

POLITICS

Netanyahu downplays tensions with US after weekend of sniping with Biden over Gaza

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, pictured in February. (Amos Ben-Gershon/Israeli Government Press Office)

(JTA) – Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu downplayed differences between him and President Joe Biden Monday, saying they “agree” on the goals of the war, while Biden emphasized U.S. efforts toward humanitarian aid and a ceasefire in Gaza.

The most recent remarks by both leaders — Netanyahu’s in a Fox News interview, Biden’s in a statement marking the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan — come following a weekend of sniping. Biden had accused Netanyahu of “hurting Israel more than helping Israel,” while Netanyahu shot back that the president was

“wrong” and that he was advancing “policies supported by the overwhelming majority of the Israelis.”

Both men also commented on a quip by Biden, caught on a hot mic following his State of the Union address last week, that he and Netanyahu would have a “come to Jesus” conversation. Biden explained that it meant “a serious meeting,” adding, “I’ve known Bibi for 50 years and he knew what I meant by it.”

Netanyahu confirmed that assumption, telling Fox News that he took the idiom to mean a “heart-to-heart conversation,” which he said they had had “plenty of times.”

The two leaders’ statements come amid fears that clashes could spread across Israel during Ramadan, a period that has historically seen spikes in violence in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, American-mediated talks toward a temporary ceasefire and hostage release in the Israel-Hamas war have stalled while Israel prepares for an invasion of Rafah, in southern Gaza.

Both men are also in a precarious position domestically. Biden is facing domestic blowback over the Gaza war that could hurt his chances in this year’s presidential election, while Netanyahu’s support has plummeted in Israel since Oct. 7, when the war began with Hamas’ invasion of Israel, which killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

Biden staunchly supported Israel at the outset of the fighting. In an interview with MSNBC on Saturday, he reiterated that he still supports Israel’s war effort but urged it to make a greater effort to protect civilians. More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, according to Gaza’s Hamas-run health ministry, a figure that is not verifiable and includes both civilians and combatants. Israel says roughly 40% of the casualties are combatants.

“He has a right to defend Israel, a right to continue to pursue Hamas, but he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken,” Biden said of Netanyahu. “He’s

hurting Israel more than helping Israel... It's contrary to what Israel stands for and I think it's a big mistake."

Biden warned Israel against invading Rafah, a city in southern Gaza that has become a focal point in the conflict in recent weeks. Rafah is crowded with more than a million refugees, but Israel says that the city is Hamas' last bastion in the enclave. The United States has urged Israel to allow civilians to evacuate the city before an invasion begins.

Asked about an Israeli invasion of Rafah, Biden said it was "a red line, but I'm never going to leave Israel. The defense of Israel is still critical, so there's no red line [where] I'm going to cut off all weapons so they don't have the Iron Dome" missile defense system.

Biden said he was prepared to visit Israel to speak directly to the Knesset to push for a ceasefire, but declined to say if there had been any discussions with Israeli leadership about a visit. The president visited Israel in October, shortly after the Hamas attack.

He also elaborated on his "come to Jesus" comment.

Netanyahu bluntly rejected Biden's criticism. In an interview on Sunday, he said he wasn't sure what Biden meant but "if he meant by that that I'm pursuing private policies against the majority, the wish of the majority of Israelis, and that this is hurting the interests of Israel, then he's wrong on both counts."

Netanyahu also rejected Biden's warning against military action in Rafah, saying Israeli forces intended to move into the city. A recent poll by the Israel Democracy Institute found that more than 60% of Israelis support military action in Gaza.

"You know what the red line is? That Oct. 7 doesn't happen again," Netanyahu said in the interview, which was conducted by German media company Axel Springer and published in Politico.

In his interview Monday morning on Fox News, Netanyahu stressed that Hamas' military capabilities must be completely dismantled to prevent another Oct. 7-style attack, which Hamas has vowed to repeat.

But he softened his criticism of Biden, saying that they were in agreement about the war's goals, but had "disagreements about how to achieve them."

"The president and I have agreed that we have to destroy Hamas," Netanyahu said at the outset of the 11-minute appearance on "Fox and Friends," asked about Biden's comment regarding red lines. "If the president means by that that we should first enable the safe departure of the civilian population of Rafah before we go in, we agree with that."

But Netanyahu did warn that divisions between Israel and the United States harmed the war effort and hostage negotiations.

"To the extent that Hamas believes that there's daylight between us, that doesn't help," he said.

In a Saturday night statement marking the start of Ramadan, meanwhile, Biden said the month was beginning "at a moment of immense pain." The president said the United States would continue to lead efforts to bring humanitarian aid into Gaza and work for a six-week ceasefire as well as a two-state solution.

"As Muslims gather around the world over the coming days and weeks to break their fast, the suffering of the Palestinian people will be front of mind for many," the statement said. "It is front of mind for me."