

How should the U.S. help Israel, Ukraine? Ohio Senate candidates clash on path forward

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Columbus Dispatch

As politicians in Washington tangle over America's role on the world stage, a proxy fight is playing out in Ohio's U.S. Senate race.

On one side, Secretary of State Frank LaRose and state Sen. Matt Dolan, R-Chagrin Falls, have urged unwavering support for both Israel and Ukraine. In the other corner sits Cleveland businessman Bernie Moreno, who wants the U.S. out of Ukraine and has offered conflicting takes on the war between Israel and Hamas.

The three Republicans are vying for the chance to take on Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, who's seeking his fourth term in office next year.

As Congress contends with how much aid to send each country, Ohio's GOP primary candidates must grapple with foreign policy on the campaign trail, in addition to domestic issues like the economy. And the rifts mirror larger disagreements within the Republican Party over whether America should take a more isolationist approach to global politics.

"There's no way to escape talking about it," said David Cohen, a political scientist at the University of Akron. "There are large Jewish and Muslim communities in the state of Ohio, and it's a very sensitive topic. It's not going away as long as the war continues to rage."

Debate over Israel prompts campaign attacks

The war in the Middle East has dominated headlines – and Ohio's Senate race – since Hamas attacked Israel in early October.

LaRose, a former Army Green Beret, reflected on training with the Israel Defense Forces and called for the U.S. to show resolve as the war escalates. Dolan's campaign sent a fundraising request saying a GOP Senate majority is "the only way we can solidify our support for Israel." Moreno said Israel needs to "end Hamas" – but he also told Cleveland.com that it didn't need more money from the U.S.

"We support Israel by doing the following: Expedite the weaponry that they've already paid for, that they've already ordered," Moreno said during a forum in Medina last month. "Let's expedite that and get that to them. Israel doesn't need America's help to do what they need to do in Hamas, other than for us to give them the space to do it."

LaRose and Dolan panned their opponent's comments, and Moreno has since changed his tune. In New Albany last week, he said the U.S. should replenish the resources Israel has exhausted so far. But he also said President Joe Biden may be proposing more money than necessary.

"Certainly, they never anticipated 5,000 rockets in a three-week period of time, so we have to spend more money to replenish the Iron Dome and other things like that," Moreno told reporters. "We should be looking at what are the exact requests that Israel's making of America? I suspect the aid package that Biden is trying to slide in there is a creation of Washington, D.C. and not an actual, formal request from Israel."

Moreno hasn't been the only target. LaRose said Brown "chose to cater to terrorists" after Senate Democrats blocked an Israel funding bill that also included cuts to the Internal Revenue Service. Brown supports a package that would supply aid to Israel and Ukraine, along with funding for the U.S.-Mexico border.

In a statement, Brown said the U.S. must also provide humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza and ensure Israel is "taking all possible measures to protect civilian lives." Democrats have fought internally over whether Israel aid should come with conditions to reduce civilian deaths.

"It's vital to our national security that we stand with Ukraine and Israel as they fight back against two of the biggest threats facing the world: Putin and Iranian-backed terrorists like Hamas," Brown said. "The House bill was nothing more than a political stunt – and members of both parties have said so. This isn't a time to play politics."

Ukraine funding divides GOP Senate candidates

The divisions between candidates are even more stark when the Ukraine-Russia war enters the picture.

Moreno doesn't want more American aid going to Ukraine and said he wouldn't support a package coupling that with funding for Israel. The U.S. has so far committed over \$75 billion to Ukraine, according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, a research institute in Germany. Moreno and other critics – including Sen. J.D. Vance, R-Ohio – contend the Biden administration hasn't been transparent about how the funds are used.

"I think Republican primary voters will probably be more attracted to Bernie Moreno's message and will probably favor cutting off aid to Ukraine and will

be more in line with Donald Trump's worldview than the worldview of Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush," Cohen said.

Moreno, Dolan and LaRose agree on one thing: They say Biden does not project enough strength, which emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine. But that's where the consensus ends. Both LaRose and Dolan believe the U.S. has an interest in helping Ukraine defend itself.

LaRose did mention one caveat during the Medina forum: He said the U.S. must secure the southern border before sending more aid to Ukraine.

"This isolationist idea that we're just going to hide on our continent and pretend that the problem's going to go away is not what you get to do when you are the world's sole superpower – if we want to stay as a superpower," LaRose said.

In an interview, Dolan said he doesn't agree with Biden's approach to the conflict. He believes the president should have established clear goals for Ukraine and conveyed them to the American public. Even still, he said, the U.S. risks showing weakness to other adversaries if it appeases Russia.

Dolan noted that helping Ukraine can boost U.S. manufacturers – including one in Lima that sent tanks to Ukraine, according to PBS News. And he criticized members of his party who want to take a step back.

"They put a shelf life on American support and strength," Dolan said. "Our enemies don't have a shelf life."