

Saving Israel for Democrats



HOUGH THE MEMORY is a fading one, the Democratic Party was once Israel's central pillar of political support in the United States, if not in the entire world.

Harry Truman considered his recognition of Israel in 1948—taken against the advice of the State Department and the CIA—to be one of the finest moments of his presidency. He later compared himself to Persia's Cyrus the Great for restoring the Jews to their homeland. John F. Kennedy described the U.S.-Israel alliance as “a special relationship” and lifted an arms embargo by providing the Jewish state with Hawk anti-aircraft missiles in 1962. Lyndon Johnson sold Israel state-of-the-art F-4 fighter jets in the waning days of his presidency. Bobby Kennedy was a stalwart supporter of Israel from its founding and paid with his life for that stance at the hands of Palestinian fanatic Sirhan Sirhan. Another legendary Democrat, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, won the admiration of the Jewish world when, as Gerald Ford's ambassador to the United Nations, he

denounced, in unforgettable language, the General Assembly's 1975 “Zionism is racism” resolution. The United States, he said, “does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.”

But Democratic support for Israel began to wobble and slide in subsequent years. The Left, which had once seen Israel as the victim of Arab aggression, became increasingly hostile when it decided that it was Israel that was the oppressive power, denying Palestinians precisely what Zionism had given Jews: a state of their own.

The diplomatic rupture began with Jimmy Carter, who pressed Israel to pave the way for a Palestinian homeland long before Palestinian leaders had shown any interest in renouncing terrorism, much less recognizing Israel. As an ex-president, Carter became the first major American political figure to accuse Israel of being an apartheid state.

Under Bill Clinton, the U.S.-Israel relationship became increasingly partisan: Democrats were pro-Israel as long as the Labor Party was in power. But hostility turned intense once Benjamin Netanyahu came to power, even when he tried to mollify Clinton (and defy his own Likud) with further territorial concessions, as he did over Hebron in 1997 and at the Wye River talks the following year. It would later come as a shock to many Democrats that it was Yasser Arafat who scuppered a peace deal by rejecting an Israeli offer of a Palestinian state on 100 percent of the Gaza Strip, 95 percent of the West Bank, and much of East Jerusalem.

Barack Obama's presidency saw a further steep deterioration in the relationship. Obama remained committed to providing American security assistance to Israel and even enhanced intelligence cooperation. But he also made a point of publicly stressing, as part of his outreach to the Muslim world, that the “situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable.” His administration also pursued secret talks with Iran without first notifying Israel, a profound breach of trust between the two countries. Netanyahu, who at first had sought to placate Obama by imposing a temporary settlement freeze and accepting in principle the idea of a Palestinian state,

retaliated by taking his objections to the Iran nuclear deal to Congress, further alienating congressional Democrats (many of whom boycotted the speech) and infuriating Obama. The following year, the administration refused to veto an anti-Israel resolution at the UN Security Council. It was undoubtedly the lowest point in American-Israeli relations.

Which brings us to Joe Biden. The president has worked with every Israeli prime minister since Golda Meir. His administration has affirmed the Abraham Accords, kept the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, and done nothing to reverse Donald Trump's recognition of the Golan Heights as sovereign Israeli territory. Biden himself has gone out of his way to strike a friendly tone with Israel's right-wing prime minister, Naftali Bennett, in contrast to the sourness that typified Obama's attitude toward Netanyahu. And so far he has not made an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement a central goal of his foreign policy. But the president has also pushed hard for a new nuclear deal with Iran, which Jerusalem views as exceptionally dangerous to Israel's security. The verdict is still out on whether the Biden presidency will leave relations with the Jewish state stronger or weaker.



Today, the Democratic Party stands at a crossroads: Will it make a final break with the Jewish state, following the increasingly prominent lead of anti-Israel progressives such as Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib? Or will it find its way back to a more traditional liberalism—one that recognizes that Israel, for all its faults, is an embattled democracy that champions values of tolerance, pluralism, and progress otherwise in short supply in today's Middle East?

