

# [***Netanyahu agrees to send Israeli officials to Washington to discuss prospective Rafah operation***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK8-W0Y1-JC5B-G0WD-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday agreed to send a team of Israeli officials to Washington to discuss with Biden administration officials a prospective Rafah operation as each side is looking to make “clear to the other its perspective,” White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

The agreement to hold talks about Rafah came as [*Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/joe-biden) and [*Netanyahu*](https://apnews.com/hub/benjamin-netanyahu) spoke on Monday, their first interaction in more than a month, as the divide has grown between allies over the food crisis in Gaza and Israel's conduct during the war, according to the White House. Sullivan said the talks will happen in the coming days and are expected to involve military, intelligence and humanitarian experts.

The White House has been skeptical of Netanyahu’s plan to carry out an operation in the southern city of Rafah, where about 1.5 million displaced Palestinians are sheltering, as Israel looks to eliminate Hamas following [*Hamas’ deadly Oct. 7 attack*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hamas-rockets-airstrikes-tel-aviv-11fb98655c256d54ecb5329284fc37d2).

Sullivan said Biden in the call once again urged Netanyahu not to carry out a Rafah operation. At the coming talks, he said U.S. officials will lay out “an alternative approach that would target key Hamas elements in Rafah and secure the Egypt-Gaza border without a major ground invasion.”

“The president has rejected, and did again today, the straw man that raising questions about Rafah is the same as raising questions about defeating Hamas," Sullivan said. "That’s just nonsense. Our position is that Hamas should not be allowed a safe haven in Rafah or anywhere else, but a major ground operation there would be a mistake. It would lead to more innocent civilian deaths, worsen the already dire humanitarian crisis, deepen the anarchy in Gaza and further isolate Israel internationally.”

The call comes after Republicans in Washington and Israeli officials were quick to express outrage after Senate Majority Leader [*Chuck Schumer sharply criticized*](https://apnews.com/article/schumer-netanyahu-israel-palestinians-elections-1ebf21e4c9c0f6f42478bb26e1db7a9b) [*Netanyahu’s*](https://apnews.com/hub/benjamin-netanyahu) handling of [*the war in Gaza*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war) and called for Israel to hold new elections. They accused the Democratic leader of breaking the unwritten rule against interfering in a close ally’s electoral ***politics***.

Biden hasn't endorsed Schumer's call for election but said he thought he gave a “good speech” that reflected the concerns of many Americans. Netanyahu raised concerns about the calls by Schumer for new elections, Sullivan said.

Biden administration officials have warned that they would not support an operation in Rafah without the Israelis presenting a credible plan to ensure the safety of innocent Palestinian civilians. Israel has yet to present such a plan, according to White House officials.

Netanyahu in a statement after the call made no direct mention of the tension.

“We discussed the latest developments in the war, including Israel’s commitment to achieving all of the war’s goals: Eliminating Hamas, freeing all of our hostages and ensuring that Gaza never (again) constitutes a threat to Israel — while providing the necessary humanitarian aid that will assist in achieving these goals,” Netanyahu said.

The Biden-Netanyahu call also came as a new report warned that [*“famine is imminent”*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-03-18-2024-eefc526aec97821fe5f1e845801a6640) in northern Gaza, where 70% of the remaining population is experiencing catastrophic hunger, and that a further escalation of the war could push around half of Gaza’s population to the brink of starvation. The report came from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a partnership of more than a dozen governments, U.N. aid and other agencies that determines the severity of food crises.

Netanyahu [*lashed out against the American criticism*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-03-17-2024-ab0b75fdd8f0ab51c5e38b1870afecd8) on Sunday, describing calls for a new election as “wholly inappropriate.”

Netanyahu told Fox News Channel that Israel never would have called for a new U.S. election after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and he denounced Schumer’s comments as inappropriate.

“We’re not a banana republic,” he said. “The people of Israel will choose when they will have elections, and who they’ll elect, and it’s not something that will be foisted on us.”

Even as they express frustration about aspects of the Israeli operations, the White House acknowledges that Israel has made significant progress in degrading Hamas. And Sullivan revealed on Monday that an Israeli operation last week killed Hamas' third in command, Marwan Issa.

“The president told the prime minister again today that we share the goal of defeating Hamas, but we just believe you need a coherent and sustainable strategy to make that happen,” Sullivan said.

Biden after his State of the Union address earlier this month was caught on [*a hot mic*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-hot-mic-gaza-885b97a75d15d15ae7f7a47d0125c918) telling a Democratic ally that he has told Netanyahu they would have a “come to Jesus” meeting over the growing [*humanitarian crisis in Gaza*](https://apnews.com/article/gaza-malnutrition-famine-children-dying-israel-palestinians-2f938b1a82d7822c7da67cc162da1a37). His frustration with Netanyahu’s prosecution of the war was also on display in a recent MSNBC interview, in which he asserted Netanyahu was “hurting Israel.”

“He has a right to defend Israel, a right to continue to pursue Hamas,” Biden said of Netanyahu in the MSNBC interview. “But he must, he must, he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken. He’s hurting ... in my view, he’s hurting Israel more than helping Israel.”

The president announced during his State of the Union address that the U.S. military would help establish a temporary pier aimed at boosting the amount of aid getting into the territory. The U.S. military has also been [*air-dropping aid into Gaza*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-airdrop-humanitarian-assistance-f8bc071193f89906abf21478bc70a084).

The Biden administration resorted to the unusual workarounds after months of appealing to Israel, a top recipient of military aid, to step up access and protection for trucks bearing humanitarian goods for Gaza.

The five-month war was triggered after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack, rampaging through communities, killing some 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and taking around 250 hostages.

Israel responded with [*one of the deadliest and most destructive*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-gaza-bombs-destruction-death-toll-scope-419488c511f83c85baea22458472a796) military campaigns in recent history. The war has killed over 31,000 Palestinians, according to [*Gaza’s Health Ministry*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-gaza-health-ministry-health-death-toll-59470820308b31f1faf73c703400b033). Around 80% of Gaza’s population of 2.3 million have fled their homes, and a quarter of the population faces starvation.

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This story has been corrected to properly attribute a new report that said “famine is imminent” in Gaza to the Integrated Food Service Phase Classification. It was previously attributed to the World Food Program.

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Frankel reported from Jerusalem. AP journalists Chris Megerian and Sagar Meghani contributed reporting.

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