

JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

EST 1917

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US funding for Israel's Iron Dome air defense system used to enjoy bipartisan support. Not anymore.

The liberal pro-Israel lobby J Street joined AOC, Ro Khanna and others in arguing Israel should fund its own defense.

By [Andrew Lapin](#) April 13, 2026



Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., conclude a news conference announcing the Artificial Intelligence Data Center Moratorium Act in the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday, March 25, 2026. The legislation aims to "ensure that AI benefits workers, is safe and effective and does not harm communities or destroy the environment." (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

A growing number of leading progressives, including the leading liberal pro-Israel lobby, have come out against continued American funding for [Israel's Iron Dome defense system](#).

J Street president Jeremy Ben-Ami on Sunday joined Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ro Khanna, along with Jewish Democratic congressional challenger Brad Lander, in opposing future budget earmarks for Israeli defense systems.

Such funding was relatively uncontroversial in the past, as the Iron Dome rocket interceptor has drawn near-unanimous praise — including from some of the figures now opposing its U.S. support — for its role in protecting Israeli civilians. As recently as September, a bill to

approve Iron Dome supplemental funding [passed](#) in the House with only nine dissenting votes.

Now, that consensus has shifted in the wake of the war in Gaza and the joint U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, both of which are deeply unpopular, particularly among Democrats — even as the Iron Dome recently prevailed in a high-stakes test as Iran fired hundreds of ballistic missiles at Israeli targets. Some of the progressives now opposing Iron Dome funding are arguing that Israel does not need the assistance.

“With a per capita GDP higher than countries like the United Kingdom, France and Japan, Israel is more than capable of paying for its own defense – just as America’s other wealthy allies already do,” Ben-Ami [wrote](#) on J Street’s blog Sunday. “Why should American taxpayers continue to subsidize the defense budget of a prosperous ally, particularly at a time when the U.S. faces its own significant fiscal pressures?”

Ben-Ami said the U.S. should continue to sell the Iron Dome and other defense systems to Israel. He also made the case that ending U.S. support for the defense systems was a boon for Israel.

“Supporters of Israel — many raised on the vision that the Jewish people just want Israel to be treated like all other countries — should welcome the development,” Ben-Ami said. “The benefits of disproportionately large financial assistance today are outweighed by the damage to Israel when that financial support becomes a divisive wedge in American politics.”

J Street’s online policy positions were updated this month to [indicate](#) that the group is now “calling for American financial subsidies to Israel’s military to be phased out” by 2028. The group says it still supports the Iron Dome: “Ending those financial subsidies does not mean the United States should cease selling Iron Dome to Israel, but Israel should pay for these systems.”

Ocasio-Cortez, earlier this month, similarly [argued](#) that Israel could fund its own defense system.

“Consistent with my voting record to date, I will not support Congress sending more taxpayer dollars and military aid to a government that consistently ignores international law and U.S. law,” she [wrote](#) on social media. The New York representative, a “Squad” leader and potential 2028 presidential candidate, [made her announcement](#) at a local forum of the Democratic Socialists of America.

In their arguments, Ben-Ami and Ocasio-Cortez are carving out a distinct lane from a different rallying cry popular with anti-Zionists: that Israel should not have an Iron Dome

because Palestinians lack an equivalent, or because the Iron Dome indirectly aids Israel's bombing campaigns.

Reps. [Ilhan Omar](#) and [Rashida Tlaib](#) are among those who have argued in this vein, [as has Jewish Voice for Peace](#) and the DSA, which [last year](#) stated, "Along with other U.S.-funded interceptor systems, the Iron Dome has emboldened Israel to invade or bomb no less than five different countries in the past two years."

Some close observers of the U.S.-Israel relationship said turning the Iron Dome into a political bargaining chip was revealing of deeper prejudices along similar lines.

"Iron Dome is a purely defensive system. It simply cannot be used to threaten, or harm, or retaliate. Its only use is to save lives," Ron Hassner, the chair of Israel studies at the University of California-Berkeley, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

"When people ask me whether antisemitism is anti-Zionism I often use anti-Zionist attacks on Iron Dome as an example to show that anti-Zionism is worse than antisemitism," he added. "Antisemites seek to harm Jews. Anti-Zionists seek to stop Jews from defending themselves from harm."

Ilan Saltzman, a professor of Israel studies at the University of Maryland, told JTA he saw J Street's position as "a bit more nuanced" and not as extreme as some lawmakers have gone.

"They are not calling for the ending of all U.S. military aid to Israel," Saltzman said, of the group, pointing to another policy position in which J Street supports selling "short-range air and ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities to Israel."

Instead, he believes J Street is seeking "to increase the oversight over Israel's actions in general and the use of U.S.-supported military capabilities in particular."

