

In Israeli-Palestinian battle to sway Congress, only one side wins

Pro-Israel is a uniquely bipartisan sentiment on Capitol Hill, a reflection of a powerful lobby and an imbalance of exposure to Palestinians

By Abigail Hauslohner
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The congressman was more sympathetic, more supportive of Israel than either lobbyist had expected. He affirmed every point they made: that Hamas is the personification of evil; that the release of hostages must be prioritized; and that the United States must not be distracted by rising Palestinian civilian casualties.

“You can count on Congress to be a friend,” Rep. Ritchie Torres, a 35-year-old Democrat from the Bronx, told his guests. “You can count on me to be a friend.”

Dona Raz Levy had flown from Tel Aviv to Washington to petition lawmakers on behalf of the more than 200 people who remain captives in Gaza. It was a mission with urgency, and she was pleased by Torres’s commitment. “That’s exactly it,” she responded. “You understood everything.”

As the United States has rushed to aid its closest Middle East ally in the aftermath of last month’s horrifying cross-border attack by Hamas, many American lawmakers have been swept up in a rhetorical feud over the violence — as Israel’s ferocious reprisal drives the Palestinian death toll higher by the day. The Capitol itself has become a front in this battle of narratives, with protesters, their hands painted red to symbolize the bloodshed, disrupting proceedings to demand a “cease-fire now!” But in Congress, only one side holds majority sway among those who control the funding of American foreign policy.

“We have been so grateful for the United States of America, for choosing to be on the right side of history,” Levy told Torres as she slid him a few papers bearing the faces of Israeli children and elderly people being held captive. But, she added, “there’s more that can be done.”

The Hamas assault on Oct. 7 left bodies and wreckage strewn across southern Israel, where authorities say 1,400 were killed. In the weeks since, more than six times as many Palestinians have perished, including thousands of children, amid the unyielding bombardment of Gaza, according to the United Nations’ children’s organization and Gaza health officials.

That Israel is winning on Capitol Hill — even as a few dozen progressive Democrats in the House and Senate have grown more vocal in their calls for humanitarian relief for Palestinian civilians — is a reflection, to Israel’s staunchest proponents, of the Jewish state’s moral high ground.

“ Hamas is a terrorist organization, period. The idea that Israel is an oppressor is a joke,” Rep. Michael Lawler (R-N.Y.) said last month in a floor speech. “ There is no moral equivalency here.”

It is also a reflection of the decades-long influence of a powerful lobby, and an imbalance of exposure, as lawmakers — many of whom are not experts in international affairs — consider information and forge policy, other lawmakers and analysts said.

Stephen Walt, a professor of international affairs and foreign policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, said that while the Israel lobby has been active and influential for decades, there is “ nothing comparable” on the other side. “ There are no Palestinian American organizations of equal clout, of equal size,” he said.

Pro-Israel lobbyist groups and individuals contributed nearly \$31 million to American congressional candidates during last year’s election cycle — more than six times the contributions candidates received from the gun rights lobby — according to Open Secrets, a Washington nonprofit that tracks campaign finance and lobbying data.

Torres, among the top 20 recipients in the House and Senate, received well over a quarter-million dollars from pro-Israel lobbyists during that election. His single biggest donor was the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Open Secrets data shows.

AIPAC’s website says that 98 percent of candidates it backed won their elections, and that it “ helped defeat” 13 candidates “ who would have undermined the U.S.-Israel relationship.” In the last cycle, AIPAC backed 365 candidates across the political spectrum, ranging from members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus who have called for universal health care and higher taxes to Republican Freedom Caucus members who refused to certify the 2020 election and want to ban the victims of rape and incest from obtaining abortions. What they have in common is Israel. “ We support pro-Israel candidates running against anti-Israel candidates,” AIPAC explains on its website.

Levy’s associate, Irwin Cotler, a retired Canadian politician and prominent Israel advocate, explained to Torres during their meeting that he was concerned about “ competing narratives” about the conflict. “ We already see these allegations,” he said, “ that it’s Israel that’s committing mass atrocities, et cetera, et cetera.”

As Levy and Cotler visited congressional offices, joined by Noam Peri, the daughter of 79-year-old Chaim Peri, held hostage by Hamas, pro-Palestinian activists were making their own push but finding few pledges of support.

“ There’s a strong position in many offices that Hamas needs to be rooted out and that, while the loss of civilian life is tragic, there’s a larger goal at hand,” said Robert McCaw, director of government affairs for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which advocates for Muslims.

In the weeks since the start of the war, at least 18 senators and four House members have made trips to Israel to meet with Israeli government officials and express their unwavering support for the Jewish state. Many also visited with leaders from other regional allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia — the

former is party to a long-standing peace treaty with Israel, and the latter, the potential party to a future treaty — and both of whose influence U.S. officials believe is essential to suppressing the threat of a larger regional war.

