US-Israel relations [*have reached a critical crossroads*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-05-09-24/index.html) that shows that even President Joe Biden's staunch support can reach its limits when it starts to conflict with wider American national security and moral interests - and his own dicey political position.

[*Biden's warning in an interview*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/08/politics/joe-biden-interview-cnntv/index.html) with CNN's Erin Burnett that he'd halt some weapons shipments to Israel if it invades the Gazan city of Rafah marks the most direct US attempt to rein in its ally in a national security crisis since the Reagan administration, and the first significant conditioning of American military assistance since the start of the war.

Biden's statement of his ultimate red line takes his trial of strength with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to its most intense level yet and sent immediate shockwaves through US and Israeli ***politics*** and around the world.

Washington fears a full-scale Israeli incursion into densely populated Rafah would cause civilian casualties on a level even greater than the 34,000 Palestinians the Gaza Health Ministry reports have already been killed in the Israeli war on Hamas. The city is already "hanging on the edge of a precipice," a senior United Nations official told CNN Thursday. Hospitals are overstretched as Palestinians die in Israeli attacks on the suburbs and tens of thousands of people have already fled.

The civilian carnage in the Gaza war has caused outrage globally and generated extreme pressure on Biden at home that threatens to splinter his Democratic coalition as he wages a neck-and-neck reelection campaign against Donald Trump. Republicans are already accusing the president of appeasing terrorists following his comments.

Despite US concerns, Netanyahu's government says it has no choice but to finish its assault on Hamas, which embeds itself in civilian areas - including in Rafah - where key leaders are hunkered down in tunnels. For Netanyahu, the eradication of the group that carried out the October 7 attacks may be a matter of political survival.

The major questions now after this tectonic shift in the US-Israel relationship are:

· Will Biden's move affect Israel's decision-making as it stages air and ground operations in Rafah that could be seen as the precursor to a full offensive?

· Can Israel - as Netanyahu vows - go ahead alone in an operation even the US has disowned?

· Longer-term, will Biden's move be a temporary blip in his relations with the Jewish state's hard-right government or a full-scale rupture between Israel and the US?

· How would a full-scale offensive in Rafah further hamper already faltering attempts to secure a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas? Would it rupture US hopes of a regional compact between Israel and Arab states? And could an operation that kills hundreds of civilians set the regional temperature boiling again and raise fresh fears of a regional war?

· In the US, will Biden's belated attempt to impose direct pressure on Netanyahu over his defiance towards US concerns do anything to alleviate the president's vulnerable political stranding in his own party as Republicans pummel him with exaggerated claims that he's turning his back on Israel?

Biden's comments send political reverberations around the world

Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York, told CNN's Becky Anderson that the public estrangement between Biden and Netanyahu over Rafah represented one of the difficult moments ever in US-Israel relations.

"I do think this is a very low point - could the relationship survive this? Yes. Could it do so while Netanyahu is in power? No," Pinkas said.

Initially, Biden's warning, delivered in an interview with CNN's Erin Burnett in the swing state of Wisconsin on Wednesday, looks like a case of political whiplash.

On Tuesday, during a speech memorializing the Holocaust, Biden said that his "commitment to the safety of the Jewish people, the security of Israel, and its right to exist as an independent Jewish state is ironclad. Even when we disagree." Yet a day later, the president seemed to be sending a contradictory message.

The two statements however need to be considered together, and the key phrase is "even when we disagree." The president is apparently seeking to create political space where he can alleviate fierce electoral pressure within his party and internationally, satisfy moral aspirations to shield civilians, head off a wider Middle East war while also honoring his long-term commitment to Israeli security.

But given the treacherous entanglement of the worst attack on Israel's security in decades and international and domestic ***politics***, many of these goals may be irreconcilable.

Biden's biggest break with Netanyahu is a moment that was always coming - even if it took months to arrive and was engineered reluctantly on the US president's part. The critical political interests of the US and Israeli leaders - both of whose hold on office is threatened by the war - are diverging.

The president and top officials repeatedly warned his counterpart against a Rafah offensive. And his authority and credibility as a global leader depends on Biden standing behind his warnings after Netanyahu has repeatedly ignored US calls to temper the intensity of the Gaza war.

Biden's statement also implies a judgement that US national interests now depend on not being seen as an accessory to the worsening of an already epochal humanitarian disaster in Gaza that has put the United States at odds with many allies in Europe and the Middle East and erode its pretension to global leadership.

