

Joe Biden feels political ground shift as Israel-Gaza conflict rages on

Analysis: US president may find himself increasingly isolated in his resolute defence of Israel



Joe Biden's stance on Israel has not shifted in his many decades in politics.

Julian Borger in Washington

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In his staunch defence of Israel, Joe Biden is sticking to a course set decades ago as a young senator, and so far he has not given ground on the issue to the progressive wing of his party or many Jewish Democrats urging a tougher line towards Benjamin Netanyahu.

Biden has even been prepared to face isolation at the UN security council, at the potential cost of his own credibility on multilateralism and human rights. But analysts say that as the death toll rises with no sign of a ceasefire, the domestic and international pressures on the president could become impossible to ignore.

American Jews have grown increasingly sceptical of Netanyahu and his policies. A Pew Research Center survey published last week found that only 40% thought the prime minister was providing good leadership, falling to 32% among younger Jews. Strikingly, only 34% strongly opposed sanctions or other punitive measures against Israel.

The liberal Jewish American lobby, J Street, has growing influence in the Democratic party and has urged Biden to do more to stop the bloodshed and the Israeli policies that have helped drive the conflict.



Protesters march in support of Palestine near in Washington DC on Saturday.

“We’re also urging the administration to make clear publicly that Israeli efforts to evict and displace Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are unacceptable, as is the use of excessive force against protesters,” said Jeremy Ben-Ami, the group’s president.

A prominent progressive Jewish writer, Peter Beinart, wrote a commentary in the New York Times last week arguing for the right of Palestinian refugees to return as the only long-term solution to the cycle of violence. “The East Jerusalem evictions are so combustible because they continue a pattern of expulsion that is as old as Israel itself,” Beinart wrote.

Donald Trump’s unquestioning embrace of Netanyahu and his policies contributed to making Israel policy a partisan issue. Facing increasing opposition from American Jews, the former Israeli ambassador to the US Ron Dermer argued publicly last week that the Israeli government should spend more of its energy reaching out to “passionate” American evangelicals, rather than Jews who he said were “disproportionately among our critics”.

US evangelicals such as Mike Pence and Mike Pompeo helped shape Trump policy on Israel. They are not a force in the Democratic party but a consideration in red and purple states Biden will have to win in next year’s midterm congressional elections to maintain a majority.

However, he cannot afford to alienate the progressive wing of his own party. It was progressive enthusiasm, and the support of prominent figures such as Bernie Sanders, that helped Biden win the presidency where Hillary Clinton failed.

Congressional progressives such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have been more and more outspoken in their criticism of the Biden line of emphasising Israel's right of defence "If the Biden admin can't stand up to an ally, who can it stand up to? How can they credibly claim to stand for human rights?" Ocasio-Cortez wrote on Twitter on Saturday.

Biden worked hard to cultivate the progressives during the campaign and afterwards, setting up policy workshops with them, but the current crisis has brought that honeymoon in an end.

Most analysts, however, say Biden set his course on the Israel long ago and will be hard to shift. He was a staunch defender in the Senate for decades, supporting the Israeli bombing of a suspected nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981, for example, and labelling himself "Israel's best Catholic friend".

His foreign policy outlook is based on the foundation of adhering to and strengthening America's traditional alliances.

"Biden has his own compass when it comes to the region, and is less susceptible to pressure from the left flank of his party," said Carmiel Arbit, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. "Although there is some pressure within the Democratic party to take a less sympathetic stance towards Israel, and it is certainly starting to drive a different conversation, it is not driving policy on this issue."

Arbit added: "But a lot depends on the situation. If the conflict escalates, and casualty numbers rise significantly, Biden's posture could change."

Daniel Levy, the head of the US/Middle East Project thinktank, agreed that the political ground is shifting under Biden's feet. "It is premature to suggest that the special treatment Israel receives in American politics and policy, and that has previously traversed Republican and Democratic administrations, is definitively over," Levy said. "Yet the dynamics are pushing in that direction and the signs of change are already visible – the question is how far and how fast those will move."

In the short term, he added, the key will be the views expressed in the Senate, which is split 50-50, with Biden's agenda often dependent on Kamala Harris, the vice-president, casting the deciding vote.