

# [***Opinion: What to make of Schumer's scathing speech on Netanyahu***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BK2-NSS1-DY7V-G005-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; In my 27 years of working for Republican and Democratic administrations on Arab-Israeli issues and watching Congress in the process, no pro-Israeli politician, let alone a Senate majority leader, ever gave a speech like [*Chuck Schumer*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/politics/chuck-schumer-israel-election-comments/index.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjdhMTI6MDNkMmE2YzRlOTljMTI5YWI1ZjJmNjQwNThmMTM4YmM5YmZlN2RiMWQyMGY4ZjRhNzNiNmEwMjNmMGYxZTE3ODpwOlQ) did last Thursday on the Senate floor. For a guy who opened his remarks by noting, as he often does, that his last name derives from the Hebrew root for "guardian" that's his mission when it comes to Israel, it was something of an epiphany.

Like Howard Beale in the classic 1976 film "Network," [*Schumer's tough words*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/politics/chuck-schumer-israel-election-comments/index.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjdhMTI6MDNkMmE2YzRlOTljMTI5YWI1ZjJmNjQwNThmMTM4YmM5YmZlN2RiMWQyMGY4ZjRhNzNiNmEwMjNmMGYxZTE3ODpwOlQ) on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conveyed the sense that he was ''[*mad as hell and wasn't going to take it anymore*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwMVMbmQBug___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjllYTQ6ZjM3M2UzNGQ5YmNiYmM1Njg4OWE1MjBjMWNlNjUyYzIzYTkzOTMxZWVkYTQ5YTQyMmRlMmNmNGU1OTI3ZDc5ZjpwOlQ)." Calling for new elections in Israel, Schumer, the highest-ranking Jewish elected official in the US, pounded on the failed policies of Netanyahu's government and called for Israelis to replace the prime minister.

Words matter in the context of the US-Israeli relationship, although deeds matter more. So, is Schumer's speech likely to have a major impact in Israel or on Biden administration policy? Are we on the cusp of a major crisis in the US-Israeli relationship? Here are some takeaways.

Impact in Israel: All ***politics*** is local.

It may be too early to measure the full impact of Schumer's groundbreaking speech. Israelis value their relationship with Washington and would impose a cost on a prime minister who was perceived to have profoundly mishandled it. And accountability for Netanyahu may only be a matter of time. But for now, if the Senate majority leaderexpected a tsunami of "atta boys" from Israel's political class, he might be sadly disappointed.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid quickly weighed, in [*saying*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.cnn.com/2024/03/15/politics/mitch-mcconnell-interview-schumer-reaction/index.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2Ojc3ZWI6ZTE2Mzc2NWMyZjMzNmY0NjViMTc1NWRlNWZjMzk2OTRkNWYzNzU1OGE4YWQxYzk2M2Q5MGQxMTNlNjFlY2VmYzpwOlQ) Schumer's speech is "proof that one by one Netanyahu is losing Israel's biggest supporters in the US." But the reaction from a broad array of Israeli politicians seemed much more restrained and, in some cases, quite critical.

Not surprisingly, Netanyahu's Likud Party challenged Schumer, asserting that "Israel is an independent and proud democracy that elected Prime Minister Netanyahu, [*not a banana republic*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israel-isnt-a-banana-republic-netanyahus-likud-lays-into-schumer-for-pushing-elections-to-replace-pm/___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmIwOTU6OTVlNWQ3MjQ2NWRiNzdkYzgwMTFkNGNmOTRiYjkyNjQ2NTliNjZmODI5YmI4NTBiMzc1N2IxNzU4MTcxM2NlZDpwOlQ)." Former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett echoed that sentiment in a statement he [*posted on X*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/twitter.com/naftalibennett/status/1768307925607452974?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1768307925607452974%7Ctwgr%5E883c07a6fa5e5e7c6a4717c3f6120e09bb7d66d9%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.jpost.com%2Fbreaking-news%2Farticle-792007___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmI0ZmM6OWIyMzE5OTZjNDI5YzU4MTQwNzFjOGY2OTI1MGEwYThhNThiOTA2YjAzOWYzOGNhOGY0NTlhMmM4OGVkYmZmZjpwOlQ), formerly Twitter, saying he opposed any "external political intervention in Israel's internal affairs." Benny Gantz, the putative successor to the current prime minister, [*said in a post on X*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/twitter.com/gantzbe/status/1768348270881915353___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2Ojc1N2Y6MTE4ODg3MWE1Y2UxMjE4MTdhZGIxNjI4YzE3YTY2MGJlYWJhNDAyNDkzNmRhNGNlMTc1NDMwYTFmYWI3YzZjNTpwOlQ) that Schumer "erred in his remarks," but that he "plays an important role in assisting the State of Israel, including during these difficult times." Gantz added that, "Any external interference on the matter is counter-productive and unacceptable."

