



# U.S.-Israel Tensions Harm Key U.S. Interests

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*On Wednesday, Israeli President Isaac Herzog addressed a joint session of Congress after meeting President Biden the day before. Herzog's visit—absent a similar visit from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—does more to highlight the rocky state of U.S.-Israel relations than it does to signal enduring partnership among two friends. On average, for each of the last ten Israeli prime ministerial terms, the new prime minister met the U.S. president within 64 days of taking office. It has now been more than 200 days since Benjamin Netanyahu was re-elected, yet the Israeli prime minister has still not met with Biden. An invitation was extended the day before Herzog's visit began but reportedly not to the White House. Biden's comments calling Netanyahu's government "the most extreme" he has seen have not endeared the two leaders to one another either. Attempts by high-profile columnists and members of Congress to distance Washington from Jerusalem are also indicative of complications in the partnership.*

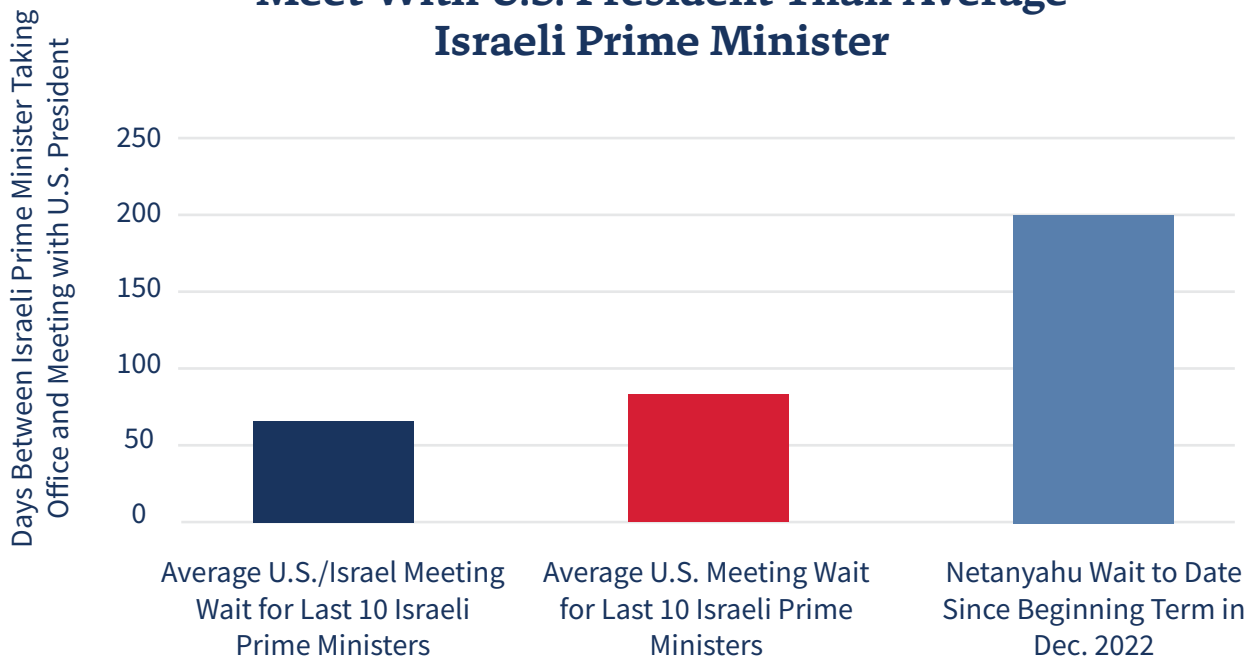
*Both Israel's and America's adversaries are seizing on these cracks in the U.S.-Israel relationship. Netanyahu recently announced his intention to accept an invitation from Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Beijing later this year—the latest Chinese effort to increase its influence in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Tehran continues to advance its nuclear program and attempts to encircle Israel. If the Biden administration continues to focus on political differences with Israel, it risks missing the opportunity to cooperate and the more important strategic priorities of countering Iranian regime's regional aggression and China's growing regional footprint.*

## What Happened?

- Israeli President Isaac Herzog is visiting Washington, D.C. He met with President Biden on July 18—his second visit to the White House in less than a year—and addressed a joint session of Congress on July 19. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was re-elected to office in December 2022, has not met with Biden since then.
- In the leadup to Herzog's visit, Biden spoke critically of Netanyahu and his government's plan to reform Israel's judiciary.
  - » In a July 9 interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria, Biden [said](#) that "this is one of the most extremist members of cabinets that I've seen [in Israel]."

