

Opinion [Israel-Hamas war](#)

## Biden needs to increase the pressure on Netanyahu

Supporting Israel and supporting the country's prime minister are not the same thing

[GIDEON RACHMAN](#)



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**Gideon Rachman** YESTERDAY

“Who’s the fucking superpower here,” said Bill Clinton, after his first meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996. The former US President was outraged by the new Israeli prime minister’s hectoring arrogance.

Almost 30 years later, Netanyahu is once again leader of Israel — and Joe Biden must be tempted to echo Clinton’s words. Ever since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 last year, the US president has provided the Netanyahu government with military support and diplomatic cover for its ferocious retaliatory offensive in Gaza. But Biden has got precious little in return from Netanyahu. With the Israelis holding back food and humanitarian aid into Gaza — and the Palestinians threatened with famine — the US has had to resort to dropping food supplies into Gaza by air and making plans to build a floating pier to deliver aid.

Providing food and other supplies to Palestinian civilians is just the most urgent flashpoint in the White House’s relationship with the Israeli government. Another major clash is emerging over Netanyahu’s insistence that Israel will attack the town of Rafah, even though around 1.5mn displaced people are crowded into the area.

Biden’s insistence that the conflict must end with a two-state solution has also been contemptuously [rejected by Netanyahu](#). Despite protests from the US, Israel has done little to rein in Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, who continue to attack and

due to them in Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank, who continue to attack and displace Palestinians there. The Israeli government is also still thinking about [escalating cross-border clashes](#) with Hizbollah that would risk a full-blown war and dragging the US into another Middle Eastern conflict.

The [US](#) president's initial instinct to stand beside the Jewish state in its darkest hour was admirable. Biden was willing to accept the serious damage to his own electoral prospects later this year — as young voters and Arab-Americans threaten to withdraw their support. America has also paid a heavy international price for its backing for Israel and is widely accused of hypocrisy around the world.

But as the [war in Gaza](#) wears on, it is increasingly clear that supporting Israel and supporting Netanyahu need not — indeed cannot — be the same thing. That was the point made by Senator Chuck Schumer in a significant [speech](#) in Congress, that has since been praised by Biden.

Netanyahu is deeply unpopular in Israel. Desperate to hang on to power and to stop the corruption trial that threatens to send him to prison, he has constructed a governing coalition that includes far right ministers in key positions. At a critical time in his country's history, he has provided leadership that is self-interested, shortsighted, brutal and ineffective.

Netanyahu's domestic unpopularity does not mean that there is a liberal alternative that stands ready to replace him. The prime minister is correct when he says that almost all Israelis share his desire to destroy Hamas. That was inevitable after the October 7 atrocities. But a responsible Israeli leader would also have laid out a long-term vision for peace and explained to his fellow citizens that their security cannot be assured simply by killing a finite number of evildoers.

Netanyahu has singularly failed to do that — perhaps because that would involve accepting the failure of his own decades-long approach to the Palestinians. Instead, he is doubling down on military force. The promised Israeli assault on Rafah is likely to cause yet more massive civilian casualties. It should be obvious that further death and destruction will lay the seeds of decades more conflict. But that remains all but unsayable in a Netanyahu-led Israel.

The US, however, has the power to change Israeli calculations. Israelis know that military might is fundamental to their own security. But most also understand that the support of America is critical. If that support genuinely came into question, many Israelis might reconsider their current course.

Under the circumstances, the US could have identified and punished the

Under ordinary circumstances, the US would have justifiable quaims about putting pressure on an ally at war. But if Israeli policies lead to mass starvation of Palestinians, the Jewish state may suffer a blow to its international legitimacy from which it never recovers. Preventing that happening is the most Israel-friendly thing that Biden could do.

The Biden administration has coercive tools that it can use without putting Israel in real jeopardy. The most obvious would be to make further military aid conditional on a change in Israel's military strategy. The US could also stop blocking UN resolutions that call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. The Biden administration could also impose sanctions on the most extreme Israeli ministers — Itamar Ben-Gvir, the national security minister and Bezalel Smotrich, the finance minister.

Netanyahu and US Republicans insist that measures such as these are an unacceptable intervention in Israel's internal politics. But Netanyahu himself has actively [intervened](#) in US politics for many years, on the side of the Republicans. Meanwhile, his closest global allies have been members of the international far right, including Trump, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and the former Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro.

Despite all this, Biden has provided crucial support for Netanyahu in Israel's hour of need. That has to change. It is time for Biden to remind Israel's prime minister who is the superpower.

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