Israel-Hamas war

Biden praises anti-Netanyahu speech amid deepening rift with Israeli prime minister

US president says call by most senior Democrat in the Senate for a new government reflects views of 'many Americans'

Joe Biden: '[Chuck Schumer] made a good speech, and I think he expressed serious concern shared not only by him, but by many Americans' © AP

Lauren Fedor in Washington YESTERDAY

Joe Biden appeared to deepen his rift with Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday, publicly praising a top Democrat's remarks that called for the Israeli prime minister's removal as a "good speech" that expressed "concerns" shared by many Americans.

His comments to reporters on Friday morning are the latest sign that the US president has all but given up on Netanyahu, who has angered his backers in the White House by failing to allow more aid into Gaza and pursuing war tactics that have killed thousands of Palestinian civilians.

Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader in the Senate and one of the most high-profile backers of Israel over his decades-long political career, sent shockwaves through the bilateral relationship on Thursday by calling Netanyahu an "obstacle to peace" who was weakening his country's "political and moral fabric".

Schumer, the most senior Jewish elected official in Washington, urged Israel to hold new elections to remove Netanyahu from office.

Biden confirmed on Friday that Schumer had given the White House advance notice of his speech and its contents. "I'm not going to elaborate on the speech," the president said. "He made a good speech, and I think he expressed serious concern

shared not only by him, but by many Americans."

Netanyahu, who was close to former Republican president Donald Trump but clashed openly with Democratic president Barack Obama, has steadily lost support among the American left, an exodus that has sped up during Israel's campaign in Gaza and has threatened to erode Biden's base during a re-election year.

But until recently, the Israeli prime minister was able to rely on older Democrats in Washington — including Schumer and Biden — who have supported the Jewish state for decades.

In a sign of the shifting political winds in Washington, senior Republicans have been quick to attack Schumer, with Mitch McConnell, the Senate's top Republican, accusing his Democratic counterpart of meddling in another country's domestic politics and undercutting Israel's right to defend itself.

"The primary 'obstacles to peace' in Israel's region are genocidal terrorists like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad who slaughter innocent people and corrupt leaders of the Palestinian Authority who have repeatedly rejected peace deals from multiple Israeli governments," McConnell said.

"Israel is not a colony of America whose leaders serve at the pleasure of the party in power in Washington," he added. "Only Israel's citizens should have a say in who runs their government."

Ted Cruz, one of the most outspoken Republican conservatives in the Senate, attacked Schumer for "calling for the overthrow of Israel's government while Israel is fighting potentially existential wars".

Biden's remarks were not his first to put distance between his policies and Netanyahu's. In a television interview last weekend, the president accused Netanyahu of "hurting Israel more than helping Israel". He said the prime minister had the "right to defend Israel and a right to continue to pursue Hamas, but he must, he must, he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost".

Netanyahu responded in an interview with Politico and the German publications Bild and Welt, saying the majority of Israelis supported his policies of seeking to destroy Hamas's remaining battalions, opposing a return of the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority to govern Gaza and rejecting any attempt "to ram down our throats a Palestinian state".

Asked later on Friday whether Biden wanted to see new elections in Israel or for

Netanyahu to cede power, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said it was "going to be for the Israeli people to decide".

Kirby added: "For our part, we are going to keep supporting Israel in their fight against Hamas, we are going to keep urging them to reduce civilian casualties, and we are going to keep working to get a temporary ceasefire in place, so we can get the hostages back home with their families and more additional aid into the people of Gaza."

Israel declared war on Hamas after the militant group attacked Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 people and taking 250 hostage.

Palestinian officials say Israel's retaliatory bombardment of Gaza has killed more than 31,300 people and displaced more than 1.7mn of its 2.3mn inhabitants, fuelling a humanitarian crisis that has left many in the enclave on the brink of starvation.