

# [***Netanyahu's response to Schumer widens rift in US-Israeli relations***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK7-2251-JBSS-S43Y-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/17/europe/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-gaza-interview-intl/index.html) is refusing to bow to calls by [*the top US senator*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/politics/chuck-schumer-israel-election-comments/index.html) for a new election and is pushing back against White House warnings about a potential new offensive in Gaza, widening a rift with top Democrats in Washington.

An [*extraordinary turn in US-Israel relations*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/15/politics/schumer-israel-speech-analysis/index.html) in recent days is coinciding with intense diplomacy aimed at securing a ceasefire in Israel's war with Hamas and the release of hostages as the conflict deepens bitter divides in US ***politics***. But the gulf in trust and goals between Israel and Hamas has thwarted hopes for a breakthrough for weeks.

Netanyahu's defiance shone through [*an interview with CNN's Dana Bash*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2024/03/17/sotu-netanyahu-full-interview.cnn) on Sunday, three days after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer - the highest-ranking Jewish American in the US government - said that a new Israeli government was needed to reset war strategy and that Netanyahu was an obstacle to peace.

"It's inappropriate to go to a sister democracy and try to replace the elected leadership there. That's something that Israel, the Israeli public does on its own, and we're not a banana republic," Netanyahu said on "State of the Union."

"The majority of Israelis support the policies of my government. It's not a fringe government. It represents the policies supported by the majority of the people. If Sen. Schumer opposes these policies, he's not opposing me. He's opposing the people of Israel," Netanyahu said.

Despite the Israeli prime minister's stand, there is increasing criticism of his approach in the US and overseas, at a time when his position among some Israeli voters is fragile, five months after terror attacks that besmirched his brand as the country's ultimate security guarantor. Thousands of [*protesters filled the streets*](https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-17-24/h_4d0b7ec8a17e27f70f0401770d591f00) of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem Saturday night, in two separate groups, one calling for the government to resign and others demanding the release of the hostages in Gaza.

Despite a fearsome onslaught in Gaza, Hamas is far from defeated. Scores of Israeli hostages remain missing or unaccounted for. The huge death toll among Palestinians has hardened much of the outside world against Israel's actions and squandered early sympathy after the October 7 terror attacks. And there is no clear plan for how to rebuild or administer Gaza - site of a humanitarian nightmare - after any eventual Hamas defeat.

'We don't agree on everything'

The heated rhetoric flying between Washington and Jerusalem raises fundamental questions about the future of the US-Israeli relationship. It also underscores the hyper-politicization of Israeli policy in Washington as Republicans line up to castigate Schumer and accuse Democratic leaders of snubbing an ally in wartime. The tensions are even more acute since some senior Democrats wonder whether Netanyahu is keen to keep the war going to postpone an election that could oust him. President Joe Biden's support for Israel's right to defend itself, meanwhile, threatens his own coalition ahead of his reelection bid in November, with progressive and younger voters upset over his handling of the war. Biden and Netanyahu therefore are being driven further apart by their own competing political imperatives.

Latest developments also raise the question of whether Schumer's stinging criticism augurs a shift to more pressure on Netanyahu from Biden. The president embraced Israel after the Hamas terror attacks that killed 1,200 people but has become more critical of Israeli policy in a war in which more than 31,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza health ministry. Amid shockwaves from Schumer's remarks Thursday, Biden complimented the New York Democrat's speech and said many Americans agreed with it. But he is yet to strike a similar tone.

For all his evident frustration, the president has not taken tangible steps to apply US leverage against Netanyahu, who has repeatedly appeared to ignore US advice or calls for a ratcheting down of the war to spare civilians. Biden has moved to open new aid routes into Gaza with air drops and a temporary port link. But he has not conditioned the use of US-made and provided weapons to Israel. And the president, despite forging his own popularity in Israel with his initial reaction to the attacks and trip to the Jewish state in wartime, has not sought to appeal to Israelis over the head of Netanyahu. The Israeli leader has sometimes done as much in his own frequent interventions into US domestic ***politics***.

White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday that Biden and Netanyahu don't agree on everything in the war, before adding: "But that's the government that is in place, and that's the government, the war cabinet, that we're going to continue to work with."

