

# [***The risk of wider war in the Middle East looms over Biden's reelection effort***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BRP-9G41-JBSS-S000-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Six months into Israel's war with Hamas, President Joe Biden is becoming ever more entangled in a foreign crisis that he cannot control but which is having deep consequences for US domestic ***politics*** and is weighing heavily on his reelection bid.

The omnipresent geopolitical risks of the war were thrown into high relief over the weekend with US officials warning of a potential retaliatory attack in the region by Iran after an [*Israeli strike on Iran's embassy complex*](https://cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html) in Damascus, alongside pledges from Israel to escalate on the northern border with Lebanon - even as it continues its operations in Gaza to rout Hamas, the Tehran-backed group that killed more than 1,200 Israelis and took more than 200 hostage in its unprecedented October attacks. Talks are set to begin again in Cairo this week in the shadow of growing international upset over human consequences of the war, in which more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed.

US forces in the region and Israel were on high alert for possible attacks by Iran in reprisal for the killing of two senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers in Damascus last week in a strike the US attributes to Israel. Any action by the Islamic Republic, against Israel or US interests could spark the full-scale Middle East war the White House dreads. Even if Iran doesn't hit back, lower-grade clashes are already simmering across the region. The US has struck Iranian clients in Yemen, the Red Sea, Syria and Iraq, while Israel's northern border, where it regularly trades missile fire with Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, is become increasingly dangerous. Israel is facing what its former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett told CNN on Sunday is an Iranian "octopus of terror."

In another example of a drama any president would prefer to avoid in a reelection year, Biden is locked in a showdown with an Israeli prime minister. Benjamin Netanyahu did bend to his pressure after a [*high-stakes phone call*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/04/politics/biden-netanyahu-call-wck-deaths/index.html) last week to open up new aid routes into Gaza. Israel also announced Sunday that it was [*pulling back from the Khan Younis area*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/07/middleeast/israel-khan-younis-withdrawal-gaza-intl/index.html) in Gaza, leaving behind a moonscape of destruction. The moves followed a storm of international anger following the killing last week of seven aid workers, one Palestinian and six foreigners, including one American. But Netanyahu's previous resistance to curtail Israeli operations despite Biden's repeated calls means the administration has put him on notice that it could shift its own Gaza policy depending on how many Palestinian civilians are killed in the coming weeks.

The gruesome humanitarian crisis - which is helping fuel criticism of both Israel and Biden - is meanwhile reaching a point of no return. World Food Programme Director Cindy McCain told CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday that children are dying "as we speak" and that even if massive aid is pumped into Gaza, many will suffer a lifetime of medical after-effects. "We're literally on the brink of going over the edge, over the cliff, with famine and not being able to recover from it," McCain said, adding that the WFP had massed food for 1.1 million people just outside Gaza's borders. "We just need to get it in," McCain told CNN's Jake Tapper. "That's why these crossings are so important, and more crossings are needed."

Biden's political backlash

At home, Biden has been [*facing a severe backlash*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/03/politics/biden-muslim-americans-gaza/index.html) from progressive, young and Arab American voters that could put his reelection hopes in several key swing states in jeopardy. Regular interruptions from hecklers and protests at his campaign events are providing a foretaste of the disruption that could cause a disastrous primetime distraction for the president at the Democratic National Convention if the conflict is still raging in August. Attempts by the White House to mitigate the problems last week only highlighted it when a [*Palestinian American physician walked out*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/politics/white-house-ramadan-meeting/index.html) of a gathering with Biden intended to celebrate Ramadan, the Muslim holy month.

Now, Biden, who is instinctively one of the most pro-Israel presidents of the modern era, is facing increasing political pressure from Democratic officeholders, including some of his closest allies, to do more to rein in the Israelis by raising the prospect of conditions for billions of dollars in US arms shipments. Republicans meanwhile reacted fiercely to the president leaning on Netanyahu in their phone call last week, accusing Biden of deserting one of America's closest friends. And ex-President Donald Trump, the presumptive GOP nominee, will be sure to twist any widening of the war to sharpen his narrative that things are tumbling out of control under his successor's watch and that only he can stop World War III.

Biden's call to Netanyahu on Thursday was the most significant moment yet in the President's evolving handling of the war. Previously, he had repeatedly criticized Israel's tactics in Gaza and called for the country to shield civilians but has been loath to unveil consequences for Netanyahu's unwillingness to listen.

CNN's MJ Lee [*reported Sunday*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/06/politics/biden-netanyahu-israel-gaza-war-phone-call-details/index.html) that the president listed several things he needed Netanyahu to do immediately, including opening the Erez crossing in Gaza and the port of Ashdod in southern Israel to humanitarian aid. "Joe, we're gonna do it," a person familiar with the conversation said in characterizing Netanyahu's response.

