



THE WAR BETWEEN ISRAEL AND HAMAS IS TESTING THE REPUBLICAN PARTY'S ISOLATIONIST SHIFT - ASSOCIATED PRESS

Posted on October 16, 2023 by STEVE PEOPLES | AP National Political Writer



Photo: Republican presidential candidate and former Vice President Mike Pence speaks during the New Hampshire Republican Party's First In The Nation Leadership Summit

Nikki Haley vowed to stand with Israel "every step of the way." She promised to "decimate" the Iranian economy. And she called for continued funding for Ukraine as it fights to repel the Russian invasion.

"It's a dangerous world right now," Haley told Republican primary voters gathered inside New Hampshire's American Legion Post No. 7 as a new war raged in the Middle East. "And this is gonna get messier before it gets better."

Less than 24 hours later, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis told New Hampshire business leaders that the United States should stop funding Ukraine until there is a clear strategy. He was more focused on what he saw as a threat posed by foreign nationals at the U.S.-Mexico border. And Israel, he said, has a right to defend itself.

"I don't think there's going to be a lot we even need to do militarily," DeSantis said of the war between Israel with Hamas. "We may have to provide some additional support like we've traditionally done, but I think mostly it's just the moral clarity to say, 'They don't have to live like this.'"

The Republican Party's White House hopefuls are offering conflicting messages on the mounting foreign policy challenges as a presidential election long centered on domestic kitchen-table issues suddenly shifts its focus abroad. The rapidly evolving dynamics are testing the limits of the GOP's drift toward an isolationist foreign policy and threaten to undermine the party's broader argument that Democratic President Joe Biden has mismanaged U.S. relationships with the rest of the world.

Republican primary voters across New Hampshire who pelted Republican presidential candidates with foreign policy questions this past week are hungry for better answers.

"This God-awful international situation is calling for a rational voice. That chair sits empty right now," said Tom Rath, a former New Hampshire attorney general who attended DeSantis' Friday appearance at St. Anselm College, where the first three questions focused on foreign policy.

The war is a stark reminder of how the GOP has shifted away from more traditional Republicans such as Rath over the past two decades. Former President George W. Bush, whose administration was defined in large part by its failures in the Iraq War, recently described himself as "kind of a hard-liner." In video obtained by Axios, he said the Biden administration's response to the Israel-Hamas conflict has "started off on the right foot."

But under former President Donald Trump's leadership, the GOP has moved sharply away from its long-standing support for a muscular foreign policy. In last fall's midterm elections, for example, 56% of voters for Republican candidates said the U.S. should take a less active role in world affairs, according to AP VoteCast.

Haley, who was Trump's ambassador to the United Nations, has emerged as the representative for the GOP's old guard, calling for the "the end" of Hamas and an aggressive response to Israel's enemies, including Iran. On the other side among her 2024 rivals, DeSantis and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, backed by conservative media personality Tucker Carlson, favor a more cautious "America First" approach.

Trump, the front-runner in the Republican primary, has confused the issue with an inconsistent message fueled by personal grievance.

In a rambling speech last week, Trump said Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, "let us down" just before the U.S. killed a top Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, in 2020. Trump also said Israeli leaders needed to "step up their game" and he referred to Hezbollah, which Israel fears may launch a large-scale attack from the country's north, as "very smart." In an interview that aired Thursday, Trump said Netanyahu "was not prepared" for the Hamas incursion from Gaza.

On Sunday, Trump ally Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said Trump should not have criticized the Israeli foreign minister at this moment.

"That was a huge mistake," Graham said on NBC's "Meet the Press." "If I were President Trump I'd talk about being the strongest president for Israel in modern times."

Trump's team finished the week in damage control mode, sending out statements that highlighted his past support for Israel. Trump himself joined the effort as he insisted the attack never would have happened had he won the 2020 election and he praised Israeli soldiers.

"I have always been impressed by the skill and determination of the Israeli Defence Forces. As they defend their Nation against ruthless terrorists, I want to wish every soldier the best of luck. May you return home safely to your families, and may God bless you all!" Trump wrote on his Truth Social network.

Meanwhile, some Republican primary voters don't like what they're hearing from their party's presidential hopefuls.

"Now, more than ever, is when I feel like we need a strong leader in the White House. Biden ain't it. Trump ain't it," said Michele Woonton, a 58-year-old retired nurse who attended a DeSantis appearance at the New Hampshire Statehouse this past week.

Woonton, who said she would consider voting for independent candidate Robert Kennedy Jr. if Trump wins the Republican nomination, was particularly upset about Trump's initial reaction to the attack on Israel.

"We don't need somebody who can't control his emotions," Woonton said. "I'm not saying he wasn't a good president. But he's too immature. ... This is not the kind of kind of leader we need in a time of war."

Bruce Wilson, a 76-year-old Army veteran from Alton, said he wants to see the Republican Party get back to its roots with a stronger approach to foreign affairs. He lamented the influence of Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement on multiple issues.

"The party got in bed (with Trump) and now they're living with the consequences," said Wilson, who attended Haley's town hall meeting at the American Legion. "I'd like to see a leader with more conviction."

The next day at St. Anselm College, Dave Lundgren, a Republican state representative who has endorsed DeSantis, said he's also worried about the GOP's drift toward isolationism.

"I think we need to go in and spank somebody," he said of the U.S. response to Hamas' attack on Israel, suggesting that U.S. special forces get involved, at least to help rescue kidnapped Americans. "Republicans are weak right now and we need a strong leader that is going to put us back to No. 1 in the world. We've been there before. We're not there now."

Associated Press writer Jill Colvin in New York and AP polling director Emily Swanson in Washington contributed to this report.