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WORLD | MIDDLE EAST

Israel's Netanyahu Addresses U.S. Congress Amid Election Shake-Up

Prime minister defends Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza and pays tribute to both Biden and Trump in speech to a jammed House chamber

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WASHINGTON—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dove into a volatile moment in U.S. presidential politics with a fiery address to Congress, defending his handling of the war in Gaza and appealing to both President Biden and Donald Trump to back Israel against its Middle East enemies.

Addressing a packed House chamber, Netanyahu displayed his penchant for intervening in U.S. politics honed over decades, delivering pointed jabs at Democrats and sometimes lavishing praise on Trump.

He thanked President Biden for supporting Israel in its nine-month war but also sought to put the White House on the defensive, calling for the U.S. to “fast track” additional weapons shipments. He also urged the U.S. to help counter a growing threat from Iran, denouncing protesters against the Gaza war outside the Capitol as “anti-Israeli” and “Iran’s useful idiots.”

“Our enemies are your enemies. Our fight is your fight. And our victory will be your victory,” Netanyahu said to a standing ovation in the jammed House chamber. “As we defend ourselves on all fronts, I know that America has our back.”

Vice President Kamala Harris, the expected Democratic presidential nominee who would normally preside over a joint session, and dozens of Democratic lawmakers skipped the speech, as did Sen. JD Vance, former President Trump’s vice-presidential nominee, who was at campaign events.

But House and Senate members who did attend applauded Netanyahu raucously, especially Republicans, giving him a standing ovation as the prime minister

walked off the dais to chants of “1,400 dead, 1,400 dead,” referring to the initial Israeli death toll in the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas that launched the Gaza war.

Israel now says an estimated 1,200 people died in the attacks.

Netanyahu condemned the “dastardly” attack on Trump at a Pennsylvania campaign rally this month and called for broadening the 2020 Abraham Accords brokered by Trump that established diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab governments. He didn’t mention the Biden administration attempts to negotiate a similar agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel that has been blocked by the continuing fighting in Gaza.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, (D., N.Y.,) who called for Netanyahu to be replaced in March over his handling of the Gaza war, grimaced during parts of the speech, and Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D., Mich.,) who has been a strident critic of the war, held up a small black circular sign that said “war criminal.”

Netanyahu used much of the first part of his speech to highlight the Gaza war, pointing out former hostages and Israeli soldiers in the audience. He told the story of Noa Argamani, standing next to Netanyahu’s wife, Sara Netanyahu, in the House chamber, who was rescued in June by Israeli special forces along with three other hostages seized on Oct. 7.



Demonstrators and relatives of hostages taken by Hamas protested on the National Mall in Washington on Tuesday. PHOTO: GRAEME SLOAN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

“As we speak, we’re actively engaged in intensive efforts to secure their release,” Netanyahu said, referring to talks on reaching a cease-fire and release of the hostages. “Some of them are taking place right now.”

Israel says there are now 116 hostages abducted that day remaining in Gaza, most of them Israeli, including dual nationals. That includes hostages whom Israel has concluded are no longer alive.

In a forceful defense of Israel's conduct of the Gaza war, Netanyahu denounced what he called "anti-Israeli" protests against the Gaza war on college campuses and in cities across the U.S., accusing protesters of antisemitism and of receiving secret funding from Iran.

He also rejected criticism that Israel has intentionally targeted civilians in Gaza and restricted the flow of humanitarian aid.

"If there are Palestinians in Gaza who aren't getting enough food, it's not because Israel is blocking it, it's because Hamas is stealing it," he said.

Over 39,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war, according to Gaza health authorities, who don't say how many were combatants.

Netanyahu appealed to the U.S. to quickly send additional weapons, an implicit reference to the Biden administration's decision to hold up a shipment of 2,000-pound bombs.

"Give us the tools, and we will finish the job," Netanyahu said. "Give us the tools faster and we will finish the job faster."



President Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, greeting each other in 2023 in Tel Aviv, have interacted for decades. PHOTO: EVAN VUCCI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Under pressure from the White House almost since the war began to outline a plan for postwar Gaza, Netanyahu said little beyond what he has said before about Israel's intentions and provided few details. He didn't mention reviving

talks on the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, a Biden administration objective.

Netanyahu spoke of what he called his “vision” for Gaza after “our victory.” With the help of regional partners, he said, his goal is a “demilitarized and deradicalized” Gaza, which he said can “lead to a future of prosperity and peace.”

The U.S. blueprint for postwar Gaza envisions an infusion of aid from Gulf Arab states and bringing in a peacekeeping force to maintain security after Israel withdraws. The Palestinian Authority, which rules parts of the West Bank, would eventually take over governance of Gaza, replacing Hamas, under the U.S. plan.

But Netanyahu has rejected a postwar role for the Palestinian Authority. Israel doesn’t intend to occupy Gaza, he said. While Israel doesn’t seek to “resettle” the enclave, he said, “for the foreseeable future, we must retain overriding security control there” to prevent Hamas from resurging.

In the days leading up to Netanyahu’s visit, it appeared U.S. party politics had moved in Israel’s favor. The national discussion over Israel’s conduct in Gaza seemed to have fallen into the background, as the focus moved to Biden’s fitness and former President Donald Trump’s invigorated campaign after a failed assassination attempt. Campus protests had died down with the summer break, and some delayed arms shipments had begun to flow.