- On June 27, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [announced](#) that China invited him for a state visit, and he [confirmed](#) to a delegation of U.S. lawmakers that he will likely visit China this year. This would be Netanyahu’s [fourth](#) visit to China as prime minister.
- Finally, on July 17, Biden and Netanyahu [spoke on the phone](#) for only the third time in more than six months, and Biden reportedly extended an invitation for Netanyahu to visit the United States, but it is unclear whether the two leaders will meet at the White House.

## Netanyahu Has Waited Far Longer to Meet With U.S. President Than Average Israeli Prime Minister



*Excludes Interim Terms and Party Affiliation Changes*

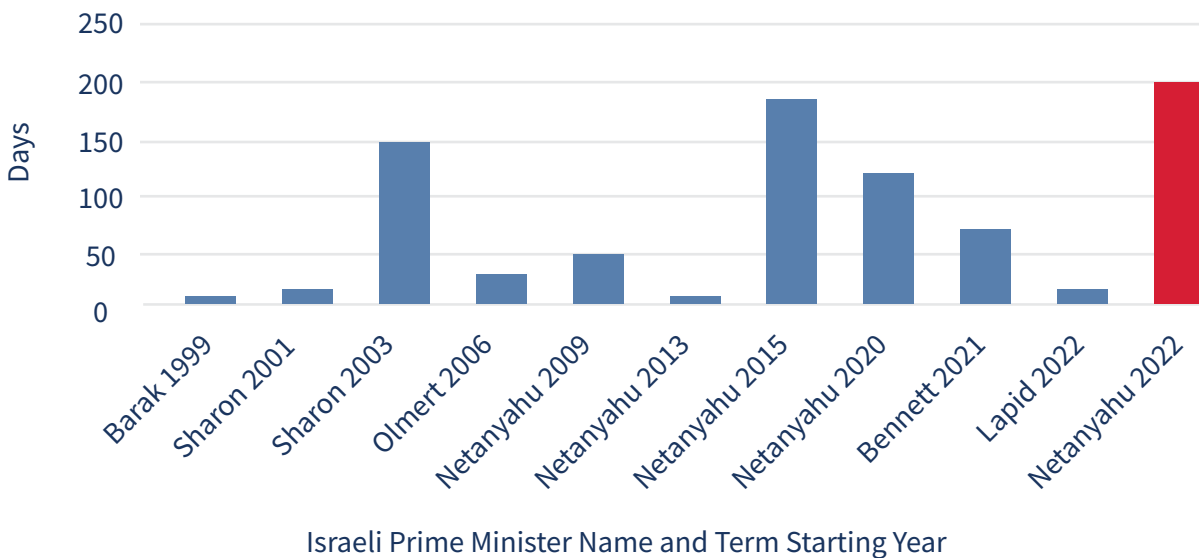
### Why Is It Important?

- Herzog’s visit and the last-minute invitation to Netanyahu only underscore growing tensions between the United States and Israel—tensions that are dangerous for both partners and that open the door for adversaries like China and Iran to exploit. Whatever the political disagreements between Biden and Netanyahu—both democratically elected to enact specific policy platforms—far more important is the shared strategic interest of both the United States and Israel to counter Iranian aggression and Chinese advancements in the Middle East, which requires mending the tension in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

- Biden’s delay in meeting with Netanyahu since he was re-elected as prime minister and his continued critical remarks about Netanyahu’s government and policies defy the historical trend of U.S. presidents meeting, quickly and warmly, with their newly elected Israeli counterpart.
  - » Since Ehud Barak took office in July 1999, the U.S. president has met, either in the United States or Israel, with the new Israeli prime minister within 64 days of taking office on average (excluding interim terms and Ariel Sharon’s post-November 2005 term with the Kadima party, during which he did not meet with the U.S. president).
  - » Since Benjamin Netanyahu took office in June 1996, the newly elected Israeli prime minister came to the United States to meet with the U.S. president within 84 days of taking office on average (excluding interim terms, Ariel Sharon’s post-November 2005 term, and Yair Lapid’s post-July 2022 term, during which he did not meet with a U.S. president in the United States).
  - » It has now been over 200 days since Netanyahu took office in December 2022.