The president also has massive political problems. While the Israel-Gaza war is far from the top issue preoccupying American voters, the likely tight race with Trump means that the race could be decided by a few thousands votes in the pivotal swing states among tens of millions cast nationally. And the demographic groups most exercised by the civilian cost of the war and the plight of Palestinians are young, progressive and Arab Americans voters in Michigan - a state that could decide the election.

These are exactly the people that the president can least afford to lose. Biden has already been called "Genocide Joe" at campaign events that are frequently interrupted by protests. The wave of pro-Palestinian demonstrations at college campuses are playing into Trump's claims that the US is beset by left-wing extremism and chaos that Biden can't control.

And any mass protests at the Democratic convention in Chicago in August would conjure painful omens for Biden, even if the unrest and anti-Vietnam war fury around the same event in the same venue in 1968 that helped propel a Republican to the White House that year aren't an exact historical analogy.

Israel's next move

Israel's war cabinet was due to meet Thursday in a session that will offer members of Netanyahu's right-wing coalition an opportunity to vent over Biden's decision. Militarily, and given its reserves of weaponry and ammunition, the government may have all the materiel that it needs to go into Rafah. Even so, Israel's ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, said Thursday that the US move could impair his country's moves to reach its objectives.

Israel must also consider whether an invasion of Rafah absent US cover would further fracture the global sympathy it received after the October 7 terror attacks. Such a step could shatter already long-shot negotiations for a ceasefire with Hamas and the return of remaining Israeli hostages and its wider geopolitical aspirations. But Netanyahu's mindset has long been that the Hamas attacks represent an attempt to wipe Israel off the map and he sees an existential threat to Judaism, even if the rest of the world does not share his view.

Israel has so far given no indication that it will change its plans. For instance, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant warned Thursday: "I turn to Israel's enemies as well as to our best of friends and say - the state of Israel cannot be subdued, not the IDF, not the defense establishment."

But if any large-scale invasion of Rafah creates the humanitarian catastrophe that the United States fears, Israel will be left on its own to take the heat after ignoring concerns of the administration and publicly and repeatedly dissing Biden.

A GOP backlash reflects Netanyahu's politicking

The immediate and angry reaction to Biden's comments to CNN from Republicans underscored Netanyahu's years of playing ***politics*** in Washington and his allying of his Likud Party with fellow travelers in the GOP.

House Speaker Mike Johnson accused Biden on CNBC of defying the will of Congress by threatening to halt weapons shipments and of "trying to dictate ... and micromanage the war, the defense effort in Israel, as a condition of supplying the weapons that we all know that they desperately need." Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, charged Biden in a Truth Social post of "taking the side of these terrorists, just like he has sided with the Radical Mobs taking over our college campuses, because his donors are funding them."

As he arrived for another day of his hush money trial in New York, Trump added that any American Jews who voted for Biden should be ashamed, repeating a trope that is offensive to many in the community who have deep bonds with Israel but do not support Netanyahu's hardline government.

The charge that Biden is harming Israeli security is tough to stand up, given his half century of support for the Jewish state and his forbearance of Netanyahu's frequent public rebukes and attempts to undermine him - and previous Democratic presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama in Washington.

Just last month, Biden ordered a massive US and allied air operation to shield Israel from a wave of drones and cruise and ballistic missiles sent from Iran in response to its assassination of senior Iranian military intelligence officers in a diplomatic compound in Damascus. And Biden recently signed a multi-billion-dollar arms and ammunition package for Israel that he requested from Congress.

Some observers are pointing to parallels between Republican President Ronald Reagan's delay of shipments of weapons and warplanes to Israel to protest its conduct of its war in Lebanon in the early 1980s. But that showdown took place at a time when US-Israeli relations were far less politicized in Israel or the United States and came with far less political harm to the former president than the current one.

Among progressive Democrats, the initial reaction to Biden's move was positive but not effusive. Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a leader of the progressive movement, said that the threat of withholding arms was "an important step in the right direction by President Biden to halt the shipment of bombs to Israel."

But the political consequences of the president's handling of the Israel-Hamas war may be so profound that it could be too late to change them. For many voters, the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza is a searing moral issue that will not be erased by the president's belated pressure on Netanyahu.

The crisis is one of the most intractable international political dramas to afflict any president in his reelection year in recent memory. And it hands Biden a set of unpalatable choices from which it will be almost impossible for him to emerge politically unscathed.