

# [***A speech that sent shockwaves from Washington to Jerusalem***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJK-W5W1-JBSS-S3H0-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's warning*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/politics/chuck-schumer-israel-election-comments/index.html) that Israel risked becoming a "pariah" and his call for new elections marked a momentous moment in modern US-Israel relations.

Schumer's rebuke of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Thursday contained extraordinarily strong language for a senior US politician criticizing the Israeli government. It was all the more remarkable coming from the New York Democrat who has a long record of staunch support for the Jewish state.

The Senate floor speech was also an unmistakable sign of increasing frustration among top Democrats about Netanyahu's conduct of the war in Gaza following the October 7 Hamas terror attacks that killed 1,200 people and his unwillingness to listen to US advice. It also reflects political realities in the United States. The deaths of [*more than 30,000 Palestinians*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-30000-israel-war-hnk-intl/index.html) in the conflict, according to the ministry of health in Gaza, have outraged US progressives, Arab Americans and younger voters in the US - all key parts of [*President Joe Biden's*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) coalition as [*he seeks reelection*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/politics/biden-aims-to-prove-he-can-still-stump-the-old-way-as-his-last-campaign-kicks-into-gear/index.html).

Schumer - the highest-ranking Jewish American in the US government - warned that Netanyahu's ultra-right-wing coalition was preventing the "significant course corrections" needed in the war against Hamas. He also voiced support for a two-state solution to the long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, a position that Netanyahu has rejected. While placing the lion's share of the blame for the civilian carnage of the war on Gaza's Hamas rulers, he argued that Israel had an obligation to do far more to protect innocent Palestinian lives.

"The Netanyahu coalition no longer fits the needs of Israel after October 7. The world has changed, radically, since then, and the Israeli people are being stifled right now by a governing vision that is stuck in the past," Schumer said. "Five months into this conflict, it is clear that Israelis need to take stock of the situation and ask: Must we change course?" he continued. "At this critical juncture, I believe 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."

Schumer noted that his name is derived from the Hebrew word Shomer, which means guardian, and spoke about how deeply he revered a country "surrounded by vicious enemies." He added: "We love Israel in our bones. What Israel has meant to my generation, within living memory of the Holocaust, is impossible to measure. "

But the Senate majority leader argued that there needed to be a fresh election so Israelis could decide on a new direction for their country in the post October 7 era.

"Of course, the United States cannot dictate the outcome of an election, nor should we try," he said. "That is for the Israeli public to decide - a public that I believe understands better than anybody that Israel cannot hope to succeed as a pariah opposed by the rest of the world."

Schumer's comments laid bare the increasing tension between Democrats and the Israeli leader and the now gaping partisan divide over Israel between the two parties in the United States.

He was almost immediately accused of deserting a US ally in a time of war and of trying to interfere in Israeli ***politics***. Netanyahu's Likud party, for instance, said pointedly in a statement that Schumer is "expected to respect Israel's elected government and not undermine it." It added: "Israel is not a banana republic, but an independent and proud democracy that elected Prime Minister Netanyahu."

"Israel is a sovereign democracy," Israel's Ambassador to the United States Michael Herzog wrote on X. "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. It is counterproductive to our common goals."

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell also delivered a scathing response to Schumer's speech, saying it was hypocritical of US leaders to warn of interference in US ***politics*** and then to try to do the same in Israel.

"Make no mistake, the Democratic party doesn't have an anti-Bibi problem, it has an anti-Israel problem," said the Kentucky Republican, who has found rare common ground with Schumer recently since they both support sending more military aid to Ukraine. McConnell added: "Israel is not a colony of America whose leaders serve at the pleasure of the party in power in Washington. Only Israel's citizens should have a say in who runs their government."

It's a fair point that Schumer is meddling in Israeli ***politics*** - after all, he just called for an election in a foreign state. But it's ironic for Netanyahu to complain. He has been playing ***politics*** in the US ever since the Obama administration, when he worked with Republicans to undermine the Iran nuclear deal. He also openly aligned himself with ex-President Donald Trump and was richly rewarded, including with the US moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Schumer's comments are the latest indication of an important shift in US ***politics*** that could have important indications for Israel moving forward, after years in which its government saw bipartisan support in Washington as a critical national interest.

There's little doubt that Schumer's move was precipitated by extreme political pressure in his party - both inside and outside the Senate. Progressives are outraged at the thousands of civilian deaths in Gaza during the Israeli assault on Hamas. Arab Americans and left-wing Democrats mounted a protest that saw [*over 100,000 voters*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024/primaries-and-caucuses/results/michigan/democratic-presidential-primary) reject Biden in the recent Democratic primary in the critical swing state of Michigan. Biden's allies insist those voters will come home to the president in the fall, but if they vote for someone else - or don't vote at all - Biden's hopes of a second term could be in serious jeopardy.

The most fascinating question raised by Schumer's comments is the extent to which his sentiments are shared by the White House. No modern president has been as pro-Israel as Biden, but it's looking increasingly like Netanyahu has pocketed the president's support while pretty much ignoring Biden's advice and warnings about Israeli strategy and the impact on Palestinians in Gaza. The president dodged questions about Schumer's comments during a visit to Michigan Thursday.

But there have been signs of palpable frustration coming out of the administration in recent days. Earlier this month, Vice President Kamala Harris called for an "immediate ceasefire" in Gaza. Biden himself last week warned Netanyahu was "hurting Israel more than helping Israel" with his assault on the Palestinian enclave. Openly criticizing Israel goes against Biden's political fiber, so these remarks carried significant weight. There's a sense among many pro-Israel Democrats that Netanyahu is prolonging the war to forestall an election that could lead to his ouster as prime minister as he faces multiple legal threats. As such it's hard to believe that Schumer - who is close to Biden - is not channeling some of the president's views.

Biden has been significantly damaged, politically at home and in a reputational sense with US allies abroad, for his unwillingness to do more to pressure Israel into a ceasefire and to put conditions on how US-made weapons can be used in the conflict.

It is now crystal clear that the electoral interests of Biden and Netanyahu are directly incompatible, which is only likely to widen the rift between the two leaders.

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