Lawmakers met with Israeli military officers and with members of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war cabinet, who showed them a short video montage of the atrocities Hamas had committed. "It shaped my understanding of just the level of the depravity and violence, and just total disregard for human life," Sen. Mark Kelly (D-Ariz.) said later in an interview.

The Israeli government, seeking to counter criticism of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, also has shown a longer version of the video to journalists in Washington, New York and Tel Aviv, urging reporters, as well as policymakers, to see Hamas as something akin to the Islamic State terrorist group, or worse.

After being shown the video on his trip to Israel, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) recalled that one of Netanyahu's ministers said: "These families tried to run and hide. For all of our history, the Jewish people have tried to run and hide. Israel is the place we were supposed to be safe."

That moment, Blumenthal said later in an interview, "crystallized for many of the delegation how existential this threat is. Hamas has the sole paramount goal to destroy Israel and eradicate the Jewish people. It is simply genocide."

None of the delegations, thus far, have met with or spoken to Palestinian authorities during their trips, lawmakers said.

"I have talked to Palestinians over the years, and we've had communications with them," Blumenthal added.

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that in the month since the attack, he has spoken to Palestinians "that I have had prior relations with."

There is no issue on Capitol Hill that unites Republicans and Democrats quite like Israel does, members of both parties say. And the halls of the congressional office buildings — studded with "I stand with Israel" signs and flags — are a testament to that unifying sentiment. The House and Senate both voted overwhelmingly to pass resolutions in support of Israel as it defends itself against Hamas.

The Biden administration has asked Congress to approve \$14 billion in emergency military assistance for Israel — four times Washington's annual budget for the Jewish state. The amount has met little pushback; lawmakers instead are divided about whether to approve President Biden's request that the package also include money for the war in Ukraine.

Publicly voicing support for the Palestinians has proved risky, however. A third of the nearly 20 pro-Israel resolutions and bills proposed by lawmakers in the weeks since Hamas's attack have focused on condemning Israel's critics — including protesters and university students. One House resolution

condemned an activist group for rallying in New York City in “solidarity with the Palestinian people and their right to resist 75 years of occupation and apartheid.”

Two measures have sought unsuccessfully to censure Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.), the only Palestinian American member of Congress. Rep. Ryan Zinke (R-Montana) last week introduced a bill that would bar Palestinians from entering the United States and deport others who are already here.

AIPAC, the powerful pro-Israel lobby, branded Rep. Cori Bush (D-Mo.) as someone who “doesn’t care about protecting Israeli civilians,” after she, backed by 17 colleagues, introduced a resolution calling for a cease-fire.

A few dozen other Democrats in the House and Senate have in the past week called for a “pause” or a temporary cease-fire to allow humanitarian assistance to reach Palestinian civilians, whom the United Nations says are running out of drinking water, food, fuel and basic medicine, since Israel cut off all access to Gaza and launched its air assault.

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) on Thursday called for Israel to alter its course in the besieged territory, saying “the current rate of civilian death inside Gaza is unacceptable and unsustainable.”

Nearly all of the lawmakers urging humanitarian considerations have included vociferous reiterations of their support for the Jewish state and their abhorrence of Hamas.

“The average representative or the average senator has very little incentive to go against this consensus or this message of unconditional support” for Israel, said Walt, the academic. “There’s no upside for them. If they express strong support for Israel, they don’t get penalized. They don’t lose many voters and they might gain some. If they question U.S. support for Israel, then they’re going to face pressure in almost all cases.”

Some lawmakers and congressional aides said that even meeting with “both sides” can be fraught.

Palestinian advocates have focused their lobbying meetings on pleas for a cease-fire and a lessening of Israel’s blockade.

“Our message is very simple ... turn the electricity and water back on in Gaza. Gaza is running out of time,” said Nagi Latefa, a Palestinian American engineer in Pennsylvania, who met with four of his state’s lawmakers, in part to plead for relief for his 83-year-old mother, trapped in Gaza, who had contracted a waterborne illness. Days later, she died.

“Most of the members have no idea what’s going on there and don’t understand the issue. They just get pushed to vote one way or another,” Latefa said. “We are so frustrated. We feel betrayed and abandoned by people we helped elect to office.”

One Palestinian American couple described their conversation with a Democratic senator who seemed sympathetic but too afraid to say so publicly. The couple said they pushed for a humanitarian corridor to

remove the wounded and dead from Gaza. The senator declined to support it. They pushed for drinking water.

The senator “hesitated,” the woman recalled. “My husband got heated. He said ‘Senator, we’re asking for water. You can’t ask for water?’”

Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md.), one of the members who have called for a pause, said he has met with a range of people — including the relatives of Israelis killed by Hamas, and the relatives of Palestinians killed by Israel.

“I’ve met with peace activists who are very happy with what I’ve been doing, and I’ve met with peace activists who have called me a war criminal,” Raskin said. The war “has released a lot of raw feelings ... I’m trying to think as clearly as I can through this hurricane of grief, fear, blind fury, rage and emotion, which is our daily bread now.”