

**US politics & policy**

# Left's take on Hamas stuns American Jews — and threatens Democratic party split

Anti-Israel sentiment on university campuses and in street protests sparks anger and resentment



Hamas's deadly attack on Israel was followed by pro-Palestine protests in New York and elsewhere, alarming American Jews © AFP via Getty Images

**Joshua Chaffin** in New York OCTOBER 14 2023

For Abraham Orden, a 43-year-old Jewish software executive from the Washington suburbs, the first inkling that the reaction to Hamas's terror attack in southern Israel might not be what he anticipated came just hours after the assault had begun.

An Israeli woman on a WhatsApp group of mothers to which his wife belongs posted about her anguish — to which another mother reprimanded her with a post enumerating Palestinian grievances. The riposte quickly racked up likes.

“We were like, ‘well, that was weird’,” Orden said.

The next day, as details of [Hamas's slaughter](#) of more than a thousand Israelis filtered out — with officials calling it the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust — New York City's chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America rallied in Times Square to celebrate the Palestinian “resistance”.

Then some campus groups joined in. A statement endorsed by 34 student groups at Harvard University blamed [Israel](#) for the violence inflicted on its people. At California State University Long Beach one student group advertised a “Protest for Palestine” with a poster featuring a paraglider of the sort that Hamas gunmen used to attack Israelis — a motif that Black Lives Matter Chicago adopted.

“I never would have expected this kind of vitriol among educated elites,” Orden said. “And now I just can’t unsee it.”

For many American Jews, the slaughter in Israel has been devastating, frightening and all-consuming — an attack that some are likening to a modern replay of the pogroms a century ago in eastern Europe that brought their families to the US in the first place.

It is also a political moment in which an emerging hard left that is often anti-Israel — and often accused of antisemitism — has reared into full view, posing a test for a fragmented Democratic party that may ripple through the coming US presidential election. It is likely to become more agonising as Israel’s [counteroffensive gathers pace](#) and casualties mount among Palestinian civilians.

Daniel Faraci, a strategist who has advised Republicans, expects the party to criticise Joe Biden for his policy of engaging Iran, Hamas’s chief sponsor, including his recent [deal to unfreeze \\$6bn](#) in Tehran’s assets. But, Faraci warned, Democrats would also be made vulnerable by a fringe that appeared to endorse terrorist violence against Jews.

“Anybody that’s associated with them is going to pay a price,” Faraci said, predicting the hard left would be “a massive problem moving forward for Biden and the Democrats”.

Hank Sheinkopf, a Democratic strategist — and ordained rabbi — agreed. “The [Democratic Socialists of America] response, which was absolutely wrong-headed, will be used to tank the Democrats,” he predicted.

Orden, who voted for Biden in 2020, said he did not know what he would do in the next election. The trauma of the attack, he said, had been compounded by a sudden feeling of alienation from erstwhile allies.

That same sense was captured by Lawrence Summers, the former Harvard president, when he posted on X, formerly Twitter, that he was “sickened” by the university’s failure to distance itself from the statement of its pro-Palestine student groups.

“Why can’t we find anything approaching the moral clarity of Harvard statements after George Floyd’s death or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine when terrorists kill, rape and take hostage hundreds of Israelis attending a music festival?” Summers wrote in another post.

On Wall Street, Marc Rowan, a founder of private equity giant Apollo Global Management, called for the sacking of the president at his alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, for fostering a “selective tolerance” in which antisemitic groups thrived. He also urged fellow donors to join him in closing their wallets.

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, an activist and politician with long ties to Israel, recalled growing up in a Jewish community in North Carolina that supported the civil rights movement — and then discovering this week that some Black Lives Matter chapters were defending Hamas and condemning Israel.

“It’s so upsetting,” said Laszlo Mizrahi, who knew eight people who were killed by Hamas. A friend’s son was taken hostage. Her synagogue in Maryland did not wish to publish details of a planned vigil for fear it would be targeted, she said, while also expressing heartbreak for innocent Palestinians.

Others noted the irony that progressive students were embracing an Islamist group that punishes homosexuality in Gaza.

American Jews have overwhelmingly made their political home in the Democratic party. But the party is enduring a generational rift over Israel that runs through its Jewish constituency, too.

That divide broke into public view when Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders were vying for the 2016 Democratic nomination. Clinton championed the establishment line that unconditional support for Israel would help to eventually secure a Palestinian state. Sanders, the Vermont senator and avowed socialist — who is Jewish — represented a younger generation that was critical of Israel’s government and eager to place conditions on military assistance and other US aid.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s long-serving prime minister, has deepened those divisions with his support of the settler movement in Israel and undermining the country’s long tradition of bipartisanship in its US relations by embracing conservative Republicans, particularly former president Donald Trump.

When Netanyahu accepted a Republican invitation to address Congress in 2015 — over objections from Barack Obama’s White House, which was fighting with Israel’s prime minister over Iran policy — more than 50 Democrats boycotted the speech.

At the highest levels, Democrats supported Israel in highly visible fashion this week. Biden not only condemned Hamas but also recognised its atrocities. In Congress, members of a Jewish caucus who, as one consultant put it, “usually can’t even agree on a deli order” swiftly found unity

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Ted Deutch, the former Florida representative who now leads the American Jewish Committee, called Biden's address "one of the most important pro-Israel speeches I've ever heard in this country", adding that the US response had been "overwhelmingly supportive".

But others were focused on "the Squad" — the group of leftwing representatives who have entered Congress in recent years at the vanguard of an emerging progressive movement.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the New York representative who is the group's de facto leader, backed out of the Times Square rally organised by the Democratic Socialists and later condemned it. "It's very clear that AOC had a bit of a wake-up call," Laszlo Mizrahi said.

Others, such as Minnesota's Ilhan Omar and Michigan's Rashida Tlaib — who is Palestinian American — did not mention Hamas in statements, let alone condemn it. Instead, Tlaib called for "dismantling the apartheid system that creates the suffocating, dehumanising conditions that can lead to resistance" and warned that the "cycle of violence" would continue unless military aid to Israel was cut.

Progressives' criticisms of Israel have intensified during Netanyahu's decade-long hold on power, inflamed by his abandonment of the peace process and restrictions on Palestinian communities in Gaza and the West Bank.

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But even to many left-leaning American Jews, calls in the wake of the Hamas attack for "both sides" to immediately cease the violence rang like an effort to create a false moral equivalence.

"Israel is the only country in the world where when faced with the mass slaughter of a huge number of its civilians the world is already more interested in telling them what not to do," said Jonathan Rosen, a Jewish New York City communications executive who helped bring progressives into office, including former mayor Bill de Blasio.

Rosen has been toggling between anger, grief

and despair this week, he said. He is committed to establishing a political space in which progressive Jews can criticise Israel. But the complexities of doing so became evident when, riding the subway this week, Rosen saw the message from Ryna Workman, the president of the student bar association at his alma mater, New York University Law School.

“Israel bears full responsibility for this tremendous loss of life,” Workman stated. “This regime of state-sanctioned violence created the conditions that made resistance necessary. I will not condemn Palestinian resistance.”

Rosen said: “It is horrifying that people who profess that their life is all about the humanity of others — that maybe that humanity doesn’t extend to Jews.”

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