

A conversation with

RITCHIE TORRES

Pro-Israel Progressives

Israel's once-robust set of friendships on the progressive Left has been stripped back. Is pro-Israel congressman Ritchie Torres the past or the future?



REPRESENTATIVE Ritchie Torres of New York's 15th congressional district has emerged as a leading pro-Israel figure among young progressives. SAPIR Editor-in-Chief Bret Stephens interviewed him about his sometimes lonely support for Israel and what it says about the future of the Jewish state in Democratic politics. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Bret Stephens: Let me begin with this double question. First, tell us about your journey as a progressive. And second, tell us about your journey as a supporter of Israel.

Ritchie Torres: My progressive values are ultimately rooted in my lived experience. I don't fit into the typical profile of a member of Congress. I don't come from a political family. I don't have a net worth over a million dollars. I don't even have a college degree. But what I lack in formal credentials I make up for in lived experience. I know what it's like to face food insecurity and housing insecurity, poverty and inequality. I know what it's like to have two brothers who spent most of their adult life in prison. Out of these experiences comes empathy for the plight of poor people.

I spent almost all my life in poverty. I was raised by a single mother who had to raise three children on minimum wage, which in the 1990s was \$4.25 an hour. The most formative experience of my life was growing up in public housing, which is run by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). If NYCHA were a city unto itself, it would be the largest city of low-income black and brown Americans in the United States. It houses about a half a million people. But it's been so chronically underfunded that there are hundreds of thousands of residents who live in conditions of mold and mildew, leaks and lead, without consistent heat and hot water in the winter. My experience in public housing is what inspired my start in politics as a housing advocate.

When it comes to Israel, I'm an improbable Zionist, because I grew up in an almost exclusively African-American and Latino community. I had almost no engagement with the Jewish community for most of my childhood. And by the time I became an elected official, about 10 years ago, in the New York City Council, I was still a blank slate on the issue of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. I was invited by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York to go on a delegation to Israel, and it was the first time I had an opportunity to travel abroad. When I went to Israel, it was one of the most informative and transformative experiences of my life—going to Yad Vashem, going to Masada, going to a place like Sderot.

I remember speaking to the local mayor, who said that the majority of his children struggle with post-traumatic stress because their family lives under the threat of relentless rocket fire. I remember seeing bus stops doubling as bomb shelters, and I thought to myself, *Imagine the sheer trauma of a child who's seeking refuge in a bomb shelter while sirens are going off, and adults are panicking and rockets are being fired.* I grew up in the Bronx, where people live in fear of bullets. But no one in the Bronx lives in fear of rockets, no one is concerned that Mexico and Canada one day are going to fire thousands of rockets into American communities. My experience in Israel led me to realize that Israel faces a level of insecurity and volatility that has no equivalent in the American experience.

Stephens: I once heard you joke that the reason you're pro-Israel is that you dropped out of NYU. Can you say another word about that?

Torres: Look, when I saw the congressional hearing and the testimony of the three Ivy League presidents, I said to myself, *I've never been more proud to be a college dropout.* I did not graduate from Yale, Harvard, or Princeton. But I did graduate from the school of common sense. If you asked average Bronx residents, "Is calling for a genocide of Jews harassment?" most of them will tell you: "Of course, it's harassment." But if you ask an ivory-tower academic, "Is calling for a genocide of Jews harassment?" their response is going to be coldly legalistic: "It's context-dependent." It seems to me that the loss of moral common sense is not a bug but a feature of what higher education has become.

There's something rotten in the state of the higher-education industrial complex. Exhibit A was the Cornell professor who announced in the aftermath of October 7 that he was exhilarated by the mass murder of Jews in Israel. If you have an ideology that causes you to rationalize and even romanticize terrorism, then there's

something profoundly and pathologically wrong with your ideology.

Stephens: Some of the people who call themselves progressives, within the Democratic Party or outside of it — that’s not how they see it. They’re seeing it from a very different place. Do you have a sense of what forms their views? You do share a common label, and often common political views, at least when it comes to poverty, equity, equality, and so on. Where is it that your journey departs from theirs? How is it that you think that they’ve come to that set of views? Is it because they went to NYU?

