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How Netanyahu Hurt America's Jews

The Israeli prime minister's focus is, as always, on himself and his near-term political needs. The plight of American Jews is simply not his concern.

By [Michael A. Cohen](#) April 26, 2026



Gali Tibbon / AFP / Getty

The relationship between the United States and Israel is in crisis. Six in 10 Americans have a [negative view of Israel](#), and a majority of those under 50 in both major parties view Israel as well as its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, negatively. After the brutal Gaza war, a large percentage of liberal-leaning Generation Z considers Israel a pariah state. Democratic candidates are scrambling to distance themselves from Israel and its controversial leader; earlier this month, 40 of the 47 Democratic senators voted against a military aid package for the country. And hostility toward Israel is spilling over into hostility toward Jews. Liberal influencers, activists, podcasters, and even politicians are invoking age-old anti-Semitic tropes with frightening regularity.

Yet what is for American Jews the worst of times is, from Netanyahu's perspective, the best of times. His more than a decade of meddling in American politics on behalf of Republican candidates and key GOP constituencies has, over the past few weeks, paid remarkable dividends. In the skies over Iran, Israeli and American pilots flew side by side. For a prime minister who has long viewed Iran as an existential threat, this was a historic achievement.

In putting all his chips on President Trump, though, Netanyahu has exacerbated the deep and growing divide between Israel and the Democratic Party.

This growing distance could create a problem for Israel if a Democrat wins the White House in 2028, but it creates a far more immediate problem for American Jews.

Diaspora Jews have, for much of the past century, found a home within both the Democratic Party and also progressive social, cultural, and institutional spaces. But since October 7, 2023, that sense of belonging has been shattered. American Jews are under attack from liberal and progressive activists who are stridently anti-Zionist, anti-Israel, and in some cases anti-Semitic.

In pursuing Israel's interests at the expense of American Jews, Netanyahu has put the world's largest community of diaspora Jews in a terrible bind, caught between support for Israel and its liberal allies.

And, it seems, he couldn't care less.

American Jews and Israeli leaders have long portrayed their relationship in warm, even intimate terms. "Jews in Israel and Jews in the Diaspora share a common bond and destiny; they are responsible for one another. These bonds must never weaken, but always strengthen," Shimon Peres, Israel's then-president, said in a 2011 [message](#) to the Jewish communities in the diaspora.

But reality has not always aligned with these platitudes about mutual respect.

Although American Jews were a crucial source of funds for the Zionist project, both before and after Israel's creation, the country's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, believed—and said publicly—that the American Jewish community would not have endured but for Israel. "If this great historic miracle had not taken place in our time and the State of Israel had not risen," he [said](#) in 1958, "the great majority of the Jews of the United States would have been left without any bond to Judaism." Like many Israelis at the time, Ben-Gurion believed that there was no future in the diaspora for American Jews and that they'd be better off moving to Israel, though he later relented to demands from Jacob Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee, not to [interfere](#) so directly in American Jewish life.

For much of [Israel's early history](#), American Jewish leaders were more involved in supporting Israel or weighing in on questions related to Jewish identity than they were in security-related issues. That changed most dramatically in the 1990s with the signing of the Oslo Accords, in 1993. Hawkish American Jews opposed the deal and lobbied Congress to place conditions on aid to the newly created Palestinian Authority. Their efforts were [supported](#) by Netanyahu, in what was at the time an unprecedented effort to politicize the American Jewish community.

The moves so angered Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that he [said](#) in 1995 that matters “of war and peace” would be “decided by the Israelis alone,” and suggested that American Jews should restrict themselves to focusing on issues such as emigration to Israel and helping the country absorb new immigrants.

These hiccups notwithstanding, Israel's leaders have generally viewed American Jews in instrumental terms—a reservoir of steadfast political support to ensure that Israel's relationship with its most important ally would not falter, but not much more.

But under Netanyahu, Israel's relationship with American Jews has been far more fraught and tenuous. Although he grew up outside of Philadelphia, speaks fluent English without the heavy accent of many Israelis, and has long boasted of his connections to the United States, Netanyahu has shown little love for the American Jewish community.

