

# [***Top Democrat Schumer calls for new elections in Israel, saying Netanyahu is an obstacle to peace***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJD-P911-JC5B-G3GW-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** MARY CLARE JALONICK and ELLEN KNICKMEYER, Associated Press

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Thursday called on Israel to hold new elections, saying he believes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has “lost his way” and is an obstacle to peace in the region amid a growing [*humanitarian crisis*](https://apnews.com/article/gaza-malnutrition-famine-children-dying-israel-palestinians-2f938b1a82d7822c7da67cc162da1a37) in Gaza.

Schumer, the first Jewish majority leader in the Senate and the highest-ranking Jewish official in the U.S., strongly criticized [*Netanyahu*](https://apnews.com/hub/benjamin-netanyahu) in a 40-minute speech Thursday morning on the Senate floor. Schumer said the prime minister has put himself in a coalition of far-right extremists and “as a result, he has been too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza, which is pushing support for Israel worldwide to historic lows.”

“Israel cannot survive if it becomes a pariah,” Schumer said.

The high-level warning comes as an increasing number of Democrats have pushed back against Israel and as [*President Joe Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/joe-biden) has [*stepped up public pressure*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-netanyahu-red-line-frustration-gaza-0f23fa8d02288c1b9d862ddc4035872e) on Netanyahu's government, arguing that he needs to pay more attention to the civilian death toll in Gaza amid the Israeli bombardment. The U.S. this month [*began airdrops*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-airdrop-humanitarian-assistance-f8bc071193f89906abf21478bc70a084) of badly needed humanitarian aid and announced it will [*establish a temporary pier*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-war-news-03-08-2024-196b1e1bdef8ce28449799759c797d39) to get more assistance into Gaza via sea.

Schumer has so far positioned himself as a strong ally of the Israeli government, visiting the country just days after the brutal Oct. 7 attack by Hamas and giving a [*lengthy speech*](https://apnews.com/article/antisemitism-congress-chuck-schumer-2182059a7b402014a00ae43d4fd72e4e) on the Senate floor in December decrying ”brazen and widespread antisemitism the likes of which we haven’t seen in generations in this country, if ever."

But he said on the Senate floor Thursday that the ”Israeli people are being stifled right now by a governing vision that is stuck in the past.”

Schumer says Netanyahu, who has long opposed Palestinian statehood, is one of several obstacles in the way of the two-state solution pushed by the United States. Netanyahu “has lost his way by allowing his political survival to take precedence over the best interests of Israel,” Schumer said.

The majority leader is also blaming right-wing Israelis, Hamas and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Until they are all removed from the equation, Schumer said, “there will never be peace in Israel and Gaza and the West Bank.”

The United States cannot dictate the outcome of an election in Israel, Schumer said, but “a new election is the only way to allow for a healthy and open decision-making process about the future of Israel, at a time when so many Israelis have lost their confidence in the vision and direction of their government.”

At the White House, national security spokesman John Kirby declined to weigh in on Schumer’s remarks, saying the White House is most focused on getting a temporary cease-fire in place.

“We know Leader Schumer feels strongly about this and we’ll certainly let him speak to it and to his comments,” Kirby said. “We’re going to stay focused on making sure that Israel has what it needs to defend itself while doing everything that they can to avoid civilian casualties.”

Israeli ambassador Michael Herzog called the speech “counterproductive to our common goals.”

“Israel is a sovereign democracy,” Herzog posted on X, formerly known as Twitter. “It is unhelpful, all the more so as Israel is at war against the genocidal terror organization Hamas, to comment on the domestic political scene of a democratic ally.”

The speech also drew a swift reprisal from Republicans. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor immediately after Schumer's speech that “Israel deserves an ally that acts like one” and that foreign observers “ought to refrain from weighing in.”

The Democratic Party has an anti-Israel problem, McConnell said. “Either we respect their decisions or we disrespect their democracy," he said.

And at a House GOP retreat in West Virginia, House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., called Schumer’s speech “inappropriate.”

“It’s just plain wrong for an American leader to play such a divisive role in Israeli ***politics*** while our closest ally in the region is in an existential battle for its very survival,” the Republican speaker said.

Netanyahu has long had a cozy relationship with Republicans in the United States, most notably speaking at a joint session of Congress in 2015 at the invitation of GOP lawmakers to try to torpedo former President Barack Obama’s nuclear negotiations with Iran. The move infuriated Obama administration officials, who saw it as an end run around Obama’s presidential authority and unacceptably deep interference in U.S. ***politics*** and foreign policy.

Just this week, Netanyahu was invited to speak to Republican senators at a party retreat. But Herzog took his place due to last minute scheduling issues, according to a person familiar with the closed-door meeting.

It is unclear how Schumer’s unusually direct call will be received in Israel, where the next parliamentary elections are scheduled for October 2026. Many Israelis hold Netanyahu responsible for failing to stop the Oct. 7 cross-border raid by Hamas, which killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and his popularity appears to have taken a hit as a result.

Protesters in Israel calling for early elections have charged that Netanyahu is making decisions based on keeping his right-wing coalition intact rather than Israel’s interests at a time of war. And they say he is endangering Israel’s strategic alliance with the United States by rejecting U.S. proposals for a post-war vision for Gaza in order to appease the far-right members of his government.

U.S. priorities in the region have increasingly been hampered by those far-right members of his Cabinet, who share Netanyahu’s opposition to Palestinian statehood and other aims that successive U.S. administrations have seen as essential to resolving Palestinian-Israeli conflicts long-term.

In a hot-mic moment while speaking to lawmakers after his State of the Union address, Biden promised a “come to Jesus” moment with Netanyahu.

And Vice President Kamala Harris, Schumer and other lawmakers met last week in Washington with Benny Gantz, a member of Israel’s War Cabinet and a far more popular rival of Netanyahu — a visit that drew a rebuke from the Israeli prime minister.

Gantz joined Netanyahu’s government in the War Cabinet soon after the Hamas attacks. But he is expected to leave the government once the heaviest fighting subsides, signaling the period of national unity has ended. A return to mass demonstrations could ramp up pressure on Netanyahu’s deeply unpopular coalition to hold early elections.

Schumer said that as the highest ranking Jewish elected official in the United States, he feels an obligation to speak out. He said his last name derives from the Hebrew word Shomer, or “guardian.”

"I also feel very keenly my responsibility as Shomer Yisroel — a guardian of the People of Israel," he said.

Schumer said that if Israel tightens its control over Gaza and the West Bank and creates a “de facto single state,” then there should be no reasonable expectation that Hamas and their allies will lay down arms. It could mean constant war, he said.

“As a democracy, Israel has the right to choose its own leaders, and we should let the chips fall where they may,” Schumer said. “But the important thing is that Israelis are given a choice.”

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Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani, Amelia Thomson DeVeaux and Lisa Mascaro in Washington, Stephen Groves in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, and Tia Goldenberg in Tel Aviv, Israel, contributed to this report.

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