**Three political visits to Israel**

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Three April visits to Israel by prominent US political leaders revealed a lot about the evolving US-Israel relationship. House of Representatives Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries visited with a delegation of 11 Democratic members of Congress. The Republican governor of Florida Ron DeSantis led a delegation on a four-nation tour promoting Florida business. And Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy came calling.

No one was fooled by the stated purpose of DeSantis’ visit. Testing the waters to challenge Donald Trump for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, his visit was seen through that lens. Shortly after arriving, DeSantis signed an anti-hate crime bill passed by the Florida legislature. While the bill imposes penalties for harassing individuals for their religion or ethnicity, in his public comments DeSantis made clear that, in his mind, anti-Semitism includes criticism of Israel and support for BDS.

In his remarks, DeSantis was careful to endorse former President Trump’s policies toward Israel: moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem; ending the Iran nuclear deal; and promoting the Abrahamic Accords. And DeSantis criticized President Biden for “butting into Israel’s internal affairs” by cautioning the current Israeli government to rethink its radical “judicial reform.” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with DeSantis but kept it low-key and without official comment—most likely to avoid provoking a reaction from Trump.

[Back to back defections make big dent in PTI](https://www.nation.com.pk/24-May-2023/back-to-back-defections-make-big-dent-in-pti)

Speaker McCarthy’s time in Israel had an official visit’s formal trappings, including a Knesset address and sit-down with the Prime Minister. McCarthy also endorsed the Trumpian Middle East agenda and followed the well-worn script of “unwavering support,” military aid, attacks on Iran, and support for Abrahamic Accords expansion. Unlike DeSantis, McCarthy was largely ignored by the press, only making news by inviting Netanyahu to Washington, an obvious criticism of President Biden’s failure to do so. (It would be the third time a Republican House Speaker invited Netanyahu to address Congress in order to attack a sitting US Democratic President.)

The least publicized visit was Minority Leader Jeffries and delegation. The same meetings and talking points, it differed only in “raising concerns about the proposed judicial reforms that hundreds of thousands have protested in the streets”—not exactly a headline maker. Clearly, Israel remains a central issue in US politics, but its role has fundamentally shifted. Polls show that Democrats now favor Palestinians over Israelis by a 49%-38% margin and American Jews, the vast majority Democrats, are increasingly alienated from the Netanyahu government’s policies. So, the targets of the DeSantis and McCarthy visits weren’t Jewish voters, but pro-Israel right-wing Christian evangelicals (40% of the Republican vote).

[PM calls for reducing difficulties of middle-class in budget for FY 2023-24](https://www.nation.com.pk/24-May-2023/pm-calls-for-reducing-difficulties-of-middle-class-in-budget-for-fy-2023-24)

Recall that two years ago Israeli Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer advised Israel not to rely on American Jews’ support, as they’re too small in number and deeply divided on Israel. Instead, he said, Israel’s strongest supporters were right-wing Christians, who are greater in number and uncompromising devotees of Israel. This rock-solid, religiously motivated GOP base are also Trump supporters—leading DeSantis and McCarthy to painstakingly endorse the former president’s agenda. The purpose of Jeffries’ visit was more complicated. He pledged his commitment to bipartisan support for Israel—i.e., keeping Democratic members of Congress in line. But as the party’s progressive base moves in a different direction, his caucus is increasingly restive, with critical views of Israeli policies.

If the overwhelming majority of American Jews will vote for Democrats and aren’t wedded to Israel, what is Jeffries’ purpose? A recent article in Jewish Currents quotes a New York Jewish Democratic operative’s answer: “You need a lot of money to stay in power” and “Jeffries is out reestablishing his credentials with Jews, particularly donors.” Pro-Israel PACs and “dark money” groups spent tens of millions in recent election cycles and Jeffries doesn’t want to risk losing their support. The three recent visits to Israel reflect the changing dynamic in US politics and the policy debate. There’s a deep partisan split on the issue of Israel. Republicans are of one mind, with Trump and his religiously conservative pro-Israel voters in control. Democratic leaders are stuck between courting pro-Israel big donors and appealing to their more progressive voters. Despite Jeffries’ pledge of bipartisan support for Israel, both Democrat/Republican inter-party and Democrats’ intra-party tensions are real and growing.