Torres: I see academia and social media as the disproportionate drivers of antisemitism, particularly on the far Left. But I’m a pragmatist. I tend to be suspicious of grand ideological narratives that purport to explain all of reality, whereas I find that I have a number of colleagues who see the world through overarching narratives. Whether you call the idea “intersectionality” or “decolonization,” there is an ideology that divides the world into oppressor versus oppressed, colonizer versus colonized, black versus white, powerful versus powerless. In the minds of those people, Israel is the oppressor and therefore can do no right. And Hamas is the oppressed and therefore can do no wrong.

That is the simplistic, distorting lens through which the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is seen. But I see it through the lens of moral common sense: Moral common sense tells me that murdering children and civilians is purely and simply and absolutely evil, regardless of your skin pigmentation and regardless of your power status. I think that’s how most people think.

Stephens: Talk to me about the politics of opposing Israel. We had some progressive members of Congress in the past few years come into office by defeating pro-Israel incumbents. Their opposition to

Israel seems to be part of their political calling card. Now there's a question about how much staying power they're going to have.

Do you think anti-Israel politics are going to spread? Are they going to become more of a sellable feature in electoral politics, especially at the primary level for Democrats? Or is this a dead end? Are Democratic candidates who run on this going to discover that it's a real problem for them at the political level—that it's not going to win votes?

Torres: Only time will tell. There is a struggle for the soul of the Democratic Party. On the subject of Israel, there's a divide between liberals and leftists, between traditional Democrats and Democratic Socialists. The Democratic Socialists of America, the DSA—which, on October 8, celebrated October 7—is strategic enough to recognize that the two-party system is so deeply entrenched that there's never going to be a viable third party in America. And so their objective is to take over the Democratic Party from within, to impose ideological litmus tests on issues like Israel, and then to cleanse the party of anyone who fails those litmus tests. That war is largely unfolding at the level of congressional primaries.

The DSA is to the Democratic Party in American politics what Jeremy Corbyn became to the Labour Party in British politics. The burden falls on traditional Democrats, like myself, to resist the Jeremy Corbynization of progressive politics. Forgive the analogy, but I think we have a choice: Either we can be Vichy Democrats who cooperate and collaborate with the DSA occupation, or we can resist it. I choose to resist it.

Stephens: And how do you do it? What is the strategy in terms of ground-level politics? How do you fashion your arguments to win over young voters, who may be bamboozled for idealistic reasons into

thinking that Israel–Palestine is the apartheid issue of their time, and that they have to take sides? What are the strategies and tactics that someone in your wing of the party uses to make the case, win votes, and win over those who don't agree with you at the beginning?

Torres: I am convinced that I represent the pragmatic, common-sense sensibilities of most Democratic voters. I remind my friends that we have to keep in mind that Twitter is not the real world. We have to be careful not to mistake a visible vocal minority on Twitter for the majority of the American people. The activists who are disrupting air travel and traffic during the holidays are unrepresentative of the silent majority of Americans.

I refuse to live in fear of the extremes, who are far more powerful on Twitter than in the real world and on the ground. These tend to be largely white activists who purport to speak for people of color without actually speaking to them.

I would argue that the greatest threat to liberal democracy comes not from the far Left or from the far Right, but from the complacency and cowardice of a center that lives in fear of the extremes. And I refuse to live in fear. The Achilles' heel of most elected officials is a pathological need to be loved by everyone. And I have no need to be loved. I would rather stand up for what I think is right, even if it means standing alone, even if it means facing criticism and ostracism. And so I would tell my colleagues in elected office: The only thing we have to fear, as Franklin Roosevelt said, is fear itself.

Stephens: You come not only from a Latino and a black community, but also a gay community, which, shockingly, certainly to me, often takes pro-Palestinian positions — shocking because the treatment of LGBTQ people in the Palestinian territories is barbaric and horrifying. And of course, Israel is a model in that sense, certainly in the

Middle East. Do you have any sense of why that is? And is it as widespread as it appears to be? Sometimes I think I'm taking my cues too much from social media and not really having a sense of where the community stands.