But Biden has an imperative political need for the war to end soon, reflected in his call for an "immediate" ceasefire. Netanyahu's determination to flush out all Hamas fighters, even with an offensive in the Rafah area of Gaza that the US fears will be a civilian bloodbath, means tensions and distrust between the White House and Jerusalem remain high.

John Kirby, the White House's national security communications adviser, told CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday that the allies remain at odds on the planned incursion. "we have been very clear with the prime minister and his team that we don't support a ground operation in Rafah, that there are other ways, other options that they need to look at for how they're going to go after the Hamas threat that still is in Rafah," he said. Kirby also downplayed the Israel withdrawal from Khan Younis. "It's hard to know exactly what it tells us right now," he told ABC News' "This Week." "They've been on the ground for four months. The word we're getting is they're tired. They need to be refit."

The threat of a new clash with Iran

Weeks of no breakthroughs in tortuous ceasefire negotiations involving Israel, Hamas, key Gulf states and the US have reinforced the impression that the war is far from ending. Asked by CNN's Fareed Zakaria whether Netanyahu is prolonging the fighting to head off a personal and legal reckoning, Bennett refused to break ranks. "I think that the decisions are being made for the right reasons. You know, one can disagree with one decision or another, but by and large the goal is to defeat Hamas," he said. "We can't finish this war when Hamas is standing. We can't have an organization that explicitly said that it wants to destroy the Jewish nation and has done the worst thing possible and said that it's going to try and do it again and again. So, we have to eliminate Hamas."

The likelihood of the war dragging on will further frustrate Democrats who worry about its impact on Biden's already fraying electoral coalition. [*Israel's attack on the World Central Kitchen convoy*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/04/middleeast/jose-andres-wck-israel-strike-criticism-intl/index.html) last week appeared to galvanize action in Washington a way that months of civilian carnage in Gaza had not. This may be partly to do with the influence of WCK founder, chef and restaurateur Jose Andres, who has deep contacts in the US capital and a prominent international media profile.

"President Biden ... you can and America will stand behind you, support the right of Israel to defend themselves on this massive attack. But at the same time, I would say that President Biden also can be defending and supporting the right of Palestinians not to die just trying to be getting a piece of bread," Andres said on ABC News. "You can be a friend of Israel, and at the same time, you can be telling your partner in the Middle East, you cannot be conducting war in such a way. You cannot be destroying every building, every hospital, every school, every university." This encapsulation of Biden's dilemma by the celebrated chef is one that the president has struggled to reconcile throughout the conflict and, despite his increasing attempts to sway Netanyahu's choices, seems no nearer to resolving.

Since the attack on the WCK convoy, more and more Democrats have been signaling to Biden that his unwillingness to impose greater control on Netanyahu is unacceptable. Many of the public statements seem also designed as coded warnings to the White House about the political risks the president runs.

"I was glad to see the president, at least as reported out, finally say to President Netanyahu that, if you don't follow my requests, that there will be consequences," Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland told CBS' "Face the Nation." "You shouldn't be shipping more weapons to the Netanyahu government when they're not meeting their commitments, including the delivery of humanitarian aid, or if they're not complying with international law."

Van Hollen's comments followed those of another key Democrat, Delaware Sen. Chris Coons, last week. Coons, who is very close to Biden, signaled openness to imposing conditions of how Israel uses American arms.

Biden is not alone in facing increasing political duress. Netanyahu endured a second straight weekend of mass political protests over his handling of the war and his failure to bring home more than 100 hostages who are still held in Gaza or are unaccounted for. The fragile coalition that keeps him in power is under stress from his left and his right amid growing calls from his critics in Israel and the United States for an early election.

Tensions with Netanyahu are playing out at the same time as both the Israeli and US governments are warning that [*Iran may be poised*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/05/politics/us-israel-iran-retaliation-strike/index.html) to avenge the Damascus attack last week. In his comments to CNN, Bennett did not admit that Israel carried out the attack in Damascus but implicitly justified it.

"Iran is an octopus of terror. Its head is in Tehran and then it sends its tentacles all around Israel and the Middle East. In Lebanon, they have Hezbollah. In Gaza, they have Islamic Jihad and a bit of Hamas. The Houthis all around. And they've been pounding Israel using their arms while their head was sort of immune," he said. "So the age of immunity for Iran's head is over."

Concern about a direct Iranian entry into the war crosses party lines in Washington. Ohio GOP Rep. Michael Turner, who chairs the House Intelligence Committee, was deeply critical of Biden's stewardship of the conflict and criticism of Israel. But appearing on CNN's "State of the Union," he also appeared to criticize the attack in Damascus, which many observers see as a test by Israel of Iran's red lines.

The strike, on what Iran identified as a consulate building in Damascus, was legitimate given the Islamic Republic's record of fomenting terrorism, Turner said. But he added: "It still is very unwise. As we were trying to put pressure on Iran to keep them out of this conflict, both with US presence, and with our response to the attacks on our own troops, this certainly does escalate the issue throughout the entire region. "

Analysis by Stephen Collinson, CNN

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