

Democrats Say No to Arming Israel: Are the American Winds Beginning to Shift?



A fierce battle is raging in Congress over the United States’ role in Israel’s campaign of mass killing in the Gaza Strip—a battle in which a small number of Democratic and independent lawmakers, known for their support of the Palestinian cause, are challenging the pro-Israel consensus that dominates both chambers.

On Capitol Hill, they are often referred to in the American media as “The Squad,” a nod to their defiance and their collective opposition to the prevailing pro-Israel stance.

After decades of strategic patience, repeated clashes, and enduring threats from AIPAC and other components of the pro-Israel lobby, “The Squad” appears to be gaining ground.

Their voices are now reaching a wider audience within Congress. Nearly two years into Israel’s devastating assault on Gaza—an assault in which Washington has provided extensive military support—signs of a shift in the Democratic Party’s position have begun to surface.

This article examines the story behind Senator Bernie Sanders’ latest legislative initiatives, the objectives they sought to achieve amid near-total U.S. backing for Israel, and the significance of the late-July Senate votes.

Are these developments merely an emotional reaction to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, or do they represent the early stages of a fundamental change in the Democratic Party's stance toward Israel after the atrocities broadcast live to the world?

Israeli Hands, American Weapons

The United States remains one of Israel's largest arms suppliers. In 2024, Israel shattered its previous record for arms imports, purchasing \$14.8 billion worth of weaponry—surpassing the 2023 total of \$13 billion, according to Israel's Ministry of Defense. In the twelve months following October 7, 2023, Washington provided \$17.9 billion in military aid. Analysts believe even these official figures significantly understate the reality.

Since October 7, American arms sales and military aid to Israel have included air defense systems, precision-guided munitions, artillery shells, tank rounds, Hellfire missiles for drones, and single-use shoulder-fired missiles.

Upon taking office earlier this year, President Donald Trump moved quickly to supply Israel with heavy weaponry, bypassing congressional approval in February to fast-track \$12 billion in military sales—including 2,000-pound bombs previously withheld by President Biden over concerns they might be used indiscriminately against civilians. The Trump administration also rushed advanced THAAD missile defense systems to Israel during its 12-day confrontation with Iran.

The U.S. has faced mounting accusations of being a direct party to Israel's war on Gaza, rather than a neutral mediator or strategic ally. Yet, popular and official efforts—particularly from pro-Palestinian lawmakers like Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, and Senator Bernie Sanders—have persisted in Congress, aiming to halt U.S. arms transfers and hold Israel accountable for its actions.

Sanders' Bills: Knocking on the Tank's Walls

In late July, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Senator Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), and Senator Peter Welch (D-Vt.) introduced two Senate bills seeking to block specific U.S. weapons transfers to Israel. One bill targeted shipments of assault rifles, the other sought to halt deliveries of high-explosive munitions.

While both measures failed, the votes were unprecedented: 27 Democrats supported the assault rifle ban—more than half of the party's Senate caucus—while 24 backed the explosives ban. These figures represent a significant shift for a party historically committed to Israel's security, especially amid what many rights groups call an unparalleled campaign of mass killing.

The legislation sought to block a \$675 million shipment of bombs and several consignments of 20,000 assault rifles. Rights organizations, including Amnesty International, have documented the use of U.S.-supplied munitions—particularly 1,000-pound bombs and deadly JDAM kits—against civilian gatherings, UN-run schools, and other protected sites in Gaza, in violation of both international law and U.S. domestic statutes such as the Foreign Assistance Act and the Arms Export Control Act.

Compounding these concerns, reports indicate that Israel—despite fighting on multiple fronts—has been exporting more arms to Europe than ever, accounting for 54% of its defense exports last year. This has sparked quiet questions in Washington about whether Israel truly needs the scale of American largesse it currently receives.

This is not Sanders' first attempt to halt U.S. arms to Israel, but it is the first time his proposals have drawn such broad Democratic support. A similar measure in November 2024 garnered only 19 Democratic votes; in April 2025, just 15. The latest surge in support comes amid a famine in Gaza, widely described as a deliberate weapon of war.

A Gallup poll released days before the vote revealed dramatic shifts in U.S. public opinion: only 32% of Americans—and a mere 8% of Democrats—said they favored Israel over the Palestinians, compared with 71% of Republicans who support Netanyahu's war. More than half of Americans (52%) said they hold an unfavorable view of Netanyahu, the highest level of disapproval since Gallup began tracking the question in 1997.

Partisan Lines, Moral Divides

The July votes exposed sharp divides within the Democratic caucus. While 27 Democrats backed the rifle ban, 19—including Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer—joined Republicans in defeating it. Some senators split their votes, opposing the munitions ban but supporting the rifle ban, citing concerns over weapons potentially reaching far-right Israeli figures like Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Three Democrats abstained altogether. And although the measures were unlikely to pass the Republican-controlled House—or survive a promised Trump veto—the fact that so many Democrats broke from the party's traditional pro-Israel stance was striking.

Notably, four of the six freshman Democrats elected last year voted for both measures, underscoring generational shifts within the party. No Republican supported either bill, maintaining a unified front in favor of Netanyahu's government.

A Message or a Turning Point?

Some veteran pro-Israel Democrats also broke ranks. Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash.), vice chair of the Appropriations Committee, said: “As a longtime friend and supporter of Israel, I vote yes today to send a message to Netanyahu’s government that it cannot continue down this path.”

Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), the top Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, also supported both measures after previously opposing similar efforts in April, citing the famine as a decisive factor.

Other Democrats framed their votes as protest against Netanyahu’s government rather than a repudiation of Israel itself. Representative Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-Del.) said she could not, “in good conscience,” approve arms sales until Israel ends its attacks on civilians and cooperates with the UN. Senator Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.) called the use of starvation as a weapon “a moral crime.”

Cracks in the Wall

Sanders hailed the vote as a sign that Democrats are “finally responding to the American people, who are tired of spending billions of dollars to support a government that starves children to death.” The progressive Jewish group IfNotNow called it “a historic moment,” while AIPAC celebrated the bills’ defeat but acknowledged the “growing anti-Israel wave” in Congress.

The Times of Israel warned that the jump from 15 Senate supporters of such measures to 27 in under a year marked “a new low” for Israel’s image abroad, fueled by images of famine spreading like wildfire online.

While some dismiss the votes as symbolic “ear-pulling” for Netanyahu, Palestinian rights advocates see them as the first real breach in the bipartisan wall that has long shielded Israel from accountability. The Council on American-Islamic Relations called the vote “a historic sign of progress” toward aligning U.S. policy with public opinion.