

Benjamin Netanyahu

Benjamin Netanyahu's American crisis



Other Israeli leaders have clashed with the White House. None has been as brazen

Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv 8 HOURS AGO

Just days after picking a public feud with Joe Biden — a self-declared Zionist — Benjamin Netanyahu turned for support to the next most powerful force backing the Jewish state in Washington: the Israel lobby.

In a short, but pointed, address to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee last week he rejected each rebuke the US president has made: that the Israeli military has killed far too many civilians in trying to vanquish Hamas; that Netanyahu was hurting Israel by obstructing a Palestinian state; and that the Israeli premier should allow the moderate and secular Palestinian Authority to run Gaza.

“You cannot say you support Israel’s right to exist and to defend itself and then oppose Israel when it exercises that right,” said Netanyahu, referring to Biden’s repeated demands that he delay a planned offensive in Rafah, the southern edge of the Gaza Strip. “You cannot say you support Israel’s goal of destroying Hamas and then oppose Israel when it takes the actions necessary.”

Among world leaders, there is perhaps no greater student — or suitor — of American power than Netanyahu himself. He has wooed, and tussled, with four US presidents, bent the Republican party — and the evangelical Christians that form its base — into all-weather friends and reaped the benefits of a durable military and diplomatic alliance no other nation enjoys.

Since Hamas’s devastating October 7 attack on Israel, emergency airlifts of American weapons have sustained Israel’s military campaign in Gaza, while US diplomats have shielded it from censure at the UN Security Council, and US lawyers have argued in its favour at the International Court of Justice.

On top of the \$3.4bn a year the US gives to Israel, normally a quarter of its military annual budget, another \$15bn is awaiting Congressional approval. For Biden, it is the fabric of an enduring, unique alliance, not just during this war, but in the five decades of his own political career, starting with what he describes as the “most consequential meeting of his life” with Israel’s then-prime minister Golda Meir in 1973.



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But now, at a time that Israel needs American support the most — with Israel determined to push its war in Gaza into Rafah, and daily tit-for-tat escalations bringing it to the brink of a full-blown conflict with the Lebanese-based militant group Hizbollah — Netanyahu has chosen to antagonise the White House, potentially putting that aid at risk.

Biden, who has not spoken to Netanyahu since mid-February, was caught last week on a live microphone saying it was time for a “come to Jesus” moment with the Israeli premier, then telling MSNBC that Netanyahu was “hurting Israel”. The Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer, America’s most prominent Jewish politician, was even more blunt: Israel needed elections to replace a leader who had weakened its “political and moral fabric”.

In feuding with Biden, Netanyahu has bet that the other levels of influence he has cultivated for decades — from friendly US senators, to the powerful pro-Israel lobby and Israel’s pivotal role in the regional geopolitics — would both preserve his ability to wage war and keep him in office. It is a gamble he has taken before, but never with such high stakes.

“Netanyahu is playing a risky game that may cost Israel a lot,” said Ehud Olmert, Netanyahu’s predecessor as prime minister. “If Biden decides to punish Netanyahu, it will end up hurting Israel too.”





Ronald Reagan strongly criticised Menachem Begin over Israel's bombing of Beirut © Dirck Halstead/Liaison/Getty Images



Israeli shelling of Beirut in 1982 © Dominique Faget/AFP/Getty Images

Other Israeli leaders have clashed with the White House before: Ronald Reagan accused Menachem Begin of a [“holocaust”](#) after Israel bombed Beirut in August 1982; George Bush Sr had to withhold \$10bn in loan guarantees to force Yitzhak Shamir to delay building settlements and engage in the 1991 peace talks with Palestinians.

But none have done it as brazenly as Netanyahu, whose own right-wing base adores him when he keeps the White House close, and adores him when he defies it, portraying himself as the only Israeli who can say no to America.

“The rift over civilian casualties is a serious problem for US-Israel relations and for

THE RISE OVER CIVILIAN CASUALTIES IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR US-ISRAELI RELATIONS AND FOR Netanyahu's ability to prosecute his war until 'total victory,' said Martin Indyk, a former US ambassador to Israel and a peace envoy for Barack Obama. "If Netanyahu was worrying about the US-Israel relationship he would never have let things deteriorate to this point."

Netanyahu's primary motivation has been to keep his far-right coalition partners satisfied, said Indyk. "The best way to do that was to confront rather than accommodate Biden . . . so now we sit back and watch the train crash."

It is a precipitous break in relations, especially after Biden became the first US leader to visit Israel during war-time, gripping Netanyahu in a supportive hug at Ben Gurion airport in mid-October, after a deadly Hamas attack that saw 1,200 killed in Israel and some 240 taken hostage, according to Israeli authorities..