Netanyahu, in an interview with CNN on Saturday, called Schumer's remarks "[*totally inappropriate.*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2024/03/16/benjamin-netanyahu-schumer-israel-elections-hamas-war-sotu-vpx.cnn) It's inappropriate to go to a sister democracy and try to replace the elected leadership there. That's something the Israeli public does on its own. We're not a banana republic."

The senator's tough words will only reinforce his suspicions that Washington is out to unseat him. And that will more than likely compel him to draw the wagons more tightly around him.

For Netanyahu, political survival is the key and that means listening above all to his coalition partners, not to Democrats in the Senate on whom Netanyahu had given up long ago. If anything, Schumer's speech will solidify Netanyahu's conviction that his political future - if he has one - [*lies with the Republican Party*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.politico.com/story/2019/08/15/israel-trump-netanyahu-1465917___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmUyYmQ6MjNmNTFjYTFiMGM3YTU1MmQxMmViYzQ2NDdmMTUyNzlhY2NiNzczOTgyOTY1Y2I2NzQ2Y2ZhMTVjN2IyYjBlNzpwOlQ) and the Republican nominee, former President Donald Trump. ([*Trump and Netanyahu have had a tense relationship*](https://www.axios.com/2021/12/10/trump-netanyahu-disloyalty-fuck-him) since the Israeli prime minister congratulated Biden on his 2020 victory while Trump was disputing the result.)

Will Biden get tougher on Israel?

One way to read the impact of Schumer's speech is that it will give the administration the political space to toughen up its policies toward the Netanyahu government. President Joe Biden has already said that Schumer had contacted his staff about the speech and when asked for his reaction to it he said it was a [*"good speech"*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.nytimes.com/2024/03/15/world/middleeast/biden-netanyahu-schumer-speech.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmI5ZDU6Mjg3YmM4OTdkYmYwNzJiNjUzZTcwMmU0MDk2ODU1MWM3MmY0N2JjNDlkMWU0ZWE4ZmIxYmY5ZDNhZThkMzZhMTpwOlQ) that reflected the concerns of many Americans.

Since the Hamas terror surge on October 7, Biden's support for Israel has been nothing short of remarkable. But growing frustrated and angry with Netanyahu's policies in Gazaand [*facing disaffection over Gaza from Arab American*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.cnn.com/2024/02/28/politics/biden-michigan-vulnerabilities-israel-gaza/index.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmI1N2I6Yzc4ZjdmZDc1N2ViZTI1OGUyZmQ3YTlkNzJjN2JlNzQ5ZWFhNGNhOGJjZTM2ODFlODAyZDliY2FiYTc4ODA3YjpwOlQ), the president's reaction suggests he's in broad agreement with the thrust of Schumer's remarks.

It's one thing to identify with progressive Democrats who have called for stopping US military assistance to Israel, something Biden has been reluctant to do. But here was a mainstream moderate Democrat giving a very tough speech on using leverage with Israel, though Schumer never identified what kind.