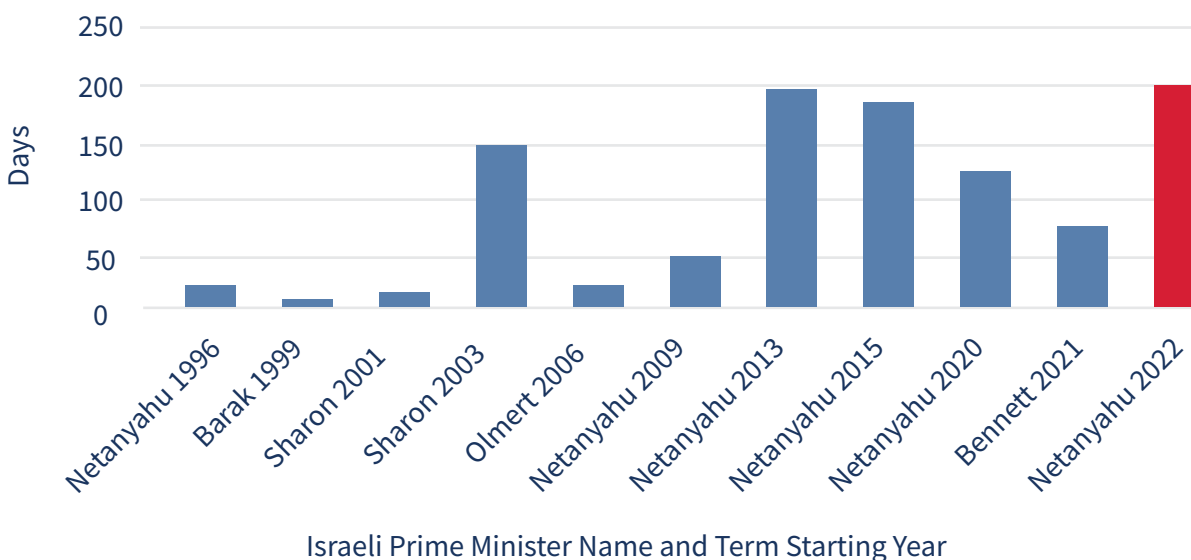


## Days Between Start of Israeli Prime Minister’s Term and First Meeting with U.S. President in United States or Israel



*Excludes Interim Terms and Party Affiliation Changes*

## Days Between Start of Israeli Prime Minister’s Term and First Meeting in United States with U.S. President



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- The administration’s skepticism towards the Netanyahu-led government’s efforts to reform Israel’s judiciary has strained U.S.-Israel relations at the political level in recent months.
  - » On March 28, referring to Jerusalem’s judicial reform plans, Biden [said](#), “I hope [Netanyahu] walks away from it.”
  - » Although the Biden administration is concerned that the planned judicial reform will undermine Israel’s democratic values (whether it does is a matter of vigorous debate within Israel), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently visited the White House for a state visit despite Freedom House’s [assertion](#) that Modi’s government “has presided over discriminatory policies” and “used government institutions to target political opponents.” Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva also [met with President Biden](#) in Washington, D.C. less than a month before Brazil’s government [permitted](#) Iranian warships to dock in Rio de Janeiro.
- Biden’s cold shoulder to Netanyahu has opened the door for others to call for distancing Israel as a U.S. partner.
  - » U.S. Representative Pramila Jayapal [told demonstrators](#) at a Netroots Nation event on July 15 that “I want you to know that we have been fighting to make it clear that Israel is a racist state...” She later [apologized and clarified](#) that “I do not believe the idea of Israel as a nation is racist.”