Torres: It's certainly the case that young people are increasingly critical of Israel, are more skeptical about Israel, and some of them are outright anti-Israel. When I announced that I was going on my first delegation to Israel, in 2014, I became the target of overwhelming vitriol and hatred. There were activists who were accusing me of betraying my race and sexuality, and aiding and abetting apartheid and ethnic cleansing and genocide. The rhetoric, even 10 years ago, was intense.

There was a rally on the steps of City Hall against me. I remember coming across an activist who had a shirt that read "Queers for Palestine." At that point, I had done some research. I asked the activist, "I'm just curious, what is your opinion of Hamas?" And I honestly thought that she was going to tell me, "Well, I support Palestinian rights. But of course, I condemn a terrorist organization like Hamas." Instead, she said she supports Hamas. Because Hamas is fighting for the liberation of the Palestinian people, Hamas is resisting the Zionist occupation.

When I heard that response, I was in a state of shock. I had the beginnings of an epiphany. I said the fact that an LGBTQ activist would defend a terrorist organization that systematically and savagely murdered LGBTQ people was as clear a sign as any of the utter stupidity and absurdity and moral bankruptcy that the BDS movement has inflicted on progressive politics. Over time, I came to realize that one of the most influential ideas on college campuses, on social media, is the idea of intersectionality. There's an anti-semitic version of intersectionality, which holds that you cannot be

both progressive and pro-Israel. So I would go to an immigration-reform rally, and someone would utter the words, “From Mexico to Palestine.” And I would ask myself, *What does Mexico have to do with Palestine?* I would go to a criminal-justice reform rally, and someone would utter the words “From Ferguson to Palestine.” And I would ask myself, *What does Ferguson have to do with Palestine?* And then it occurred to me that there was a concerted effort by the BDS movement to make everything about Israel, to transform every progressive cause into a delegitimization campaign against Israel. If you think of antisemitism as a virus, intersectionality has become the vector that carries that virus across a wide range of progressive causes. And so I saw clearly the insidious antisemitism that was permeating in progressive circles.

Stephens: Do you think the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) lost a lot of sympathy when, on October 8, it was tweeting images of paragliders, plainly in support of what Hamas had done? How damaging do you think that was to BLM, not just in the black community, but on the liberal and Democratic side of politics as a whole?

Torres: I want to be careful because that was one affiliate of BLM. BLM is more of a brand—there are a whole host of organizations that claim the brand of BLM. But those activists are unrepresentative of most black people. I represent a heavily black district. I’ve never had a single constituent, a black constituent or Latino constituent, raise objections to the position that I’ve taken on Israel—and I’ve been one of the most visible and vocal advocates for Israel in the United States Congress.

Young people are much more hostile toward Israel than older people are. The college-educated tend to be more hostile toward Israel. I would argue that educational attainment and age are far more predic-

tive of one's attitudes toward Israel than race. It is worth pointing out that, were it not for the African-American vote, Bernie Sanders, rather than Joe Biden, would have been the Democratic nominee, and Bernie Sanders would have been far more hostile toward Israel. The older African-American vote has been a moderating force in the Democratic Party, to the benefit of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Stephens: We're also interested in the role of philanthropy, activism, even lobbying. Your journey really began with a trip to Israel that was sponsored by a pro-Israel group. It clearly had a transformative effect on your thinking about the conflict, and I suspect, of the world. What works, what doesn't? If you're talking to philanthropists in the Jewish community, what should they be doing more of? And what should they be doing less of?

Torres: It's a hard question to answer. I think there's no substitute for firsthand experience, for direct travel to Israel. I tell people: I'm not going to tell you how to think, but all I will tell you is you should actually go to Israel. I find that in Congress, the most vociferous critics of Israel have actually never been there.

People should go to Israel, speak to both Israelis and Palestinians, Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, see the facts on the ground with their own eyes, go to a place like Sderot. You will come to a view of Israel that is far more complicated than the caricature that percolates on social media. The trouble is that the opinion that young people hold about Israel is increasingly formed not by firsthand experience, but by TikTok, by hashtags. And that does a disservice to the truth and it does a disservice to Israel.

Stephens: I'm just being candid: Sometimes I feel there's a side to the pro-Israel community that is, frankly, obnoxious, off-putting, unsubtle.