Much of the evidence isn't encouraging. An AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll conducted in June 2021 concluded, "Among Democrats, 51 percent say the U.S. is not supportive enough of the Palestinians. The sentiment jumps to 62 percent among

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Democrats who describe themselves as liberal." Another 2021 poll, conducted by Vox-Data for Progress, found that 26 percent of Democrats thought Biden was not sufficiently supportive of Palestinians, as opposed to only 7 percent who thought he wasn't supportive enough of Israel. (A plurality of Democrats thought he had "the right approach.") Additionally, 45 percent of Democrats wanted the United States to decrease the amount of annual military aid sent to Israel. All of this corresponds with the drift of many younger Democrats toward the ranks of groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose members have adopted the "Boycott, Divest, Sanctions" stance as a linchpin of their foreign policy.

The poll numbers are increasingly reflected in political action. In May 2021, some 25 Democrats signed a letter calling Israel's then-planned evictions of Palestinian families from homes in east Jerusalem "abhorrent" and a violation of international law and human rights. (The evictions were later suspended by Israel's judiciary.) When Hamas sent rockets toward Jerusalem on May 10, these same Democrats called Israel's military response a violation of international and American law, and condemned Israel's use of force. After the war, Representative Jamie Raskin, a Jewish Democrat from Maryland, spearheaded a letter, signed by more than 140 congressional Democrats, calling on Republicans not to block an aid package for Gaza—even though the aid would unavoidably benefit Hamas. Ron Kampeas, of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, called it a "tectonic shift in how Democrats relate to Israel." Months later, House progressives briefly blocked an effort to fund the Iron Dome missile-defense

system, the chief purpose of which is to intercept Hamas's rockets before they can kill Israeli civilians.

The influence of the far Left in the Democratic Party is exemplified by the change in position taken by New York representative Jamaal Bowman, who was a co-sponsor of a bill backing the Abraham Accords, called the Israel Normalization Act, or INA. A leading progressive, Bowman got in trouble with both the DSA and "the Squad" after a trip to Israel sponsored by the liberal group J Street, which favors a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue, and because he voted for (after initially opposing) \$1 billion in funding for Israel for the Iron Dome system. As a result, DSA's foreign-policy committee called for his expulsion. He was not expelled, but the far-left group said they would not endorse his reelection in 2022 unless "he is able to demonstrate solidarity with Palestine in alignment with expectations we have set."

Bowman soon gave the DSA what it wanted. Though 55 members (out of 97) of his own progressive caucus support the act, he announced his opposition to INA. The congressman may have once feared alienating pro-Israel constituents, since a sizable portion of his district is Jewish. But recent redistricting (now headed to New York's highest court on a challenge) has reduced the number of Jews, and whatever fears he had were clearly outweighed by the risk of losing votes from progressives for whom anti-Israel politics are central to their cause.

For all this, it remains important to stress that the militant anti-Israel wing of the party still represents only a minority of Democratic views. There is also an important wing of the progressive movement that has maintained a principled commitment to supporting Israel.

Nobody better exemplifies this than Ritchie Torres, the young congressman from the Bronx, who seems to check every box in the progressive identity tool kit: gay, black, Hispanic, born to a single mother, raised in a housing project. Yet Torres has distinguished himself as an outspoken defender of Israel. (He likes to joke that the reason he's pro-Israel is that he dropped out of college.) In a series of recent tweets,

Torres wrote that the Abraham Accords "created a path to peace that fundamentally altered the Middle East, while the BDS movement offers no positive change for Israelis or Palestinians." In a follow-up tweet, he noted that it is possible to support "Palestinian dignity and sovereignty without delegitimizing Israel as a Jewish state."



What then, can be done to turn this around—to encourage more of the politics of Ritchie Torres, and less of AOC's?

The most important political step in this direction was the creation, in 2019, of The Democratic Majority for Israel, or DMFI, led by Democratic pollster Mark Mellman. Its focus so far has been the work of its corresponding political action committee to help elect supporters of Israel to Congress, and to challenge those Democrats who are hostile to Israel in primaries. In 2020, it helped elect 83 pro-Israel members of Congress, and it was the first group to endorse Joe Biden during the 2020 primary.

