

MIDDLE EAST

# McCarthy invites Netanyahu to visit Congress, skip the White House

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JERUSALEM — House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, on a visit to Israel, has placed himself in the middle of a widening rift between President Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, criticizing the White House for not hosting the premier and suggesting he come address the Congress instead.

McCarthy (R-Calif.), who arrived over the weekend with a bipartisan delegation of House members at a time of tense political standoffs in both countries, sought to make common cause with Netanyahu over their shared frustrations with the president.

“It’s been too long,” McCarthy said in an interview with the daily Israel Hayom. “If that doesn’t happen, I’ll invite the prime minister to come meet with the House. He’s a dear friend.” Netanyahu’s office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on McCarthy’s suggestion.

Biden has said he had no immediate plans to offer the traditional visit of a new Israeli prime minister to the Oval Office — [Netanyahu returned to power](#) four months ago — a seeming rebuke for his new government’s controversial push to [gain greater control over the country’s Supreme Court](#). In Washington, [Biden and McCarthy are jockeying over the fight to increase the government’s debt limit](#), with the president refusing to negotiate spending cuts demanded by House Republicans.

McCarthy, saying Netanyahu was in good company, complained that Biden was also stiffing House Republicans. “President Biden hasn’t talked to me about the debt ceiling for the last 80 some days or so.”

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby, when asked about McCarthy’s invitation, highlighted the “longstanding and unwavering support” that the United States has for Israel, as well as the long relationship that Biden has with Netanyahu.

“We’ve seen Speaker McCarthy’s comments and we’ll let him speak to those,” Kirby said.

“Israeli leaders have a long tradition of visiting,” he added. “I expect the prime minister will visit at some point.”

Addressing reporters on Monday, McCarthy reiterated his willingness to invite Netanyahu to Washington if Biden does not. But, McCarthy said, “I expect the White House to invite the prime minister over for a meeting, especially with the 75th anniversary.” Israel last week marked its 1948 founding.

McCarthy suggested if he issues an invitation it will be done in consultation with House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.).

During the news conference, both McCarthy and Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.), who is part of the bipartisan delegation traveling with the speaker, were pressed for thoughts on Netanyahu’s plan to remake Israel’s judicial system, which was delayed after social unrest and protests. Among other things, the plan would give lawmakers more control of the makeup of the court.

“Look, Israel’s their own nation,” McCarthy said. “Israel can decide what they want to do. But I mean, having democracies, you want to have a check and balance. You want to have separation of powers. ... But we leave it up to you, your country, to figure out how to do that.”

Hoyer said that “friends give friends advice and counsel” but echoed McCarthy in saying the ultimate decisions are up to Israel.

Earlier Monday, McCarthy became just the second U.S. speaker to address a full session of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, and the first since his fellow Republican Newt Gingrich appeared here in 1998. It is McCarthy’s first foreign trip as speaker and began with a stop in Jordan.

During his remarks, McCarthy repeatedly referenced the “special relationship” between the United States and Israel and stressed that the delegation he is leading includes Democrats, including Hoyer, whom he called a “good friend.”

Israel’s story, McCarthy said, “is a story of hope that continues to inspire millions around the world, especially me and my fellow Americans, regardless of our political party.”

McCarthy said the United States would never shy away from defending Israel. He decried threats to Israel by Iran, which he labeled a “rogue nation” — and vowed that “Iran will never acquire a nuclear weapon.”

“The best days for Israel — and our unbreakable bond — are ahead of us,” McCarthy said.

McCarthy’s appearance comes amid one of the greatest political upheavals in Israel’s history, with regular mass demonstrations continuing against the new right-wing government’s fast-track bid to remake the judiciary system.

Supporters see that proposal as a needed corrective to a judiciary they say has usurped legislative authority and is hopelessly biased toward Israel’s leftist elite. Critics call it a power grab that would gut checks and balances and set the country on a path to authoritarianism.

Biden, saying such a fundamental change should be made only with broad consensus, called Netanyahu directly to express his concerns. The spat went public in March after Biden said Netanyahu's government "cannot continue down this road."

The prime minister snapped back in a tweet that Israel "makes its decisions by the will of its people and not based on pressures from abroad, including from the best of friends."

Netanyahu pulled the proposal for further negotiations after protests and a general strike paralyzed the country last month. Talks with opposition lawmakers, overseen by Israeli President Isaac Herzog, have been ongoing over the Knesset's Passover recess, which ended Sunday.

Netanyahu is struggling to gain agreement on how to proceed even within his governing coalition, according to reports in Israeli media, and lawmakers are considered likely to take up pressing budgetary measures before returning to the judiciary.

McCarthy is the second high-profile Republican to visit Jerusalem in recent days. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a likely 2024 presidential candidate, stopped off during a four-country trade mission last week. He too criticized Biden's handling of Israeli relations and declined to comment on Netanyahu's judicial campaign.

McCarthy's suggestion that Netanyahu visit the Republican-controlled Congress harked back to an earlier chill between the prime minister and a Democratic president. In 2015, as Netanyahu was trying to torpedo President Barack Obama's plans to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, the prime minister arranged with Republican leaders to speak against the deal to a joint meeting of Congress.

The gambit was considered a significant breach of protocol, and Netanyahu was criticized in Israel for threatening the country's historically bipartisan support in the United States. That schism only widened under President Donald Trump, who tilted U.S. policy openly toward the goals of Israel's right, including moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem.

Commentators warned the prime minister not to revert to that risky dynamic.

"Our leaders must do whatever they can to prevent support for the Jewish state from turning into a hot potato issue, one that will force Americans to choose sides based on their party affiliation," the Jerusalem Post wrote in an editorial Monday.

Neither Netanyahu nor McCarthy mentioned the idea of a congressional visit or the judicial controversy in their appearance together Monday.

Jacob Dayan, a former Israeli diplomat in the United States, said Netanyahu had to place Israel's bipartisan standing above all else, despite his affinity for GOP politics. He noted that while the prime minister did meet with DeSantis, his office did not publicize the session or release any statements or photos afterward.

"On the one hand, it's very tempting to accept this warm embrace from Republicans who tell him exactly what he wants to hear," Dayan said. "At the same time, Biden has been a very good friend to Israel. And he is going to be in the office for at least two more years."

*Wagner reported from Washington. Matt Viser in Washington contributed to this story.*