Perhaps this should not come as a huge surprise. Netanyahu's father, Benzion, was both a Revisionist Zionist and a revisionist academic. His most famous work, *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain*, made the controversial argument that Spanish Jews who had converted to Christianity (many, he said, willingly) were still discriminated against on racial, not religious, grounds. This discrimination, he argued, laid the groundwork for later, more racially focused anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust. In the elder Netanyahu's telling, there was no future for Jews in diaspora communities, where anti-Semitic hatred would eventually overwhelm any Jewish efforts to integrate and assimilate.

Indeed, Netanyahu's second tenure as prime minister, beginning in 2009 to the present and pausing only for an 18-month interregnum in 2021–22, has been marked by a concerted effort to strengthen Israel's ties to America's pro-Zionist evangelical-Christian community, often at the expense of American Jews. His biographer, Anshel Pfeffer, told me that Netanyahu believes that “evangelicals are more loyal” and less likely to criticize Israel's policies than liberal American Jews. He has told aides in private that with the support of the evangelical community, “we don't need AIPAC,” the pro-Israel lobbying organization that has long been a steadfast supporter of Israel. For Bibi, AIPAC's most important role is “to balance J Street,” the liberal pro-Israel lobbying group, Pfeffer said.

Netanyahu's engagement with the Christian right has been matched by similar outreach to Republican politicians, whom he viewed as more likely to take a hard line on Iran. His key lieutenant in these efforts has been Ron Dermer, a former Republican political operative. Before moving to Israel, Dermer worked for the GOP strategist Frank Luntz, who helped formulate Newt Gingrich's Contract With America.

Netanyahu has also cultivated ties with donors closely associated with the Republican Party, including Sheldon Adelson, who gave hundreds of millions of dollars to the GOP and offered his largesse to the Israeli right as well.

Bibi's right-wing advocacy did more than diversify Israel's political support in the United States; it also fundamentally shifted the relationship between Israel and its superpower ally. For most of the country's history, Israel's leaders strove to ensure that no matter who controlled Congress or the White House, the U.S. would remain a staunch and dependable ally. Indeed, bipartisan American support for Israel was arguably the country's most crucial strategic asset.

But Netanyahu has repeatedly imperiled that bipartisan consensus.

In 2012, convinced that Republicans would be tougher on Iran than Barack Obama had been, Netanyahu tacitly endorsed Mitt Romney's bid for the White House.

In 2015 came Netanyahu's most audacious and destabilizing move. He accepted an invitation from the Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, to deliver a speech to a joint session of Congress, inveighing against the Iran nuclear deal, which President Obama was negotiating at the time. Never before had an Israeli prime minister so clearly waded into American politics, putting his thumb on the scale on behalf of one of the two parties.

As Bernard Avishai [wrote](#) at the time for *The New Yorker*, "Netanyahu is injecting partisanship into what should be a bipartisan issue in both Israel and the United States, and is doing harm to Israel by showing the American Presidency disrespect." That view was widely [shared](#) across the political spectrum.

Beyond Netanyahu's overt interference in American politics, he's also impeded repeated U.S. diplomatic efforts to resolve the Israel-Palestine question. Although Israeli recalcitrance on moving toward a viable two-state solution has often been matched or exceeded by the Palestinian Authority, there is no question that Netanyahu's continued support for expanding settlements in the West Bank and his lack of serious engagement in peace talks have further alienated Democrats. In the past, even when Israeli leaders disagreed with the United States, they would try to avoid open provocations. Bibi, it seems, goes out of his way to frustrate the U.S. Not surprisingly, every Democratic president who has dealt with Netanyahu directly—Clinton, Obama, Biden—appears to loathe him.

Yet, and it's hard to imagine this lesson was lost on Netanyahu, he and Israel paid little immediate price for his provocations. When a Democrat returned to the White House in 2021, Netanyahu faced few recriminations over his earlier support for Republicans. And since October 7, the U.S. has continued to provide significant political and military backing.

Despite growing domestic blowback against Israel's military campaign in Gaza, and his empowerment of extreme, right-wing Israeli politicians such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich and their violent settler allies, Netanyahu continued to push for American support, lobbying the new Trump administration to join Israel in its plans to attack Iran. In June, the U.S. belatedly joined Israel after the Israel Defense Forces struck Iran's nuclear facilities, and then in late February, it went to war alongside Israeli forces.

