

Israel's Right-Wing Government Has Jewish Democrats at a Loss

American lawmakers defending Israel have often fallen back on what they call the countries' shared democratic values. But defending the current far-right government is proving a lot harder.



By Jonathan Weisman

April 20, 2023

6 MIN READ

Last month, as demonstrations across Israel convulsed politics in the Jewish state, Jewish Democrats in the House who have made up the bulwark of Israel's support on their side of the aisle met privately with the country's ambassador.

Representative David Cicilline of Rhode Island, a self-described progressive, was particularly blunt. In meetings with liberal groups on and off Capitol Hill, where support for Israel has grown more tenuous by the month, he had always fallen back on what he called the shared democratic values of Israel and the United States, Mr. Cicilline told the ambassador, Michael Herzog.

But the new far-right government in Jerusalem, with its efforts to undermine Israel's independent judiciary and its inclusion of extremist politicians, was making even that plea "much, much more difficult," Mr. Cicilline recounted in an interview.

In the ensuing weeks, the strains between Israel and the Democratic Party, and particularly an American Jewish community that remains predominantly liberal, have only grown worse.

Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, may have put his overhaul of Israel's judiciary on pause, but the beating of Muslim worshipers during Ramadan in the Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem — known to Jews as the Temple Mount — the bloodletting on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide and the empowerment of far-right ministers in Mr. Netanyahu's government are fraying relations between the world's two largest Jewish communities, Israeli and American.

"I represent one of the most ideologically diverse Jewish constituencies in America," said Representative Jake Auchincloss, a Jewish Democrat from Massachusetts. "On this issue, there is unanimity. There are extreme concerns about the direction that Israel is headed, toward illiberal democracy."



Mr. Netanyahu has empowered far-right ministers in his government, drawing criticism from many liberal Israeli and American Jews. Pool photo by Menahem Kahana

The signs of such strains are everywhere. At Ansche Chesed, a Conservative synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky has replaced the standard prayer for the State of Israel with a more spiritual psalm invoking peace in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Kalmanofsky said that the Netanyahu government had crossed a line when it included in its cabinet Bezalel Smotrich, who has called for the separation of Jews and Arabs in Israeli society, and Itamar Ben-Gvir, who until 2020 hung a photograph in his home of a Jewish nationalist who killed 29 Muslim worshipers in the West Bank.

"I would say to my fellow American Jews, if you have ever said, 'No, no, no, Israel is not, and it's not going to be, and it's not tilting toward an apartheid state,' and you believe that, as I have, then you have to say that the inclusion of these two people in the government is a disaster," Rabbi Kalmanofsky said.

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan founded a movement within Reform Judaism, Amplify Israel, to try to renew a commitment to Zionism in a Jewish community drifting away from the Jewish state. Last month, even he appeared near a breaking point, pleading to Mr. Netanyahu from his synagogue's bimah, "Stop this runaway out-of-control car before it hurtles off the abyss."



Representative David Cicilline of Rhode Island, a self-described progressive, said that the Israeli government's moves had made defending it far more difficult. Pool photo by Graeme Jennings

And the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish civil rights group that has been stalwartly Zionist, on Monday included a remarkable denunciation of "Jewish racism" within Israel's government in its annual assessment of global antisemitism.

Far from retreating, Mr. Netanyahu this week nominated May Golan, a far-right member of Parliament allied with Mr. Ben-Gvir, to become Israel's consul general in New York, a move that immediately yielded criticism. Martin Indyk, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel, wrote that Ms. Golan's nomination, if it occurred, "will be seen by the American Jewish community as a sign of utmost disrespect" and suggested that the Biden administration should reject her appointment.



Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz, Democrat of Florida, has also been critical of Israeli actions. Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun-Sentinel, via Associated Press

In the latter years of Barack Obama's presidency and for the duration of the Trump administration, such strains were evident but did not seem to threaten the ties that bound the Israeli and American governments. Mr. Netanyahu cultivated partisan relations with congressional Republicans and evangelical leaders in the United States that deepened support for his government in the G.O.P. and across a Christian conservative community that is numerically far larger than American Jewry.

President Donald J. Trump, in turn, did virtually whatever Mr. Netanyahu wanted, from cheering the annexation of the Golan Heights to moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv.

Evangelical leaders remain strikingly uncritical of the Israeli government.

"I don't get involved in the intricacies of the Israeli government, but I am grateful that Prime Minister Netanyahu was elected again," said the Rev. Robert Jeffress, a minister at a Dallas megachurch and a Trump ally who delivered a prayer at the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem in 2018. "He is committed to the safety of his nation and understands the existential threat that faces his land."



