Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Democrats' leftward turn on Israel could threaten potential November gains

Nancy Pelosi, the veteran lawmaker who for a time was considered the most powerful woman in US politics, last week did what was once unimaginable.

Pelosi banded with 102 other Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives in favor of slashing the government's annual $3.3 billion aid package to Israel. The largely symbolic vote was widely viewed as a split between progressives and moderates in the House, but Pelosi is in a category all her own.

The former Speaker of the House, Pelosi, once said, "If this Capitol crumbled to the ground, the one thing that would remain is our commitment to our aid" to Israel.

The two nations she had said in 2019, "are connected now and forever."

Forever came early. Pelosi's vote carried a meaning beyond those of her colleagues. And it was an unmistakable sign that the Democratic Party's relationship with America's longtime ally is evolving in ways that one day could lead to a significant rift.

Of more pressing concern to moderates who fully back Israel, however, is whether Democrats will pay a price at ballot box this November, when congressional elections are held.

The party needs to pick up just a handful of seats in the House and Senate to regain control and derail President Donald Trump's agenda, but that seemingly easily attainable objective is being threatened by the widening ideological divide within the party.

"Nothing will be the same on this issue ever again, I think, after this vote," said Democratic Representative Greg Casar, who supported cutting the aid package.

A crossroad for the U.S.–Israel alliance

Pelosi was quick to note that her vote was not an attempt to undercut her longtime support for Israel but instead was intended to be a wake-up call to the Netanyahu government, saying, "The American people are rightly demanding an end to a perpetual cycle of war."

But much of that nuance was lost in coverage of the vote. Thomas Massie, the Republican who sponsored the amendment, said on X, "The tide is changing. Americans want their tax dollars to be spent improving things here at home, not waging war and genocide."

Massie, a critic of the Trump administration's handling of the Iran war, had nothing to lose in proposing the amendment. He lost his primary this year to a Trump-backed Republican and will exit the House at the end of the year.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a longtime pro-Israel lobby group that has worked to defeat lawmakers who don't align with its viewpoint, immediately cut off contributions through its web portal to 15 Democrats who voted to end U.S. aid.

"This so-called messaging vote on Israel's security sends a dangerous signal to both our allies and our enemies around the world," AIPAC said in a statement.

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John Fetterman, the hoodie-clad, working-class Democratic senator from Pennsylvania, threatened to leave the party if it turns away from Israel.

The current House Democratic leader, Hakeem Jeffries, voted against the measure to cut off U.S. aid but tried to find a middle ground. He said that if Democrats win the House, American policy toward Israel must shift.

Democrats, he said, should ensure that the Israeli government is held accountable for its actions, and make a renewed commitment to a

two-state solution, one that establishes an independent Palestinian state that allows its citizens to live with "dignity, respect and self-determination."

Rahm Emanuel, the former mayor of Chicago and White House chief of staff to President Barack Obama, told an audience in Tel Aviv last week that the U.S–Israel alliance is at a "crossroads."

Emanuel, who reportedly is considering a presidential run in 2028, has long been considered a Democratic moderate, but in his remarks, he, too, called for an end to U.S. aid.

The battleground in Michigan

The tension running through the party is manifesting itself in Michigan, where two Democrats, U.S. Representative Haley Stevens and challenger Abdul El-Sayid, are competing for the party nomination for Senate.

AIPAC has spent nearly $30 million this year backing Stevens and attacking El-Sayid, a progressive who has called for a rethinking of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

But as has been its modus operandi, the committee's ads don't explicitly mention Israel or the war in Gaza. One TV spot, for example, credits Stevens for opposing Trump's immigration agenda.

It's recognition that U.S. voters typically don't base their decisions on foreign affairs except in rare instances – and are more likely to be motivated by economic or domestic issues.

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Michigan could be an exception, given that it has the largest Arab American population in the country, a cohort that El-Sayid is courting. His campaign, which is supported by the likes of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, two luminaries of the left, styles itself as an anti-establishment effort. El-Sayid has railed against AIPAC, charging the committee seeks to buy the election.

Unlike most Democrats, El-Sayid has termed Israel's conduct in Gaza a "genocide" and said this month in an interview with CNN: "The question about whether or not Israel has a right to exist is actually quite secondary to whether or not they have a right to our tax dollars. And people don't ask that question in good faith."

Seven-term Congressman Mike Rogers is the favorite to win the Republican primary in Michigan, which could put Democrats in an uncomfortable bind. While Rogers has largely been supportive of Trump, he has an established track record of service in the state, particularly with regard to national security. The Michigan primary is August 4.

Strategists warn that Rogers could easily beat El-Sayid in a head-to-head race while having a tougher match-up in Stevens, with Rogers likely to make support for Israel an issue. The subject has particular resonance with conservative Christians, who are reliable Republican voters.

Shifting views of American voters toward Israel

But perhaps the largest problem facing Democrats is that much of the dynamism and organizational energy in the party is among younger and more left-leaning voters who are more likely to view Israel negatively.

That was one reason why a relatively unknown progressive, Melat Kiros, 29, defeated a 20-year veteran of the House in a Colorado primary race last month. Kiros also accused Israel of genocide and has called for a U.S. arms embargo on the country.

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Should an establishment figure like Stevens beat out El-Sayid, those young voters could easily decide to stay home and not vote in November.

There is little doubt that the views of American voters toward Israel are shifting, fueled in large part by images from Gaza that have dominated social media now for almost three years.

According to a poll this month by the Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about one-third of U.S. adults, including roughly half of Democrats, believe Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians.

About 30% of Jewish adults said Israel has committed genocide, while about half, 49%, said it has not, according to the poll.

Republicans, led by Trump, have long sought to capitalize on the Democratic drift leftward on Israel by accusing critics of antisemitism but have made only modest gains. The overwhelming majority of Jewish voters still prefer Democrats.

But November's elections will be another opportunity for that tradition to be tested. For some voters, the party surely isn't making things easy.