

# Democrats Risk Long-Lasting Rift Over Israel-Hamas War

*Pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian liberal factions now divided as ugly accusations fly in both directions*

By Molly Ball  
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To many on the left, [the Israel-Hamas war](#) is spurring what feels like a permanent rupture, when previously sublimated differences become impossible to ignore and everyone must choose sides.

The weeks since the Hamas attacks have riven the liberal coalition, pitting erstwhile allies against each other as ugly accusations fly in both directions. From the halls of power in Washington to street protests and social media, progressives find themselves at odds with those they once saw as kindred spirits.

Both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian advocates describe a feeling of disillusionment as relationships fracture and harsh words are exchanged. The result, many predict, could be a breach that splits Democrats for a generation with untold political consequences.

To liberal Jews devastated by scenes of the deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust, the ensuing weeks have shattered illusions of solidarity, says Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO and director of the Anti-Defamation League. [College students](#) and faculty, as well as local chapters of Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Socialists of America, have justified or even [celebrated Hamas's actions](#), while many others have emphasized the Palestinians' plight and criticism of Israel over sympathy for the victims of the terrorist attacks.

"It has been an incredibly clarifying and terrifying moment at the same time for many progressive Jews," Greenblatt said. "They're calling me, tweeting, messaging, expressing shock and sadness that the people they marched with, the causes they marched for, have abandoned them in their hour of need."

The feeling is mutual for many activists on the left who say President Biden and other Democratic officeholders have blindly sided with a right-aligned Israeli government bent on retribution that disproportionately harms innocent civilians.

"If you are Arab-American, Muslim-American or Palestinian, you feel like you don't matter, you feel invisible," said Waleed Shahid, a progressive strategist and former spokesman for the Justice Democrats, which has supported the progressive Congress members known as the squad in primaries against more centrist

Democrats. “If you are advocating at all that Palestinian and Israeli lives should be treated equally, there’s a feeling that the party doesn’t care about you at all,” he said.

The result, Shahid warned, might be that a president already struggling to ignite the enthusiasm of young and minority voters loses them completely—a [recent Gallup poll](#) found Biden losing 7 percentage points of support with voters under 35 in the past month, [he noted](#)—or that the party splinters as it did in the Vietnam War era. Others have drawn parallels to the left’s split over Soviet communism in the 1950s.

In a Wall Street Journal/Ipsos poll conducted Oct. 18-20, 48% of Democrats said the U.S. has a [responsibility to support Israel](#) in the conflict, versus 53% of independents and 64% of Republicans.

The split comes as Biden has expressed strong support for Israel and called on Congress to approve billions of dollars in new military assistance to the American-allied government. Israel on Monday sent tanks and infantry toward Gaza City in an intensification of its ground operation in the territory. Authorities say thousands have been killed in the fighting since Hamas’s Oct. 7 terrorist attack.

The conflict has spilled into the White House, where Biden on Thursday [met with Muslim leaders](#) who chided him for not showing more empathy for Palestinians in his remarks on the conflict. A top [State Department official resigned](#) Oct. 18 in protest of the administration’s approach, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Oct. 19 sent a [letter to diplomatic staff](#) seeking to quell internal dissent.

In Congress, a resolution condemning Hamas passed the House overwhelmingly with 412 votes on Wednesday, with nine left-wing Democrats voting against it and six voting “present.” (A lone Republican, Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky, also voted against the resolution.)

Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington, who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus, explained her “present” vote in a [statement](#) that said, “While I still condemn Hamas’s attacks and the pain and suffering of the Jewish people everywhere, I also condemn the violations of international humanitarian law by Israel and the pain and suffering of Palestinian people everywhere that are not recognized anywhere in this resolution.”

On Thursday, Rep. Josh Gottheimer, a New Jersey centrist, [said on X](#), formerly Twitter, that the 15 Democrats who didn’t vote for the resolution were “despicable and do not speak for our party.” In response, one of the 15, Rep. Andre Carson of Indiana, [called](#) Gottheimer a “coward” and a “punk,” and invited him to settle their differences physically.

A recent closed-door meeting of congressional Democrats erupted in recriminations when [Gottheimer was heard to mutter](#), “they should feel guilty”—a remark that some progressives heard as directed at Muslims as a group, but which Gottheimer said was aimed at his colleagues who hadn’t sufficiently condemned Hamas. Gottheimer has faced protests and death threats over the comments.

