

# [***How a brief exchange in a call explains the strained Biden-Netanyahu relationship***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BH5-2M71-JBSS-S204-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; When Joe Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu [*spoke on the phone in mid-January,*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/19/politics/joe-biden-benjamin-netanyahu-palestinian-state/index.html) the president had no shortage of heavy matters to discuss with his Israeli counterpart.

A ceasefire and hostages deal appeared to be stalled. The civilian death toll in Gaza was mounting by the day. And the US was eager to help build a path to an eventual two-state solution.

But at one point [*in the phone call*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/politics/concern-rising-biden-officials-israel-lebanon-incursion/index.html), the two leaders turned to matters of political intrigue.

Netanyahu bristled at recent media coverage citing anonymous Biden administration officials who said that the US was actively making plans for a post-Netanyahu government.

Biden swatted away the idea. He made clear that the idea was farcical - or at the very least, not worth spending precious time discussing. Netanyahu is the current leader of Israel, after all; he was the person that Biden and his top aides had been working with since Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, and he was the person they would continue working with as long as the prime minister was in the job.

And both leaders flashed agreement on one thing: Blind quotes from government officials in media stories were an irritant.

The brief exchange was described to CNN by multiple sources, who said it was a blip relative to the weighty wartime issues that the pair needed to discuss. The previously unreported back-and-forth offers a window into the two men's tenuous relationship as they each confront crises at home and growing domestic pressures, with Israel's war in Gaza poised to play an outsized role in each of their political futures.

Biden offered a glimpse into the tensions Thursday after concluding his State of the Union speech, in which he offered a pointed message to the "leadership of Israel" that "humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip."

After stepping from the rostrum, Biden could be heard revealing to a Democratic senator some tough words for his Israeli counterpart.

As Biden was making the remark, one of his aides tried to interrupt, apparently to advise the president his words would be caught by cameras.

"I'm on a hot mic here. Good. That was good," Biden acknowledged.

For Netanyahu, the eventual end of the war will force the Israeli leader to answer to the extraordinary events of October 7 that he and his government wholly failed to anticipate and could usher in the end of his already tenuous right-wing coalition. Any suggestion of active US planning for a post-Netanyahu Israeli government would no doubt aggravate the prime minister as he tries to hold off that potential reckoning.

For Biden, the end of the war can't come quickly enough. Since October, the president has seen his support erode among key constituency groups like Muslim- and Arab-Americans, progressives and young voters, who are furious with Biden's refusal so far to call for a permanent ceasefire. That political predicament for Biden was clear when he delivered his State of the Union speech Thursday evening. While some administration officials had hoped that the president might have a ceasefire and hostages deal to tout, he instead announced the US military will begin establishing a port to deliver food and medical supplies to Gaza and delivered forceful comments on the humanitarian crisis.

Those starkly divergent sets of interests are increasingly testing [*the already-fraught Biden-Netanyahu relationship.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/12/politics/biden-netanyahu-israel-gaza/index.html) The two men, who have known each other for several decades, have had their share of [*frank and candid conversations recently*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/12/politics/biden-israel-losing-support-netanyahu/index.html) - with no shortage of sharp words and the airing of grievances. When asked for comment on the exchange, an official in the prime minister's office rejected the characterization of the call.

"Obviously these are two guys who politically are not aligned and have their differences," a senior administration official said. "There have been frustrations, and there continue to be."

But that official was emphatic that despite how much the Biden-Netanyahu relationship has [*been tested and worn down over the course of the war,*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/01/politics/biden-netanyahu-relationship/index.html) the two leaders are more aligned on important issues than might be apparent.

One senior Biden adviser acknowledged that moments of serious tension and disagreements have erupted between the two leaders since the beginning of the war. "We pressured them. They don't always accept that pressure very well," the adviser said.

Still, they insisted, the Biden-Netanyahu relationship remains more or less the same - precisely because their divergent worldviews were never a secret.

"I wouldn't say the relationship is any different than probably when Joe Biden as a younger senator met Bibi," the adviser said, using Netanyahu's popular nickname. "Because they don't agree on a lot."

Asked Tuesday about his relationship with Netanyahu, Biden, preparing to board Air Force One, simply said: "Like it's always been."

A National Security Council spokesperson told CNN in a statement that Biden and Netanyahu have a "good and productive relationship that goes back decades."

"This relationship allows President Biden to be honest and direct when needed," the spokesperson said. "They continue to speak regularly, and the United States is a strong ally of Israel. That will continue."

Even if their relationship remains in many ways consistent, the backdrop is drastically changed and the stakes dramatically higher.

Their phone conversations have veered between familiar warmth and heated disputes, including a now-widely reported moment in December when Biden abruptly ended a call by declaring the conversation was over and hanging up.

Biden, who has said he believes he understands Netanyahu better than anyone, has been highly attuned to his counterpart's political predicament and is sensitive to being seen as aggravating any political vulnerabilities, officials said.

Still, Netanyahu's political standing was a subtext to the visit to Washington this week of Benny Gantz, a member of the Israeli war cabinet and Netanyahu's chief political rival. Gantz is often mentioned as a potential future prime minister, and his meetings with White House, State Department and Pentagon officials were not officially sanctioned by Netanyahu's government.

While at the White House, Gantz did not meet with Biden, who was at Camp David until midday Tuesday preparing for his State of the Union address. But he did meet with Vice President Kamala Harris and national security adviser Jake Sullivan along with a host of other senior officials.

The decision to travel to Washington against Netanyahu's will underscores the lingering tensions within the Israeli war cabinet and only seemed to advance the impression among some Israeli officials that Biden's White House is looking ahead to a time when Netanyahu is no longer in power.

Biden's aides were quick to dismiss the suggestion that Gantz's meetings with Harris and other officials were a sign of looking beyond Netanyahu.

"No," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said flatly when asked about the dynamic on Tuesday.

Privately, many administration officials view many of Netanyahu's public statements about the war and comments precluding the formation of an eventual Palestinian state as motivated by his own domestic ***politics***.

The Israeli public is still widely supportive of the effort to go after Hamas, and there is not a wide discrepancy between Netanyahu and his political rivals over how to prosecute the war, even amid the humanitarian suffering in Gaza.

Where Netanyahu has felt pressure is on the remaining hostages. Protests in Israel have called on him to do more to secure the remaining captives' release, even as the war in Gaza proceeds.

Talks to secure the hostages' release in exchange for a six-week pause in fighting remain halting and hopes for a deal before the start of the Ramadan holiday have faded as the back-and-forth continues between Hamas and Israel over the terms of the agreement.

Biden on Friday cast doubt on the prospect of striking a deal that includes a temporary ceasefire paired with a release of hostages by Ramadan.

"It's looking tough," Biden told reporters in Pennsylvania, where he was campaigning.

Asked if he was concerned about violence in East Jerusalem if a deal isn't reached, Biden said, "I sure am."

By MJ Lee and Kevin Liptak, CNN

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