

TREADING A TIGHTROPE

# Amid Biden barbs, Netanyahu navigates his own balancing act

*The president's criticisms highlight the area where Netanyahu is strongest domestically – his handling of the war in Gaza*



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*

By [Lahav Harkov](#) March 11, 2024

When President Joe Biden told MSNBC on Saturday that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was “hurting Israel more than helping Israel,” he was hitting the polarizing Israeli leader at a precarious moment for his governing coalition, which is divided over domestic issues. But if Biden

thought he was pushing Netanyahu closer to the political edge, he may find that this strategy has the opposite effect.

Biden's hot-mic call after Thursday's State of the Union address for a "come to Jesus" meeting – a phrase unfamiliar to most Israelis, which Hebrew media translated as a scolding – and Vice President Kamala Harris' call to "distinguish or at least not conflate the Israeli government with the Israeli people" punctuated a week in which Netanyahu had taken one domestic political hit after another.

The fallout continued from Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's call at the end of February for an end to the Haredi exemption from the IDF draft, with Gallant saying he would only table legislation supported by all parties in the coalition – a seemingly impossible feat.

Yet, if Netanyahu thought he could rely on the 64 members of his pre-war, religious-right coalition to stick together when it comes to Haredi conscription, the response to remarks by Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef made clear that the issue is Haredim vs. everyone else – and that Netanyahu may not be able to avoid an election if he chooses the Haredi side, as he has in the past.

Yosef said in a weekly Torah class on Saturday night that Haredim will "all move abroad" if the exemption ends, which, in the words of prominent Haredi journalist Ishay Cohen, is "a stop sign" for the Shas lawmakers trying to come up with a compromise.

In the ensuing uproar, coalition parties to Netanyahu's right joined opposition figures and centrists in the wartime coalition in speaking out against Yitzhak's threat. MK Simcha Rothman of the Religious Zionist Party opened a meeting of the Knesset Law, Constitution and Justice Committee, which he chairs, saying he "felt a need to protest the words we heard... The discussion has gone beyond the question of the right relationship between the IDF and the Haredi public and broader society... The people of Israel, the Torah of Israel and the Land of Israel cannot act in a way that is detached from one another."

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's Otzma Yehudit party released a statement that "serving in the IDF is a great privilege and a great mitzvah for a Jew to defend himself in his land... We can solve many of the disputes through adapted conscription to the police and National Guard."

Earlier in the week, another Haredi-related matter heated up, when the state commission of inquiry on the 2021 Mt. Meron disaster, in which 45 people were killed at the overcrowded pilgrimage site, presented its findings.

Netanyahu, among others, was named responsible.

Soon after, Likud released a statement dismissing the report, because the commission was established by the short-lived government led by former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and claimed that one of its members, former IDF planning chief Maj. Gen. (res.) Shlomo Yanai, is an ally of opposition leader Yair Lapid who was offered a spot on Lapid's Yesh Atid party slate for the Knesset.

"Lapid's cynical and intentional attempt to turn the Meron disaster into a political battering ram will not succeed," the party's spokesman stated.

The Likud reaction angered many, with Netanyahu's political opponents tying the "pattern of neglect, negligence and dangerous responsibility" to the Oct. 7 attack on Israel. Even one of Netanyahu's biggest supporters, pundit Yinon Magal, called the response a mistake and reported that Sara Netanyahu was involved in writing it: "It annoys me...be statesmanlike."

All that took place within days of war cabinet Minister Benny Gantz's visit to Washington, which Netanyahu refused to authorize, arguing that "there is only one prime minister." Likud ministers accused Gantz of "subversion." Netanyahu's coalition may seem as rickety as it has been since the war began, but the Biden administration's criticisms highlight where he is strongest.

In light of the increasingly critical comments from Washington, Gantz sought in his visit to the White House to better communicate Israel's position in the war than Netanyahu and other Israeli officials had managed. Gantz, who is polling as the person most likely to replace the prime minister, may have

hoped to have received a warm welcome from the Biden administration, which had already started publicly blaming Netanyahu.

Instead, the former defense minister was read the riot act by Harris and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan over the shambolic, and at times disastrous, distribution of humanitarian aid to Gaza, as well as Israel's plan to attack Hamas' last stronghold in Rafah.

Over the weekend, Biden and Harris gave interviews in which they tried to draw a distinction between Netanyahu's position on the war and Israelis more broadly, amid reports that the administration was trying to create a wedge between the prime minister and the people and, perhaps, even bring about an early election.