Surely, if Biden wanted to get tough with Israel, the speech would give him more license to do so. (He called Schumer's remarks "[*a good speech*](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-schumer-speech-netanyahu-gaza/).") It's not at all clear, however, that's where Biden is going. Until now he's pursued a sort of passive aggressive policy toward Israel - [*tough words but no effort*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.nytimes.com/2024/03/14/opinion/biden-israel-gaza-policy.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjBlYWY6NTMzMjVkMGU3YWNhNDQzYTRhNzNjZWI0NTMwYThhZjcyZjUwMjczYzc4YzQ5YWQ1ZmM0N2Y2NDg0YmRkZjE2ZDpwOlQ) to actually impose costs or consequences.

The president needs to deescalate the situation in Gaza both by getting Israel and Hamas to agree to a hostage for prisoner release, plus a ceasefire and to surge humanitarian assistance into Gaza. He needs Netanyahu's agreement to do both. Right now the Israelis are actually leaning into facilitating [*more humanitarian aid*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/16/israel-hamas-war-news-gaza-palestine/___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmNjYzI6NmQ1MjQwMjVhODMyODFkZjczNzA5N2JiYzkxMjBmZDE2NWRjZDlhNjVlMmY2MTI4NmUxNDA2Y2E3YTkyMWFlMjpwOlQ); and an [*Israeli delegation is in Qatar*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-03-15-24/h_bd1c410b2db0f3e72e87398e56b3d89d___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjgyNDg6MjA0MmZmYmM1OTNmNDQwNTQ3MWY4YWY1ODU5NjkzYzNjNjRmNGIwNDdkNGUxNmE1ZDRlMjRlMjQyZjlkOTk4ZTpwOlQ) because it appears there may be a chance for an Israeli-Hamas deal.

Biden may believe that now is not the time to up the pressure on Israel. It would make more sense to see how these potentially positive developments play out. But Biden has in his back pocket the cover of the top Democratic Jewish leader should he move to push Netanyahu's government harder. Nonetheless, tough talk by Schumer won't sway those uncommitted voters back to Biden; only the possibility of ending the war in Gaza can possibly do that.

The myth of non-intervention

While Schumer's call for new elections in Israel is one of the most blatant US interventions, it should finally put to rest the notion that we didn't intercede in Israeli ***politics*** and they don't interfere in ours. I had a ringside seat on at least two occasions when presidents interfered in Israeli ***politics*** both to unseat one prime minister and boost another.

The first occurred in the George H.W. Bush administration when Secretary of State James Baker and the president [*denied Israel $10 billion in housing loan guarantees*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/02/25/baker-bars-israeli-loan-aid-unless-settlements-are-halted/e7311eea-e6d3-493b-8880-a3b98e0830a1/) on account of Israel's settlement policies. That decision would play a large part in [*Yitzhak Rabin's election victory over Yitzhak Shamir*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.jcpa.org/dje/articles/elec92-analysis.htm___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjAyN2Y6ZGY3Njg4NTkzMGVmZDE2YTcxMGEwMTA4YTU2Y2E1ODA3OTllYmM2NmU2ZmY4NmQ3OWI1OWM1NjEzODBlYWYyYTpwOlQ) in 1992. Rabin [*would receive the loan guarantees*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/08/11/bush-agrees-to-support-israeli-loan-guarantees/2790eec6-2fd4-42ce-9aea-66a4e1693455/) within two months of his election.

The second intervention occurred in 1996 in the middle of an election campaign when then President Bill [*Clinton hosted Shimon Peres*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/04/29/clinton-and-peres-shower-each-other-with-praise/ecb7c180-bf92-4d4e-84e7-9a48260d4f7a/), who at the time was running against none other than Netanyahu, at the White House. In that instance [*Peres would lose to Netanyahu*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___http:/edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9605/31/netanyahu.wins/___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjNhOGU6OGQwODM0NjVmYTZiYTNjMWNjYzYzY2IxNDcxZTc4Mzg0YWViMDY0YTA0MmIxMzdiYjg1ZGFiNTJiZDU0OWU3YjpwOlQ); and it's almost certain that Netanyahu would hold a grudge ever since.