"They are saying that you can be American Jewish while maintaining a very critical view of the Israeli government, especially the current one, and that the connection between the U.S. and Israel is important but cannot be beyond compliance with American values and law when it comes to the use of military force," he said about J Street.

Ocasio-Cortez's shift on the Iron Dome was notable, as she [has drawn criticism from the left in the past](#) for not opposing Iron Dome funding. In addition to voting for the funding in September, she has voted against a measure, introduced by Republican former Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, to cut funding, while voting "present" on a 2021 bill to fund the Iron Dome and other Israeli military capabilities.

Her announcement touched off a new round of progressive candidates backing away from the Iron Dome. Khanna, a California congressman also considering a 2028 presidential run, [is now also opposing funding](#) for the defensive system, echoing the argument that Israel should be able to pay for it themselves.

“We should not be subsidizing them, especially given their egregious violations of human rights law,” he [said](#).

Congressional candidates in closely watched primaries are also saying they will oppose Iron Dome funding, notably including Lander, the Jewish former New York City Comptroller running against Jewish New York Rep. Dan Goldman. (J Street’s PAC [has endorsed Goldman](#) in the race.) Lander was a vocal supporter of Zohran Mamdani’s successful run for mayor of New York City; Mamdani [has also backed](#) Ocasio-Cortez’s opposition to Iron Dome funding.

“American foreign policy to Israel has to change, and it has to condition support based on human rights and international law,” Lander, who identifies as a liberal Zionist, [told](#) the New York Times editorial board last week. Like some of his allies, Lander also cited the Leahy laws, which mandate that U.S. military support go only to countries that adhere to international human rights law.

Michael Blake, a left-wing challenger to pro-Israel New York Rep. Richie Torres, has also [come out](#) in opposition of Iron Dome funding in a recent debate. Torres, meanwhile, has doubled down on his own support of Iron Dome funding, issuing an [impassioned statement](#) backing it on Sunday.

“There is a rapidly growing chorus of candidates calling for the defunding of missile defense systems like Iron Dome—at a time when millions of Israeli civilians are facing a constant barrage of rockets, drones, and ballistic missiles,” Torres said. “I will never join that bandwagon—no matter how politically expedient it may become.”

Saying that “even the world’s most committed pacifist should have no objection to Iron Dome,” Torres emphasized that the system’s only purpose is to prevent civilians from being killed. He concluded, “Defunding Iron Dome would not bring peace. It would not de-escalate conflict or end war or save lives. It would serve only one purpose: more dead civilians.”

Eylon Levy, a former spokesperson for the Israeli government, argued that the Iron Dome had delayed conflict with Hamas in Gaza. “If we didn’t have Iron Dome, we wouldn’t have tolerated 20 years of rocket fire from Gaza and waited for October 7 to eliminate the Hamas threat,” he [wrote on X](#) last week. “If Hamas’ rockets were hitting their targets, we would have been forced into an all-out war ages ago. Careful what you wish for.”

Meanwhile, progressive Jewish California state Sen. Scott Wiener, who is running for Nancy Pelosi's seat in Congress and has called Israel's actions in Gaza a genocide, [said](#) in a recent debate that he would continue to back Iron Dome funding. The debate was held after Ocasio-Cortez's announcement that she was no longer supporting funding the Iron Dome.



Anti-missile batterie fire interception missiles toward incoming ballistic missiles launched from Lebanon, as seen in northern Israel, during the war with Iran and Hezbollah and ongoing missile fire toward Israel, March 22, 2026. (David Cohen/Flash90)

“I support the Iron Dome. I think there is, to me, a clear distinction,” Wiener said in contrast to one of his opponents, Ocasio-Cortez's former chief of staff Saikat Chakrabarti, who claimed, “Defensive money can be used for offensive weapons.”

Another key argument being made by progressives is that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has himself [promoted](#) the idea of winding down Israel's financial dependence on the United States within the next decade. Sen. Lindsay Graham, a key GOP ally of Netanyahu, has backed the call and said it could be accomplished sooner.

“Netanyahu's allies in the Knesset just approved a \$45 billion defense budget, and the Prime Minister himself also asserted his interest in withdrawing from the MOU with the United States in January,” Ocasio-Cortez wrote in her post, referring to the memorandum of understanding outlining U.S. aid to Israel.

Saltzman, for his part, views Netanyahu's comments in a different light, noting that they came in response to President Trump's broader tariff plans.

"Netanyahu wanted to show Trump that he understands the general trajectory of the new administration and is attuned to the new attitudes in the White House and is more than willing to plan accordingly," he said. "It was political pragmatism."

But on the left, and elsewhere, the new political pragmatism around the Iron Dome may be to view its funding through the prism of "normalizing" relations with Israel — or treating it as the United States treats other countries, by giving relatively little aid.

"Across the political spectrum, a growing view is emerging: the US-Israel relationship should be 'normalized,'" Ben-Ami wrote.