

As Congress Weighs Aid to Israel, Some Democrats Want Strings Attached

Democrats are clashing with each other and the Biden administration over whether to attach conditions, including measures to avoid civilian casualties, to a major infusion of security assistance.

By Karoun Demirjian
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Democrats in Congress are clashing with each other and the Biden administration over a push from the left that would attach conditions to an emergency infusion of security aid for Israel during its war with Hamas, the latest reflection of a growing rift within the party over support for the Jewish state.

The debate is a striking departure from longstanding practice on Capitol Hill, where for decades, lawmakers have approved huge amounts of military funding for Israel with few strings attached. Now, as Israel battles Hamas in a conflict whose civilian death toll has soared, a growing number of Democrats are voicing worry about how American dollars will be used.

The issue could come to a head on the Senate floor as early as next week, when Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the majority leader, has said the chamber could begin work on a legislative package including the aid measure.

The disagreements among Democrats simmered behind closed doors on Capitol Hill and at the White House on Tuesday. At the White House, Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, huddled with roughly 20 Democratic senators who have raised concerns about how Israel might use U.S. assistance on the battlefield. Later, at a private party lunch in the Capitol, several of the same Democrats argued to their colleagues that any aid package should increase humanitarian assistance to Gaza and ensure that Israel do more to avoid civilian casualties.

We want the president to secure express assurances from the Netanyahu government regarding a plan to reduce the unacceptable level of civilian casualties, and we want the Netanyahu coalition to commit to full cooperation with our efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza,” said Senator Chris Van Hollen, the Maryland Democrat leading the effort, referring to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. “The bottom line is we need those express assurances. How we achieve that is something that we are discussing right now.”

Mr. Van Hollen spearheaded a letter this month to President Biden that was signed by half of the Democratic caucus and raised concerns about whether the weapons provided by the United States would be used [in keeping with international law](#).

The Biden administration has requested \$14.3 billion for Israel's war effort against Hamas as part of a sweeping national security package that includes additional billions to speed humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip.

No Democrats have said they would not back the package. But several have worried that if left unchecked, Israel's use of heavier, U.S.-supplied offensive weapons funded by a fresh infusion of American money could undermine efforts to minimize Palestinian casualties and distribute help to civilians under bombardment.

Their concerns have become the latest flashpoint in a debate within the Democratic Party about how much restraint Israel should exercise in its strikes on Gaza. Leaders of both parties have dismissed calls for conditions as unnecessary, and warned that they would hamstring Israel's military strategy.

"There are different views on that," Mr. Schumer told reporters on Tuesday after the lunch. "The bottom line is I'm going to discuss it with the administration and my caucus."

Republicans, eager to showcase Democratic divisions on the issue, have been far more blunt.

"If Senate Democrats want to vote to tie the hands of Israeli soldiers as they defend their country against vicious terrorists, I welcome such a debate," Senator Mitch McConnell, the minority leader, said in a floor speech. "Israel deserves the time, space and resources to restore its security, and I will stand by our ally 100 percent."

Israel has been the United States' largest cumulative recipient of foreign aid since its founding in 1948, and the \$3.8 billion it receives in annual military assistance outpaces the amount given to any other nation, with the recent exception of Ukraine. Although some of those funds were approved on the heels of peace deals, Congress has not previously detailed terms restricting the conditions under which the weapons Israel procures from the United States can be used.

But that could change as some Democrats push for an explicit assurance that Israel's operations against Hamas not run afoul of international law in the assistance package.

"Those are goals that I think everyone shares, and we're just trying to figure out the best way to do it," said Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia, who signed the letter to Mr. Biden.

The Biden administration, though initially unequivocal in its support of Israel's efforts to rout Hamas from Gaza, has recently urged [Israel to be more surgical](#) in its strikes, to avoid exacerbating an already dire humanitarian crisis. Last week, Mr. Biden told reporters that the idea of conditioning aid to Israel was "a worthwhile thought."

Some leading congressional Democrats argue that the Biden administration has already done enough to ensure that Israel conducts its operations in a way that spares civilian suffering.

“The Biden administration has had good conversations with the Israelis; I think he’s had impact on the military strategy as well as humanitarian assistance,” said Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, a Maryland Democrat who is the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Mr. Cardin has vocally opposed putting restrictions on additional weapons for Israel.

“We don’t condition aid on an ally, and we’re not going to try to micromanage their defense,” Mr. Cardin said.

Still, the debate over Israel’s use of force has intensified in recent days, as lawmakers brace for an expected resumption of hostilities in the Gaza Strip. The two sides have been in a temporary truce for nearly a week to enable the release of some hostages held by Hamas and certain Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

The Democrats pressing for conditions say their concerns should not be seen as backpedaling on their support for Israel. They argue that they are trying to avoid a worse humanitarian catastrophe and security crisis in the region.

“I support Israel aid; I always have,” said Senator Peter Welch, Democrat of Vermont. “My big issue is not with the Israel aid, it’s with the Israel bombing that’s having such a devastating impact on the civilians.”

He said the administration owed Congress more “transparency” about what the aid package would be used for, including why massive offensive weapons would be needed.

“There’s a lot that’s in there for Iron Dome — that’s great. Humanitarian — that’s great,” Mr. Welch said. “Two thousand pound bombs? Not so sure.”

The Iron Dome is a key piece of Israel’s missile defense infrastructure, which has been used to take out incoming Hamas rockets. Israel has been criticized for [using heavy bombs](#) to hit targets in the Gaza Strip because of the harm such weapons can pose to civilians in a tightly settled area.