Representative Jake Auchincloss, a Jewish Democrat from Massachusetts, said that "there are extreme concerns about the direction that Israel is headed, toward illiberal democracy." Alex Brandon/Associated Press

And Republicans remain committed to hammering down the wedge that Mr. Trump sought to drive between American liberals and Israeli citizens. Representative Kevin McCarthy and his Israeli counterpart, Amir Ohana, announced on Tuesday that Mr. McCarthy would at the end of this month become the second House speaker to address Israel's Parliament, an intentional contrast with President Biden's chilly relations with the new right-wing government.

And Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, a likely presidential candidate, will speak next week in Israel on what he called the "unnecessarily strained relations between Jerusalem and Washington" at a conference celebrating 75 years of Israel's independence.

But Israeli officials say they recognize the importance of relations with American Jews, even the majority who remain firmly Democratic. Mr. Trump's defeat and the instability of the Republican Party have raised worries in Jerusalem that an administration as friendly as Mr. Trump's might not be returning to Washington anytime soon.



"I've been to the region three times in the last 10 years, and without question, this is the worst it's been," said Representative Mark Pocan, Democrat of Wisconsin and one of a growing member of House Democrats willing to criticize Israel openly. Alex Wong/Getty Images

Israel's diplomats in the United States have redoubled their efforts to keep Zionism at the core of American Judaism, regardless of sect. But that effort has run headlong into current events.

For American liberals, the Netanyahu government's push to overhaul the judiciary came on top of the marginalization of liberal parties in Israel, despair in Gaza and the absence of progress toward Palestinian autonomy and equal rights.

"I've been to the region three times in the last 10 years, and without question, this is the worst it's been," said Representative Mark Pocan, Democrat of Wisconsin and one of a growing member of House Democrats willing to criticize Israel openly.

The meeting last month with Ambassador Herzog was a watershed, because it was organized by and included some of Israel's strongest supporters in the Democratic Caucus. If Mr. Cicilline spoke for liberal Jews in Rhode Island, Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz was just as critical of Israeli actions on behalf of far more conservative Jews in her South Florida district.

Representative Brad Schneider, Democrat of Illinois and one of the meeting's organizers, said, "We were dealing with a very complicated issue that has no easy solution, where people have very strong feelings, and those feelings were shared as though among family."

As their younger Jewish constituents see Zionism as less central to their Jewish identity, Democrats are finding it politically easier to level strong criticism of Israeli government action, said Representative Jan Schakowsky, Democrat of Illinois.

"This next generation of American Jews are really justice Jews," she said. "If you expect them to care at all" about Israel, she added, "you'd better address injustices to the Palestinians."

Ms. Schakowsky pointed to her own rabbi in Evanston, Ill., Andrea London, who, in an interview, voiced an opinion that would have once sounded heretical: "Israel's not going to be destroyed" by its hostile neighbors, she said.

The question facing world Jewry is no longer whether Israel will survive, Rabbi London said. "It's whether Israel will become a Jewish and undemocratic state, or whether Israel will become a state for all its inhabitants, from the Jordan River to the sea, and lose its Jewish character," she said.

Such strains are surfacing even among Orthodox Jewish leaders, long considered part of the natural alliance between Mr. Netanyahu, conservative Christians and religious Jews. Morton A. Klein, the longtime president of the conservative Zionist Organization of America, said his organization was the only one of a vast array of Jewish organizations running the religious gamut to back the Netanyahu government's push to allow a Knesset majority to override rulings of Israel's Supreme Court.

As Israel's politics and voters move right, Mr. Klein said, American Jews of all stripes see its high court as the last lever of liberal power. "That is the main motivator" of American Jewish criticism, he contended. "They're losing their power to control policy."

It is not just liberal-leaning organizations that have expressed concern. When Mr. Smotrich, Mr. Netanyahu's finance minister, visited the United States last month, many Jewish leaders refused to meet with him; some protested his presence.

The Orthodox Union did meet with him, said Rabbi Moshe Hauer, the union's executive vice president. "We don't do ourselves a service by disengaging from members of the government and relying on the opposition's portrayal of them as the extreme," he said.

But, Rabbi Hauer hastened to add, he understands the difficulty of the moment — for all Jews.

"The intensity of the debate has made this a delicate moment in terms of the internal fabric of the State of Israel," he said, "and an equally delicate moment for North American Jewry in terms of being able to relate."