"Justice must be done," Biden said during his trip. "But I caution that, while you feel that rage, don't be consumed by it."

Since then, Netanyahu has overseen a war in Gaza that has claimed more than 31,000 lives, according to Palestinian officials, and resisted calls for an extended ceasefire that could aid the US and Qatar in brokering a second round of hostage swaps. Israel says it has killed at least 10,000 Hamas fighters.

Netanyahu's break with Biden came the same week as the US intelligence community released an annual assessment that challenged the pillars of his current political strategy. It found that Iran had no role or knowledge of the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel; that defeating Hamas fully could take years; and that Netanyahu's own grip on power may be tenuous.

"This is one of the greatest crises in US-Israel relations," said Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the US during the Obama administration, and a deputy minister in a prior government.





US President Barack Obama with Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara © Ronen Zvulun/AFP/Getty Images





Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu shake hands in front of US President Bill Clinton © Paul J Richards/AFP/Getty Images

Even though Biden has ruled out cutting off the Iron Dome interceptors that protect Israeli cities from Hamas and Hizbollah rockets, it is not clear whether the US is equally determined to continue supplying the larger offensive weapons Israel has used extensively in Gaza, said Oren.

The use of those US-supplied 2,000lb bombs, the largest in its conventional arsenal, in densely populated Palestinian neighbourhoods has drawn international censure.

Oren suggested the US may have altered the mix of munitions it is sending. “Already the aid has changed in substance, not quantity,” said Oren. “My sense is that the precision bombs keep coming, since that’s in Biden’s interest — there’s far less collateral damage.”

A person familiar with Netanyahu’s decision to confront, rather than accommodate Biden’s demands, denied that the Israeli premier was reacting to the US political calendar, where Republican support far outweighs that of the Democratic party for Netanyahu.

“The American people fully support Israel’s right to defend itself,” the person said. “The Israeli public fully supports the prime minister’s policies. There is no contradiction here.”

Netanyahu’s support in the US political establishment runs deeper than the White House, the person said, “because under Netanyahu, Israel has made the world safer” for US interests in the region. “This is a historical fact.” After stinging criticisms from Schumer on Thursday, Netanyahu’s party Likud on Thursday called for “respect”: “Israel is not a banana republic, but an independent and proud democracy.”

Netanyahu’s history with American power is certainly long, if determined by his own pursuit of power. His American accent — honed as a student, then consultant, in Boston, when he went by the name Ben Nitai — made him a mainstay on US television, especially on CNN during the first Gulf War.

His bonhomie and easy political charms turned American politicians into lifelong friends, who even now call the longest-serving Israeli premier by his childhood nickname Bibi

HICKNIGHT, DIDI.

He cultivated relationships that yielded fruit decades later — in the 1990s, a teenage Jared Kushner lent Netanyahu, a family friend, his bed in New Jersey. As an adviser to Donald Trump, Kushner, the former president's son-in-law, later drew up a US peace plan that would have handed most of the occupied West Bank to Israel.

But Netanyahu has also been proud of sacrificing those relationships when his own principles — or politics — were threatened. “No one in history has insulted the Oval Office the way Netanyahu did,” Olmert said, referring to when he broke with Obama over nuclear talks with Iran in 2015. Spurned by the White House, Netanyahu simply made a direct appeal to a joint session of Congress.

At that time, Netanyahu paid little political price — Obama was on his way out, and other than withholding the US veto at a December 2016 UN security council resolution condemning Israeli settlements, he continued implementing the nuclear deal over Netanyahu's theatrical objections.

Donald Trump later tore up that deal, after Netanyahu leveraged the president's antipathy over any Obama-era legislation with secret documents that the Mossad spirited out of Tehran, suggesting Iran had pursued a nuclear weapon in the early 2000s.

Secretary of state John Kerry apologised to Netanyahu after an unnamed US official described the Israeli premier as a myopic, pompous “chicken shit”. But the rift over the Iran nuclear deal cemented Netanyahu's decision to count on the Republicans, rather than the entire US political establishment, for unwavering support.

“[Democrats] have never forgotten it,” said Indyk. “Bibi managed to destroy the bipartisan nature of support for Israel — a longstanding tradition that he purposely placed in jeopardy, believing that Evangelicals were more reliable than progressive [American] Jews.”

Now, many of the same Democrats Netanyahu offended are in the Biden administration, and Trump's generosity can't be counted on, were he to win the US elections. “Fuck him,” Trump told an Israeli reporter in 2021, complaining that Netanyahu had congratulated Biden on his victory.

“The elections are a long way away, and the inauguration is a year away,” said Oren. “It's not like there's a new administration tomorrow — for now, you're going to have to deal with Biden.”

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