Yet the meetings with Gantz, in which there was little daylight with Netanyahu on Rafah and humanitarian aid, as well as the short-term infeasibility of the Palestinian Authority governing Gaza, should have clued the Biden administration into the fact that Netanyahu's positions are broadly popular at home.

An Israel Democracy Institute survey conducted on Feb. 28-March 4 and published on Sunday found that 64.5% of Israelis support the IDF "expand[ing] its military operations into Rafah," while only 21% oppose it. When narrowing the sample to Israeli Jews, 74% support entering Rafah, while 12% oppose it.

In addition, 55% of Israelis and 62% of Israeli Jews think that Gantz's party should remain in the coalition – which runs counter to calls for Netanyahu's ouster and an early election at this point.

In an interview with *Politico* on Sunday, Netanyahu noted that "the overwhelming majority of Israelis...support the action that we're taking to destroy the remaining terrorist battalions of Hamas. They say that once we destroy Hamas, the last thing we should do is put in charge of Gaza, the Palestinian Authority that educates its children towards terrorism and pays for terrorism... The attempt to say that my policies are my private policies

that are not supported by most Israelis is false. The vast majority are united as never before. And they understand what's good for Israel.”

And even before Biden and Harris' comments, Israelis began to suspect that the administration's support was on the decline. Only 40% of Israelis surveyed in the IDI poll said that the Jewish state can rely on the U.S. fully or to a large extent. Another poll conducted by the Jewish People Policy Institute last week and provided to *Jewish Insider* found that 70% of Jewish Israelis believe that Biden supports Israel less now than at the beginning of the war.

JPPI President Yedidia Stern said that “even those Israelis who do not express trust in Prime Minister Netanyahu's leadership – around 70% according to previous surveys – also do not support proposals made by the U.S. administration regarding the way the war should be conducted — operating in Rafa for instance — or regarding the ‘day after,’ the two-state solution for example, and see such proposals as an expression of a decline in President Biden's support for Israel.”

Former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren saw Biden and Harris' attempt to separate Netanyahu and Israelis as “delegitimizing the government that was democratically elected. It's unconscionable... They're saying we don't accept the outcome of the [2022] election.”

Oren posited to JI that, as Gantz's visit to Washington indicated, replacing Netanyahu would not remedy the situation: “We're getting the crap knocked out of us in every way. They accept Hamas casualty numbers with no question, but when we say we killed 13,000 terrorists, the administration says they think it's half that. Would it be different without Bibi? No.”

Yiftach Dayan, a Hebrew-language commentator on American politics who writes the blog “Elephants and Donkeys,” told JI he thinks Biden knows that Netanyahu is representing a mainstream position on the war and that the president is mostly bluffing for domestic benefit.

“Biden has a game he's playing, and that is criticism of Bibi... It reduces some of the flames,” Dayan said.

Dayan argued that Biden is trying to avoid a situation ahead of this summer's Democratic National Convention where he is presenting a polar opposite position to a significant bloc of his party's voters, in order to avoid a repeat of the 1968 Democratic Convention — also held in Chicago — which was marked by anti-Vietnam War protests and rioting.

Biden's "instinct is to support Israel and allow it freedom of action against Hamas after Oct. 7, but he is aware of the importance of this issue to a bloc of his voters" who oppose Israel, Dayan argued. "If Biden talks more about the humanitarian issue and attacks Bibi, he's avoiding that polarized situation, which lessens the chance that there will be a large force disrupting the convention. His supporters can say...he's not perfect, but you can't say he's blind to the situation in Gaza."

Both Oren and Dayan thought it was unlikely that Biden would actually address the Knesset, a possibility floated in his MSNBC interview. Oren said that Biden would likely be heckled in Israel's legislature, and noted that former President Barack Obama avoided speaking in the Knesset, instead inviting university students to hear him at a Jerusalem convention center. Biden, Oren argued, is "actually strengthening Bibi, not weakening him, because people are going to rally around him. As much as I think this government is a deep strategic liability, it makes me want to rally around [Netanyahu], because Biden is attacking Israeli democracy."

Dayan said that Biden's criticism is unlikely to hurt Netanyahu politically, and that "right-wing people who are disappointed with him may now see him as standing up for Israel's interests."

"The center and center-left could make the argument that they would advance Israel's interests better...but I don't think it would change much here," he added.