Even as both left- and right-wing commentators [trotted out](#) the old anti-Semitic trope that Israel was pulling the strings behind the scenes and had dragged the U.S. into war, Netanyahu continued to push his advantage. If he was worried about driving a wedge between Israel and the Democrats, or concerned about blowback against American Jews, he certainly didn't show it.

He seems similarly unfazed over the growing frustration among Trump and his top aides that Netanyahu's promises of sweeping change in Iran have failed to materialize. Contrary to Netanyahu's confident predictions, the joint U.S. and Israeli military onslaught has not led to regime change in Iran. Tehran continues to possess its highly enriched uranium and thousands of missiles that can reach cities in Israel and throughout the Gulf. Arguably, with its newfound control of the Strait of Hormuz, Iran might be in a stronger strategic position than before the war began. According to Pfeffer, Netanyahu "doesn't realize that his relationship with Trump is tenuous" or that the mercurial president is apt to turn on him, as he has on every other political leader who disappoints him. But Netanyahu fancies himself a modern-day Churchill and sees Iran as an existential threat, Pfeffer said. And he concluded that the only way to be "less like Chamberlain" and more like Churchill was to throw his lot in with Trump.

As is usually the case with Netanyahu, who is legendary for his short-term approach to politics, the long-term damage to the American Jewish community and to Israel's standing in the United States is a problem for another day. With an Israeli election looming later this year—and as his seemingly endless trial for public corruption continues—Netanyahu appears more focused on his immediate political problems.

For American Jews, however, the problem is in the here and now.

Since October 7, the worst act of violence committed against Jews since the Holocaust, anti-Semitic violence has increased exponentially across not just America but most of Western Europe. According to a recent survey by the American Jewish Committee, more than 90 percent of American Jews report that they feel less safe today. Synagogues, Jewish cultural institutions, even Jewish-owned restaurants and bakeries across the diaspora have borne the brunt of anger over the war in Gaza, particularly from leftist and progressive activists.

For more than a century, American Jews have deeply embedded themselves in liberal spaces, including cultural and artistic communities and academic and scientific institutions. They have plunged into progressive causes, helping to build organizations including the ACLU and the NAACP, and remain deeply involved in the nonprofit sector. That involvement has not been without self-interest—many American Jews believe that a tolerant, inclusive society is likelier to provide them with a home in which to thrive—but that itself speaks to the entwinement of the diaspora-Jewish experience with liberal, democratic ideals.

Now they find themselves cast as villains within the cultural and intellectual communities they helped build. Indeed, according to one recent poll, nearly a third of American Jews who work in the secular nonprofit sector are [considering leaving](#) because of persistent anti-Semitism.

Within the Democratic Party, the situation is particularly stark. Jews are among the Democratic Party's most consistent supporters, and among the most liberal minority groups in America. The first Jewish vice-presidential candidate and the first Jew to win a presidential primary were Democrats. Of the 35 members of Congress [who are Jewish](#), 31 caucus with the Democrats.

Now political commentators seriously wonder whether a Jewish Democrat can be a viable presidential candidate in post-Gaza war America. Supporting Israel or receiving support from AIPAC is now widely seen within the party as a black mark. Many American Jews—including some of those who oppose Netanyahu's policies—find themselves questioning whether they have a future in a party growing hostile not just to Israel, but to Jews.

Netanyahu is not solely or even mostly to blame for this calamitous turn of events. Anti-Semitism is the world's oldest and most enduring hatred. Today, those who conflate diaspora Jews with Israel and target them with violence bear ultimate responsibility for their actions. But one can bemoan the frightening rise in anti-Semitism while also noting that Netanyahu—and his actions—have undoubtedly provided anti-Semites with plenty of ammunition.

A prime minister who saw American Jews as more than an instrument for furthering Israel's security but as "partners in building the Jewish future," as he told American Jews more than a decade ago, would take his responsibilities to the American Jewish community more seriously. He would take into account how Israel's actions boomerang against diaspora Jews and empower anti-Semites. He would seek to depoliticize the U.S.-Israel relationship and ensure that American Jews are not forced to choose between their Jewish identity and the progressive and political spaces they've long called home.

But Netanyahu hasn't—and he won't. Bibi's focus is, as always, on himself and his near-term political needs. The plight of American Jews is simply not his concern.

About the Author

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