Netanyahu spoke in 2015 before Congress. PHOTO: J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Then the ground shifted. Just hours before Netanyahu boarded his plane for the long flight, Biden announced he was withdrawing from the race. The prime

minister was airborne while Harris was solidifying her position as the Democrats' expected nominee.

Netanyahu arrived confronted with a new balancing act—appealing to the new, potentially more progressive face of the Democratic Party while not antagonizing Trump.

There is tension between Netanyahu and both sides of the U.S. political aisle. Some Democrats continue to chafe over his 2015 speech before Congress in which he attacked President Barack Obama's Iran policy. Meanwhile, Trump was put off by Netanyahu's embrace of Biden after the 2020 election.

Harris has been tougher in her criticism of Israel than Biden, hewing closer to the progressive flank of her party. Netanyahu will need to be wary of reigniting controversy over Israel just as she is formulating her own public approach to what has become a wedge issue in the election.

If Netanyahu comes off as too chummy with the Democrats, he risks raising the ire of Trump, who has already lambasted him as someone ungrateful for their prior cooperation.

Many back in Israel were bracing themselves for a speech that they feared could draw the wrong sort of attention.

“Anyone who understands the bilateral relationship has got to be very concerned about Israel becoming a partisan issue,” said Chuck Freilich, a former deputy national security adviser in Israel. “He is going to have to be very, very careful if he doesn't want in the end to alienate both sides.”

Netanyahu traveled to the U.S. for the speech at the invitation of House Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.) and Schumer. He is scheduled to meet Biden on Thursday at the White House and Trump on Friday at the former president's Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Fla. He is also set to meet Harris.

Boaz Bismuth, a lawmaker from Netanyahu's Likud party, said the prime minister couldn't say no to an invitation from Congress, especially when Israel is facing historic challenges.



Smoke billows after a hit from a rocket fired from southern Lebanon in northern Israel, along the border where Israel and Hezbollah have traded fire on a near-daily basis. PHOTO: JALAA MAREY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Few countries have more at stake in this U.S. presidential election. Israel needs a steady supply of arms, intelligence, diplomatic support in international forums and potentially outright military support as it hopes to defeat or deter its adversaries. It is contending with a war in Gaza, another looming on the border with Lebanon and an increase in clashes with Iran-backed militias in places as distant as Yemen.

U.S. support looked less certain in the spring, with college campuses roiled by pro-Palestinian protests, the Biden administration pausing some weapons deliveries because of concerns about civilian casualties and Schumer calling for Netanyahu to step down. Concerns grew in Israel that U.S. support would fall victim to partisan politics.

Such concerns have eased, but Netanyahu risks reigniting debates over U.S. support for Israel. Progressive Democrats already have Netanyahu and Israel in their sights thanks to the visit.

“Netanyahu should not be welcomed into the United States Congress,” said Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.), a critic of the Israeli government who wasn’t planning to attend the speech. “On the contrary, his policies in Gaza and the West Bank and his refusal to support a two-state solution should be roundly condemned.”

A letter signed by 230 anonymous House and Senate staffers last week called on members to protest or boycott the event.

“This is not an issue of politics, but an issue of morality,” the letter said.

“Citizens, students, and lawmakers across the country and the world have

spoken out against the actions of Mr. Netanyahu in his War on Gaza.”



Relatives and supporters of hostages held by Hamas protested to demand their release, outside the U.S. Embassy branch office in Tel Aviv on Wednesday. PHOTO: OHAD ZWIGENBERG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

While the exact number of Democrats who planned to skip the address wasn't known, some congressional aides had privately suggested it could be between 50 and 100. In 2015, nearly 60 Democrats boycotted Netanyahu's speech to Congress.

Netanyahu is deeply unpopular at home among many voters and his own security establishment. Both blame him for failing to cut a cease-fire deal with Hamas that could free some of the hostages still being held in Gaza, many of them likely dead, and for subjecting the country to the prospect of an endless war.

Critics also fault him for fighting publicly with the Biden administration about the war in Gaza, including a recent dispute over arms deliveries, in what they see as posturing to improve his standing at home.

The prime minister has said that he is standing up for Israel and that the military pressure is improving the prospects for a deal. Many in Israel see his visit as an attempt to burnish his image and appear as a statesman to his supporters.

Netanyahu's speech at the Capitol was his fourth to a joint session of Congress, surpassing his idol Winston Churchill for most addresses by a foreign leader. He was making the address on his first trip abroad since the Hamas-led attacks on Oct. 7.



Injured women arrive at a hospital in Khan Younis, in southern Gaza, on Tuesday. PHOTO: BASHAR TALEB/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The feeling in Israel now is that the tension with the U.S. has abated, Hamas has been severely weakened and that Israel is no longer facing an emergency situation, said Amit Segal, a leading conservative Israeli commentator. The backdrop gives Netanyahu the room to take a less combative approach with the Biden administration while seeking to frame the conflict in Gaza as an international war with international consequences, he said.

Bismuth, the Likud lawmaker, said that while the prime minister's 2015 speech was meant to warn the West about the threat from Iran, this week's speech is about what to do now that the threat has been unleashed. "In 2015 it was theoretical," Bismuth said. "Now everything is all too real."

Israel's security establishment fears that long-term bipartisan support in Washington, a pillar of national security, is in danger.

"The fact that he's landing in the biggest political storm now shows he doesn't understand the political situation," said Mitchell Barak, a former adviser to Netanyahu and now a political analyst and director at Jerusalem-based Keevoon Global Research. "He's only going to create divisions and do more damage than good by doing this trip."

—Gordon Lubold contributed to this article.

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