- » On July 11, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman [argued](#) that a “reassessment” of the United States’ “basic diplomatic approach” to Israel “would be some tough love... but a real necessity before [Israel] truly does go off the rails.”
- China has seized on this rocky patch in U.S.-Israel relations to try and extend its influence with Israel at a time when Beijing is making in-roads in the region but was beginning to encounter resistance in Israel.
  - » Xi’s invitation to Netanyahu comes amid recent Chinese initiatives to bolster its influence in the Middle East, particularly the Beijing-brokered [normalization agreement](#) between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s [express willingness](#) to mediate negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and Xi’s [announcement](#) of a “strategic partnership” with the Palestinian Authority (PA).
  - » But China had not been enjoying the same success in Israel recently, until now.
    - Beijing’s investments in Israeli critical infrastructure such as railways and strategically-located ports are nevertheless extensive, [involving](#) several Chinese state-owned companies with close connections to the Chinese military. Despite their potential economic benefits, these efforts render Israel vulnerable to espionage from China and the subsequent transfer of sensitive technologies to Iran and other adversaries of the United States and Israel.
    - Commendably, Israel has in recent years [created](#) a formal committee to review inbound foreign investments.
    - Reflecting an increasingly shared vigilance with the United States to mitigate risks from Chinese investments, Israel [announced](#) on July 14, 2022 that it awarded the Indian conglomerate Adani Group a tender to privatize the Haifa Port despite competing Chinese bids.
    - Jerusalem, however, may reverse course and conclude it has no choice but to do business with an increasingly influential China if Washington does not offer viable alternatives.
- At the same time, Iran is growing more dangerous, advancing its nuclear program and increasingly encircling Israel with its proxies.
  - » Iran is now capable of producing enough fissile material for a nuclear device in less than two weeks and could make several more bombs-worth in a matter of months, putting Tehran on the very precipice of nuclear weapons capability, as JINSA has [documented](#).
  - » Iranian-backed [terrorist groups](#) in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the [West Bank](#) have been launching projectile and/or other terrorist attacks against Israel recently. Israel’s recent [military incursion](#) into the West Bank city of Jenin—the largest in the West Bank since the Second Intifada—to target terrorist infrastructure highlights the extent to which Iran’s efforts have increased the threat to Israeli citizens.
- The United States and Israel have a common interest in working together to blunt both Iranian aggression and Chinese influence, but their disagreements are keeping the two partners from uniting or even realizing the need for cooperation.

- » Beijing’s moves risk an erosion of the United States’ preponderance of power in a region that struggles with violent extremism, is home to U.S. adversary Iran and its proxies, and through which much of U.S. allies’—and the world’s—energy resources flow.
  - However, given the Biden administration’s [support](#) for the recent China-brokered normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran—a development that emboldens Tehran and challenges Riyadh’s alignment with Washington—it appears prepared to cede regional influence to Beijing.
- » As China attempts to build closer economic and technological relationships with both Israel and Iran, Jerusalem risks aiding a friend of its closest adversary. So long as Iran and China enjoy a close economic and [military](#) relationship, it makes little sense for Israel to bolster China, which would only put Beijing in a better position to strengthen Tehran.
  - It is concerning, therefore, that Netanyahu [reportedly](#) argued recently in a classified briefing with Knesset members that “the Chinese involvement in the Middle East isn’t necessarily bad. It could be useful because it will compel the U.S. to stay here.”
- » Meanwhile, multiple U.S. administrations, from both parties, have repeatedly pledged to prevent a nuclear Iran, which would pose an existential threat to Israel and upset regional stability.
  - Yet, while the Biden administration continues to pursue failed diplomacy with Iran while largely ignoring its regional aggression, only Israel is preparing to stop Iran’s nuclear program by any means necessary.
  - Israel and other U.S. partners in the Middle East have lost confidence in Washington’s commitment to the region due to its disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, bipartisan rhetoric endorsing retrenchment from the Middle East, and repeated failures, across multiple administrations, to respond to Iranian aggression.
- The Biden administration’s visible failure to extend an invitation to the leader of Washington’s closest Mideast partner before Beijing did harms U.S. diplomatic prestige and credibility. Maintaining the confidence of Washington’s many allies and strategic partners requires consistent U.S. efforts to demonstrate the durability of its friendships.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- President Biden should mitigate U.S.-Israel tensions by making clear that he is inviting Netanyahu to meet with him at the White House for a state visit as soon as possible. During the visit, Biden should publicly reaffirm the two countries’ shared interests in countering the threat that Tehran’s regional aggression and nuclear advances presents to American and Israeli lives.
- When Netanyahu does visit the United States, Congress should reinforce the strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship. This could take the form of a resolution reaffirming the relationship and enduring U.S. support for Israel’s defense against a nuclear Iran.