Then of course there was 2015, when Prime Minister Netanyahu accepted an invitation from former US House Speaker John Boehner [*to address Congress*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.washingtonpost.com/politics/netanyahus-planned-speech-to-congress-strains-us-ties-no-meeting-with-obama/2015/01/22/b5af2a4a-a27f-11e4-903f-9f2faf7cd9fe_story.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OjJkMmY6ZmY4ZjcxMTZkNGFmZWE4MTNiMDk1ZGM3OTliOTY5YTAxNDUyNTBkMmMwYzBlNmM0MTM0NjMxNGQyZjVmMWQwNzpwOlQ) in the middle of the debate over the Iran nuclear deal which he and the GOP were determined to defeat.

Netanyahu's love affair with the GOP would continue under the Trump administration when the former president took actions that would boost Netanyahu's prestige such as [*recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/17/politics/trump-heights-golan-settlement-us-israel-scli-intl/index.html) and [*moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem*](https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/13/politics/us-embassy-jerusalem-scenesetter/index.html). In this sense, Schumer's intervention will only encourage Netanyahu and the Republicans to try to do the same as US presidential elections approach. Already Senate Republicans have [*invited Netanyahu*](https://protect.checkpoint.com/v2/___https:/www.nytimes.com/2024/03/14/us/politics/schumer-netanyahu-israel-elections.html___.YzJ1OmNhcm5lZ2llZW5kb3dtZW50Zm9yaW50ZXJuYXRpb25hbHBlYWNlOmM6bzplMjU0MTM3M2M0NDQyMDBhOWJmYThmZDEwYmVjM2IyNjo2OmUxMjk6ODIyZGVhNDE4NjY4ODYzODE5M2E5MTRlNTA5NGQwM2QzODdmNDIwOTFlZmU2NTQ1ZWE5OTc4MTcwNDFmOGM0YzpwOlQ) to address a party retreat in Washington.

How big a deal was the Schumer speech?

A very big deal. How Schumer's speech will impact Israel and the US-Israeli relationship is hard to predict. But what seems inescapable is that the speech reflects just how dysfunctional the US-Israeli relationship has become under Netanyahu, as the shared values and common interests that have bonded the two countries appear to be coming apart.

Even two years ago, it would have been unimaginable for someonelike Sen. Schumer to stand in Congress and all but concede that the current Israeli government of a close US ally needs to be replaced. A dozen years of Netanyahu's reign punctuated by his abortive effort to eviscerate the independence of the country's Supreme Court and empower two of his ministers - [*Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/11/15/the-lead-israeli-cabinet-extreme-speech-jake-tapper-live.cnn) both racists and Jewish supremacists - with key portfolios and an agenda to annex the West Bank to Israel in everything but name has brought us to this point.

US ***politics*** have contributed to this remarkable turn. Like everything else in America, the US-Israeli relationship has become polarized - bandied about as if it were a partisan football. The GOP has emerged as the "Israel can do no wrong party" and the Democrats are divided between progressives who want to restrain and punish Netanyahu and moderates, many of whom are strong supporters but willing to be more critical of the prime minister's policies.

Bipartisan support for Israel is by no means dead. But it's stressed as well. Just look at the Republican reaction to Schumer's speech. In an [*interview with CNN*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/15/politics/mitch-mcconnell-interview-schumer-reaction/index.html), Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell said Schumer's speech was a contradiction of US policy. "You can't spend years hyperventilating about foreign interference in our democracy and then turn around and tell allies, particularly democratic allies, who their leader should be and when they should have elections," he argued.

Whether the Schumer speech represents a headline or a trend line in US-Israeli relations may well depend on a return of the affinity of values and interests that have linked the two countries these many years. That will depend on a leadership course correction in Israel and a lowering of the tensions between Democrats and Republicans at home. And right now, neither is in the offing.

Opinion by Aaron David Miller

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