Even progressive stalwarts such as Sen. John Fetterman (D., Pa.) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I., Vt.) have drawn protests from the left for backing Israel. Jewish Democrats have reportedly complained to Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries about comments made by Reps. Ilhan Omar (D., Minn.) and Rashida Tlaib (D., Mich.), both of the squad, in the aftermath of the attacks. Squad members have received increased protection from Capitol Police because of a sharp escalation in threats against them in recent weeks.

Rep. Brad Schneider (D., Ill.) said that while Democrats have been mostly unified, he has been “incredibly disappointed” to see some people “who not only haven’t been able to condemn the horrific terror attack on Israel, but have celebrated it and called it resistance.” He singled out Tlaib for refusing to retract her statement blaming Israel for an [explosion at a Gaza hospital](#) that Israel and the U.S. say was caused by an errant rocket fired from Gaza (a [Wall Street Journal video analysis](#) supports that claim).

“She spread a claim by Hamas that is not true, that has led to threats to American military personnel and diplomats around the world, and continues to throw gasoline on that fire,” Schneider said in an interview. “It’s important that all of us call out evil. We may have differences of opinion, but we don’t get to have our own facts.”

Tlaib’s office didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Though the current conflict has brought it to the fore, the discord in the Democratic ranks has deep roots. In 2019, House Democrats struggled to pass a resolution disapproving of remarks by Omar that [many saw as antisemitic](#), eventually uniting around a statement that condemned both antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

Democratic Majority for Israel, an advocacy group with ties to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, sprung up in 2020 to oppose progressive Democrats in primaries. The group’s political-action committee spent large amounts to counter Sanders’s 2020 presidential campaign and to stymie a further expansion of the squad, with [mixed results](#).

While some progressives decry the machinations of the big-money Israel lobby, centrists see grim [vindication](#) in the ugly expressions from the illiberal left. [Center-left thinkers have warned](#) for years about the climate on many campuses, where an

“anticolonialist” posture has become a litmus test for faculty hiring, and students embrace a radical chic that rationalizes or valorizes violence if it is committed by groups regarded as oppressed.

“I do worry that young people are increasingly indoctrinated with an ideology, an anti-Israel hatred, that is so virulent that it renders them indifferent to the coldblooded murder of Israeli civilians and children,” said Rep. Ritchie Torres, a New York Democrat.

Many New York progressives, including Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, distanced themselves from the city’s DSA chapter after it promoted an Oct. 8 pro-Palestinian rally that blamed Israel for the attacks and included antisemitic displays. Torres, who has been decrying the organization’s anti-Israel stance for years, said too many fellow progressives previously played down such sentiments.

Omar last week attacked Torres for his pro-Israel statements, asking at a press conference, “How many more Palestinians would make you happy if they died?”

Responding on X, Torres called Omar’s accusation a “vicious lie,” adding, “How many Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Palestinians must die from endless rocket fire and escalated conflict before she summons the moral decency to support Iron Dome?” referring to Israel’s air-defense system.

Progressive activists say the focus on what they characterize as a few nutty college kids is misguided and disproportionate at a time when some Republican politicians, including Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, have called for leveling Gaza. They see a march to war that echoes the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when antiwar voices were marginalized and the result was decades of disastrous military entanglement in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“I’ve been heartbroken and disturbed by the lack of empathy altogether around the plight of Palestinians,” said Maurice Mitchell, national director of the leftist Working Families Party, which is pressuring the White House to back a cease-fire.

To others, however, the lack of sympathy for the suffering of Jews reflects a deeper split. “It really is, I think, a battle for the soul of our party,” says Joe Vogel, a Maryland state delegate who is seeking the open congressional seat to be vacated by Democratic Rep. David Trone.

As an undergraduate at George Washington University, Vogel was expelled from student government by activists for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. The same group came under fire this week for projecting [antisemitic messages](#) including “Glory to our martyrs” on the outer walls of a campus library.

“It shouldn’t be that hard to condemn the murder of innocent women and children and seniors, yet many have either said nothing or equivocated,” Vogel said. “We have a serious problem in our party right now.”