

[One of the Democrats' Biggest Hawks Is Now Senate Foreign Relations Chair](#)



Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Ranking Member Robert Menendez speaks during a Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on September 24, 2020. Erin Schaff-Pool / Getty Images

Now with a working majority, the Democrats have named Sen. Robert Menendez (D-New Jersey) to chair the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. This has rung alarm bells for advocates of peace, human rights and international law, given that Menendez has opposed the Iran nuclear agreement, repeatedly attacked the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, supported unconditional military aid to governments that have used the weapons in the commission of war crimes, and taken other positions far closer to those of Republicans than rank-and-file Democrats.

Domestic policy initiatives taken by President Joe Biden in his early days in office have been surprisingly positive from the perspective of most progressives, leading hopes that the growing influence of the left-wing of the Democratic Party and the dire conditions facing the country will lead to a more progressive administration than many had dared to envision. The main concerns remain in the foreign policy arena, where Biden has often sided with the more militaristic wing of the party, including his important [support for the invasion of Iraq](#), his defense of Israel's right-wing government, his advocacy of high military spending, and support for allied dictatorships.

There were hopes that a Democratic Senate majority might curb Biden's hawkish impulses, which have been only heightened by his selection of Anthony Blinken, Jake Sullivan, Victoria Nuland, and other hardliners to key foreign policy positions. Indeed, for most of the past 60 years, Democratic chairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — such as J. William Fulbright, Frank Church and Claiborne Pell — have tended to be

more critical of U.S. military intervention and backing of repressive allies than their contemporaneous presidents of either party. Unfortunately, Senate Democrats have now chosen one of their most hawkish members to serve in the party's most visible foreign policy position.

[Roger Noriega](#), a right-wing policy analyst who served as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs under President George W. Bush, [expressed his enthusiasm](#) about Menendez becoming chair, noting “You can’t work around the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when he’s willing to dig in his heels on important issues.”

Noriega was particularly pleased with Menendez’s strong opposition to Obama’s efforts to normalize relations with Cuba, which the senator refers to as a “totalitarian regime,” even while supporting unconditional U.S. military aid to the far more repressive Sisi regime in Egypt and other allied dictatorships. In 2018, Menendez was one of only 10 Democratic senators to vote to table a bipartisan resolution to end U.S. support for the devastating Saudi war on Yemen.

Menendez was previously chair of the committee for two years during the Obama administration, frequently joining Republicans in criticizing the president. When he served in the House of Representatives, Menendez was known for even attacking President George W. Bush from the right. For example, in 2003, he sent a letter to Bush saying that he was “deeply dismayed” by Bush’s criticism of Israel’s assassination policy targeting Palestinians, saying that the killing of a Hamas leader “was clearly justified as an application of Israel’s right to self-defense” and that Israel’s assassination policy — which also included [nonviolent opponents](#) of the Israeli occupation — must have “the full support of the United States.” He has also [criticized](#) Trump from the right, decrying his efforts to withdraw some U.S. forces from Syria and Afghanistan and claiming that doing so would somehow be a threat to U.S. national security.

Regarding Iran, Senator Menendez tried to [undermine the negotiations](#) that led to the nuclear agreement and exaggerated Iran’s nuclear capability. He was one of only two Democratic senators who joined Republicans in [opposing Obama’s nuclear deal](#). When the Republican leadership invited right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress to denounce Obama and the Iran agreement, leading to a boycott by a number of Democratic members of Congress, Menendez joined Netanyahu’s official [escort committee](#) to the House floor.

Menendez has supported Republican efforts that would [refuse payments](#) of hundreds of millions of dollars owed to the United Nations unless member states elect the United States to certain UN committees. He has stridently opposed U.S. participation in [the UN World Conference Against Racism](#), joining right-wing Republicans in falsely accusing it of being antisemitic and anti-American. He signed [a letter](#) criticizing the United Nations and its agencies for calling on the Netanyahu government to end its violations of international humanitarian law and commended Trump’s former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley’s attacks on the world body. And he [voted for](#) a resolution [attacking the international Court of Justice](#) for ruling that while Israel could construct a separation barrier along its internationally recognized border, it could not legally build such a structure deep inside occupied Palestinian territory to defend illegal settlements, falsely claiming the near-unanimous decision rejected Israel’s right to self-defense.

Particularly troubling is Menendez’s disregard for civilian lives in wartime. In 2014, Menendez co-sponsored a bill [defending Israel’s war on Gaza](#), which killed close to 1,500 civilians, including over 500 children. His resolution insisted that the deaths were a result of Hamas using “human shields,” despite reports from [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and other groups which, while critical of Hamas in a number of other areas, found no evidence to support that they engaged in that particular war crime. Menendez also supported a 2009

resolution supporting Israel's similarly devastating assault on that crowded Palestinian enclave [using language](#) that effectively asserted that having members of a designated terrorist group being treated in hospitals, attending houses of worship, or living in civilian neighborhoods made all of these places legitimate targets. He also [co-sponsored a resolution](#) condemning a well-documented United Nations report put together by a commission composed of prominent reputable international jurists (chaired by a prominent Zionist) criticizing both Hamas and Israel for attacks on civilians, falsely accusing them of having an anti-Israel bias and opposing Israel's right to self-defense.

Menendez even [signed a letter defending Israel's 2010 attack on an unarmed humanitarian aid flotilla](#) in which 10 passengers and crew were killed and opposing any action by the United Nations. According to autopsy reports and a UN investigation, five of the dead were not resisting the Israeli raid, one of whom was a 19-year-old U.S. citizen who was simply filming the incident before being shot at point blank range in the back of the head.

Indeed, it is on Israel and Palestine where Menendez's extreme right-wing views are most apparent. While claiming to support a two-state solution, he opposes any efforts to pressure Israel to end the occupation to make it possible. Indeed, he has steadfastly [opposed any kind of Palestinian statehood](#) not supported by Netanyahu, who has long made clear his opposition to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel. Menendez has [attacked the European Union](#) for its opposition to labeling products in the occupied West Bank as "Made in Israel," accusing the EU of implementing "restrictive and illegal trade measures." He was one of only two Democratic senators to vote in favor of Trump's pick of [David Friedman](#) — an opponent of Palestinian statehood who has promoted Israeli colonization of the West Bank and insists that liberal Zionists opposed to the occupation are worse than Nazi collaborators — to become U.S. ambassador to Israel.

In 2017, Menendez co-sponsored a [resolution](#) siding with Trump against Obama on the question of Israeli settlements and challenged the right of the United Nations to weigh in on questions of international humanitarian law in territories under foreign belligerent occupation. That same year, he was one of the small minority of Democratic senators to [praise Trump](#) for his decision to unilaterally recognize Jerusalem as solely the capital of Israel and move the U.S. embassy there, a decision that Biden has vowed to uphold. At that time, Menendez [also co-sponsored a bill](#) which, had it passed, would have made it a federal crime, punishable by up to 20 years imprisonment, to encourage or participate in boycotts against Israel or Israeli settlements.

The choice of Menendez by Senate Democrats to head the Foreign Relations Committee and effectively serve as their foreign policy spokesman is yet another example of the Democratic Senate leadership betraying the progressive base that gave them a majority. This could have been an opportunity for the Democrats to show Black and Brown voters, who are primarily responsible for having a Democratic administration and Democratic Congress, that the party supports human rights in the Global South. Instead, it did the opposite.

With distractions from the COVID pandemic, the new administration, and so much else, Menendez's appointment to this critical foreign policy post has gone largely unnoticed by progressives. With Menendez in such a powerful position, we must be vigilant in order to prevent future foreign policy disasters.