Not every DMFI campaign has been a success, but notable ones have. This March, California's Democratic Party endorsed a strong pro-Israel platform at the party's convention. In Ohio in 2021, DMFI was instrumental in electing pro-Israel candidate Shontel Brown in a Democratic primary against Nina Turner. Turner, who had entered the race with a large lead in the polls, had the support of AOC, Bernie Sanders, and the far-left "Justice Democrats" PAC. But Turner also left no doubt about her pro-Palestinian sympathies, tweeting her "solidarity" with calls to "#EndApartheid." She wound up losing the race by six percentage points in the deep-blue 11th congressional district.

Along with DMFI, there is Pro-Israel America (PIA), a bipartisan PAC that endorses pro-Israel candidates of both political parties. That includes Janice Winfrey, the Detroit city clerk who is running in the state's Democratic primary against Rashida Tlaib in Michigan's redrawn new 12th congressional district. With its new super PAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has also gotten into the

political-endorsement business. As of this writing, the AIPAC PAC has endorsed 61 Democrats and 62 Republicans in the midterm elections. But even as it's vital for groups such as DMFI, PIA, and AIPAC to do this sort of political work, it's equally important to go to work on the ideological and moral front. The fight over Israel among Democrats is ultimately a battle of ideas, and that's the one that pro-Israel Democrats cannot afford to lose.

Four tasks are especially important.

First, it's essential to break the mental and rhetorical grip of "intersectionality" as it now applies to Israel—the idea that if one is against the oppression of black people in America, one must also be anti-Israel, on the view that Israelis are white Jews oppressing colored Palestinians. Not only is that mistaken on factual grounds (Jews aren't "white," and a plurality of Jewish Israelis are of Middle Eastern descent), but it is also neocolonialist in its assumption that America's racial categories can be grafted on to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Fighting lazy and invidious stereotypes used to be a liberal priority; pro-Israel Democrats should make it one again.

Second, pro-Israel Democrats must fight the accusation that they are using "dark money" from reactionary (or Republican) sources. In her concession speech, Nina Turner said, "We didn't lose this race, evil money manipulated and maligned the election." The charge is itself reminiscent of the infamous statement made by Representative Ilhan Omar that American support for Israel is "all about the Ben-jamins"—that is, Jewish money. It also echoes some Republicans' habit of blaming every liberal activist they dislike for taking money from George Soros, who everyone knows is Jewish.

Third, the distance between expressions of anti-Zionism and antisemitism is often short or nonexistent, and liberal Democrats need to be encouraged (or shamed) into understanding that fact and denouncing the behavior. Whenever Omar has made blatantly antisemitic statements (for which she usually apologizes and backtracks, before doing it again), Democratic condemnation has been far from full-throated. When she remarked that she saw nothing wrong when

she criticized people who pushed for "allegiance to a foreign country"—meaning Jews who lobbied on behalf of Israel—Democrats responded with a statement that did not mention her by name, left out what she had said that was objectionable, and balanced opposition to antisemitism by stressing opposition to "Islamophobia." At a time when Jews have become the leading target of religiously motivated hate crimes, the diffidence in criticizing Omar is unworthy of a Democratic Party that otherwise shows no tolerance for bigotry.

Finally, centrist Democrats and pro-Israel groups must develop educational programs showing that support for Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, along with its status as the only true democracy in the region, corresponds with the other policies most Democrats hold in common—a commitment to democracy at home and abroad, a foreign policy based on morality and the defense of humane values, and economic growth that benefits regular people throughout America and the world.



The Democratic Party remains, however equivocally, a supporter of the Jewish state, particularly when it comes to current leaders such as House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. Some may be tempted to write off that support, either because they think it can't last, or that it shouldn't. They're mistaken. A party that supports Israel—even as it recognizes its faults—is a party that is true to its best traditions. And a party that supports Israel helps itself by demonstrating to voters that it won't be held hostage to the radicals and antisemitic bigots in its midst. It's a case of the right thing to do in politics also being the smart thing.

As for Israel, maintaining American support from both major political parties must remain a strategic priority for any Israeli government. The old ties that once held between Israel and the Democrats might be frayed, but they aren't yet broken, and they remain very much worth mending. *