

Most Democratic Candidates Still Afraid to Criticise Israel's Violations of Palestinian Rights

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The attitudes of Democratic voters toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have become decidedly more balanced in the past two decades. Favourable attitudes toward Palestinians are up, while attitudes toward Israel appear to be in decline. While overall views of Israel remain positive, substantial numbers of Democrats are opposed to Israeli policies, namely illegal settlement construction and violations of Palestinian rights. Israel's leader, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is also viewed negatively by most Democrats.

These shifts in opinion have placed many Democratic presidential candidates in a bind, especially those who have served in Congress or as governors. As conscious as they may be of their base's changing mood, they have also been schooled not to alienate pro-Israel donors or cross Israel's lobbyists, who can, if aroused, distract their campaigns with a barrage of protests.

It was against this backdrop that I watched the results of a months-long New York Times project, in which they interviewed 21 of the Democrats running for president on a range of foreign and domestic policy issues that will confront the next president. There were questions on Afghanistan, handguns, healthcare, immigration and the death penalty.

Most intriguing to me was question no. four: "Do you think that Israel meets international standards of human rights?" because it was deeply revealing about each of candidates' principles and their understanding of and readiness to deal with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

It was disturbing how few of the candidates appear to have given the matter any serious thought. With the notable exceptions of Senator Bernie Sanders, Mayor Pete Buttigieg and congressmen Eric Swalwell and Seth Moulton, most of the elected officials stumbled about like frightened high schoolers being asked a test question, for which they had not prepared.

Only a handful found the inner strength to suggest that Israel was, in fact, violating human rights. Most respondents hedged their replies noting the challenges Israel faces or "Israel attempts meet human rights standards... but could do a better job." A few, senators Kamala Harris and Michael Bennet, Mayor Bill de Blasio and Congressman John Delaney, actually indicated that they believed that Israel was upholding human rights. Some, instead of addressing the question, shifted to a more comfortable critique of the failings of President Donald Trump or Prime Minister Netanyahu, as if to suggest that problems began with these two leaders.

Additionally, those who hedged their answers implying that Israel's record was less than perfect offered, as their way out of appearing to be critical of Israel, something like, "Israel's trying to do the right thing, but sometimes they fail and need our help." Finally, other than the few that mentioned illegal settlement expansion, most failed to consider other human rights violations that occur in occupied Palestine. The only Democrat who did was Seth Moulton, who cited his earlier support for legislation calling for "not supplying Israel with weapons and goods if they do not uphold standards for the treatment of Palestinian kids in prison".

As they awkwardly struggled to get out of the challenge foisted upon them, you could almost see the wheels spinning inside their heads weighing their need to assert their pro-Israel bona fides with the newly-felt need to be relevant to the changing mood of the Democratic electorate. It was for many "a damned if they do, damned if they don't" situation.

What became painfully clear was the extent to which most of the candidates, either because they were loath to offer any criticism of Israel or because they simply had no idea how to answer this question, found themselves forced to recall comfortable, though irrelevant, talking points.

The top-of-mind reply of a majority of the respondents was a variation of "Israel is our most important ally" or "Israel is a liberal democracy", completely dodging the question asked. Equally off-topic was the support a majority of the candidates expressed for a "two-state solution".

You can read the transcripts of their comments, but far more interesting was watching their faces as they struggled to answer this simple question. First, there was the obvious discomfort at being called upon to talk about a topic they would rather avoid. Then, you could see them fumbling about trying to remember talking points and looking for a safety net. At one point, you can see the lights go on when they recalled the magical "two-state solution" formula. It was as if at the end of a long and gruelling half-baked answer to an unwanted question, they remembered "Ah ha! Two states, that is the way out of this mess." Then without any connection to the question or anything they had said up until that point, they would shift into their comfort zone and say "we should be doing more to press the parties to negotiate a two-state solution", end of answer and smile, as if they were saying "Phew! Did I get out of that one?"

What is especially troubling about this "fall back" two-state solution answer, in addition to the fact that it had nothing to do with the question that was asked, is that most seemed to act as if just saying they supported two states absolved them of needing to say or do more, for this reason, I have come to refer to it as "the two-state absolution". The notable exception here was Congressman Julian Castro, who acknowledged that illegal settlement expansion made the goal of two states "harder".

Most disappointing was the non-response of the usually thoughtful Senator Elizabeth Warren, who said that she would urge the Israelis and Palestinians to "come to the table and negotiate" and then "stay out of the way to let them negotiate", as if that had never been tried before and as if the ascendancy of far-right in Israel is not hell-bent on doing everything they can to avoid an independent Palestinian state.

The bottom line is that most of the Democrats running for president have a long way to go

to in dealing with Israel/Palestine. The reason is simple. Because of the pervasive presence and power of pro-Israel forces, elected officials have long taken a “hands-off” approach to dealing with this issue. Many have learned that stepping “out of line” brings painful results, calls that tie up their office phones and angry e-mails that fill up their inboxes, leading them to avoid this issue like a disease. The result is what I called “willed ignorance”. They focus on “their issues”, the ones that got them elected and ignore those that can only bring trouble. Therefore, they do not receive or even request briefings on this critical question.

But the situation is changing. The evolving attitudes of the electorate, especially key blocs of Democratic voters and the disgust of many Democrats with Netanyahu’s policies and the Trump/Netanyahu “love-fest”, all point to the fact that this will not be the last time uncomfortable questions about Israel-Palestine will be asked. It is time for those who hope to lead us to take the time to learn about this issue that has vexed every US president for 70 years.

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