One of the glaring areas of disagreement is the proposed Israeli offensive in Rafah in southern Gaza, which Biden previously warned would cross a US "red line" - though his remarks were somewhat ambiguous. There is no doubt, however, that the White House is skeptical of the plan because of the potential toll on civilians in Gaza, where humanitarian conditions are worsening. Speaking on CNN, Netanyahu doubled down on his intention to invade Rafah, vowing to "destroy the remaining Hamas terrorist battalions."

But on ABC, Kirby said, "We would not support such an operation unless or until they've got a credible executable plan to take care of the 1.5 million refugees that have been pushed into Rafah."

As the reverberations continue from Schumer's remarks on Thursday, there is renewed focus on diplomacy aimed at a temporary ceasefire in Gaza to allow the surging of humanitarian supplies to the devastated enclave and for the release of some of the remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

Hamas official Ghazi Hamad told Al-Arabiya on Sunday that the group, which rules Gaza, had presented a "logical" proposal that could bring a breakthrough in the negotiations but accused Israel of wanting to prolong the war. Netanyahu told CNN on Sunday that Israel is seeking a deal that would see the release of 100 hostages in exchange for a six-week pause in fighting. But his criticism of Hamas underscored the fragility of hopes for a breakthrough. "Hamas' outlandish demands ... makes that deal a lot more difficult, but we're going to keep on trying because we want those hostages back," the Israeli leader told CNN.

How political changes in the US and Israel are driving the tensions

The increasing distrust between the Israeli government and top Democrats in Washington can be seen in their different opinions of how the war should be waged. But it also reflects long-term political shifts in both countries.

Through his years in power, Netanyahu has moved sharply to the right, and his current coalition is the most conservative in Israeli history, relying on several small ultra-orthodox parties. In the United States, meanwhile, the Republican Party has undergone a similar transformation, and there is now considerable ideological synergy between the GOP and Netanyahu's Likud.

Netanyahu has also noticeably courted Republican leaders and irked Democratic ones. For instance, he lectured President Barack Obama in the Oval Office about the situation in the Middle East in front of journalists in 2011 in a way that infuriated White House staff. He traveled to Washington at the invitation of Republicans in 2015 to try to shatter an Iran nuclear deal during an address to Congress. He also aligned himself with ex-President Donald Trump - and got multiple policy wins as a result - including the relocation of the US Embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Given this background, and the feverish political climate in an election year in the United States, it's not surprising Republicans are trying to seize on the rift between Democrats and Israel to their own electoral advantage - and Democrats see ***politics*** at play.

Republican Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota said on "State of the Union" that the message from Netanyahu was: "'Let us run our own country. We appreciate you as our close allies, but we're going to make up our own minds, and we will do it according to our laws and our customs.'" House Foreign Affairs Chairman Michael McCaul said on Fox, "There's a way to talk about your differences - not to topple a democratic country." The Texas Republican said there was a "split in the Democratic Party" between what he called a "pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel faction" and those who support Israel.

Events of recent days are so remarkable since Biden and Schumer are among the most pro-Israel politicians in modern American history. But the deeply felt ties of both men toward Israel may, to some extent, reflect nostalgia for a more moderate political time in the Jewish state that is a far cry from Netanyahu's radicalism. Even a year ago it would be impossible to believe that the Senate majority leader would call for a new election in Israel. His remarks last week speak to the extreme political pressure Democratic leaders have been under from other senior members of the party, not to mention their voters. Schumer's remarks are beginning to look like a milestone in US-Israeli relations since it suggests that senior Democrats no longer believe that lock-step support for Israel involves acquiescing to every policy of a hard-right governing coalition.

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi - another longtime friend of Israel - offered staunch support to Schumer on Sunday and sought to explain the speech. "He loves Israel, as we do. We support Israel. And the fact that he made this statement should be listened to, because Israel's reputation is at risk because of what is happening in Gaza," the California Democrat said on "State of the Union," alluding to looming famine in Gaza over which the World Health Organization expressed grave concern on Sunday.

"Chuck Schumer's speech was an act of courage, an act of love for Israel. And I wish the prime minister would read the whole speech, because he speaks with great vehemence about the need to defeat Hamas," Pelosi said. "He is concerned about the weakness of the Palestinian Authority and the very, very dangerous attitude of the right-wing Israeli government."

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