Do you think that's something that people who are involved in Jewish philanthropy should care about? How do you approach potential allies and friends in a way that's effective? And how do you approach them in a way that's not moralizing or condescending?

Torres: Well, I will raise one concern, and we might have a disagreement here. But I've been outspoken against campus antisemitism long before October 7, and I've had Shabbat dinner with Jewish students at Columbia University and elsewhere to show solidarity. But I will confess I do worry about the fight against campus antisemitism if it comes to be associated with an ideological assault on diversity. I do worry that you run the risk of polarizing the issue, transforming it into a right-wing cause, and alienating the black political establishment, in particular. It is not in the interest of the pro-Israel community for the fight against antisemitism to become a right-wing cause. It should be a cause that transcends partisanship.

There are legitimate concerns about DEI. It is certainly the case that there are DEI programs that have become Trojan horses for anti-Zionism, that have portrayed Jews as oppressors. That's cause for concern. But I would take a different approach than the one that I've seen percolating in the past few months.

Stephens: I'm not sure I disagree with you at all. I think that's an incredibly important point of view. Another thing I'd love your reflections on is the fight against antisemitism ending up as suppression of free speech. One common argument, which I think is a red herring, is: You criticize Israel, and you're accused of antisemitism and hate speech. But there is a real question, for instance, about banning groups like Students for Justice in Palestine on college campuses.

I've seen people take very different views on the subject, and I struggle in my own mind as to what the right thing to do is. Do you

think it's effective to try to ban those groups or to ban certain kinds of speech because you believe they're antisemitic or have shades of antisemitism? Or is that counterproductive?

Torres: I find that people bring up free speech as a pretext for defending the indefensible. And it's brought up only selectively. The First Amendment applies to the government, it applies to Congress. But private universities can have a code of conduct. Private universities can impose restrictions that Congress cannot impose and should never impose. It's not clear to me that private universities should operate under the same constraints that would bind me, for example, as a member of Congress.

I'll give you a concrete example. Long before October 7, CUNY School of Law had a commencement speaker who gave what I thought was a vehemently anti-Israel and, dare I say, antisemitic speech. A year before the speech, that same person went on the streets of New York and said that Zionist [professors] should be purged from every classroom on every college campus. And a few years before that, she said that Zionists should burn in the hottest pit of hell. This was the person who was allowed to deliver a commencement speech.

I asked myself, *If she had called for the destruction of Haiti and Jamaica, or the destruction of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, would she have been permitted to serve as a graduation speaker?* There's no doubt in my mind that the answer is no. So then it raises the question: Why is there a double standard when it comes to antisemitism? Why is there a double standard at the expense of the Jewish community? That commencement speaker has a right to her own opinion, a right to her own speech. But her speech is not entitled to the imprimatur of a public university and the platform of a commencement speech. That's where I would draw the line.

Stephens: You and John Fetterman — and I think people were surprised by Senator Fetterman — represent a pole in the progressive movement that I think a lot of people have been a little surprised by. Is there a secret club that we're unaware of? That's much larger, that we should know about? Because I think when Fetterman came out and expressed [his support for Israel] with a lot of humor and energy and passion, people were like, wow, we can't believe this. Is it just the Ritchie Torres–John Fetterman caucus, or is there a secret society that we should be aware of?

Torres: There is a secret club. It's called the Three Johns: John Kirby, John Fetterman, and Ritchie John. My middle name is John, so it doesn't quite — I'm kidding.

But sometimes in life you find friends in the places where you would least expect. Sometimes the people from whom you expect the most deliver the least, and sometimes the people from whom you expect the least deliver the most. That's part of the beauty of America. It's the country of improbable friendships. I suspect that the common thread between Senator Fetterman and myself is that both of us are idiosyncratic, independent thinkers. And we don't have a pathological need to be loved by everyone around us. We do what we think is right. He has been a powerful example of moral clarity and moral leadership in the United States Senate.

Stephens: As you have been in the United States Congress. Congressman Torres, Ritchie, thank you so much for this interview. So many lapidary sentences and incredibly sharp and sharpening thoughts. As a writer, I find it really a joy to listen to you speak.

Torres: That's a high compliment coming from you, Bret. Thank you. *