



The Coming Change in US-Israel Relations

By Yousef Munayyer
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The discussion on Israel at the most recent Democratic presidential debate is but the latest benchmark in progress down a road on which the American people have begun to travel for several years. Indeed, when the issue was raised at the Democratic debate last month, one presidential candidate attacked the other for the lack of empathy displayed toward Palestinians. Given how one-sided mainstream American discourse has been, this is taboo-breaking.

The presidential election season of 2016 is, for many reasons, already being described as an outlier in our history. However, on this particular issue, the election season reflects the continuation of an ongoing trend which will grow well beyond November: the shift in US-Israel relations.

For decades, US support for Israel has been largely unconditional and a third-rail issue in American politics. Criticism of Israel and Israeli policy has long been taboo for any serious candidate running for anything outside of rare, isolated districts. Today, the boundaries of what is politically possible are changing and this election period offers an interesting barometer of that change today.

Before we arrived at this election season however, changes in American public opinion were already beginning to take place. Due to the unending Israeli occupation and denial of Palestinian rights in addition to the confluence of a Democratic Obama-led White House and right-wing Netanyahu-led governments for most of the last decade, these changes have taken a particularly partisan color.

Indeed, polling data shows that Democrats are increasingly frustrated with Israel and Israeli policy. When one looks at the demographics of youth and minorities - the base of the Democratic Party - these shifts are even more apparent. During Israel's horrific bombardment of Gaza in 2014, a Gallup poll showed that both Democrats and Independents found Israel's actions to be unjustified by a margin of at least 10% (Republicans took the opposite view nearly 3 to 1). Non-Whites and people under 30 saw Israel's actions as unjustified by a 2 to 1 margin.

One major indicator of change took place last year when 60 members of Congress boycotted the speech of the Israeli Prime Minister who came to Washington to attack one of the President's signature foreign policy achievements; the Iran deal. The Congress speech of an Israeli Prime Minister is usually notorious for the number of standing ovations it features compared to a State of the Union Address; a sign of unparalleled bipartisan support for Israel. Yet, this speech and its unprecedented boycott were marked by a stain of growing partisanship.



Beyond the Iran deal, Israel's illegal colonial expansion in the West Bank has been a source of friction with the Obama White House and many administrations before his. Despite routine criticism of settlement expansion, Washington has forked over billions in aid to Israel annually and provided carte blanche diplomatic cover at the UN. There are signs that the US public is growing ready for this to change as well. A Brookings Institution [poll released in December 2015](#) found that when asked what the appropriate US response to continued settlement expansion should be, 37% recommended economic sanctions or more serious actions. Among Democrats, this number was a striking 49%.

It is in this context that the 2016 election season rolled in, and the unexpected successes of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump offer indicators of continued change to come.

First, with regards to the Republican frontrunner Donald Trump, one might think that given the growing partisan divide, his candidacy would reinforce the prevailing norms. Instead, his candidacy has exposed a dynamic that suggests something different. Trump's positions on any issue are hard to pin down; on Israel they have been no different. Initially he spoke about neutrality and against free riding allies, but then at AIPAC he towed the line in a rare, written address. His wishy-washy (at best) position certainly does not pass the "kishke test." Despite this, Trump has dominated among the one constituency where Israel single-issue voters are strong; evangelical Christians.

Sanders on the other hand, himself Jewish and a former resident of Israel, has made statements and held positions on Israel that would have been thought to be political suicide outside progressive bastions such as Vermont. Far from perfect on this issue, Sanders has still separated himself from the pack of disappointing candidates as he skipped Netanyahu's speech last year, AIPAC this year, and speaks of Palestinians with a modicum of decency and empathy. But more importantly than just saying and doing these things, he is saying and doing these things while being a viable candidate for US presidency, which would not have been possible a decade ago.

Better yet, he is also the candidate [viewed most favorably](#) among American Jews. That shouldn't come as a major surprise considering that American Jews routinely rank 5 or 6 issues ahead of Israel in importance. At the top of the list is the economy and growing economic inequality. There is also a shift in the American Jewish community on Israel with younger members increasingly critical of Israel's actions.

All of this suggests that change is happening. It also suggests that while support for Israel in America in a general sense may be wide, it is not very deep and while Americans might be supportive of the security of the Jewish people they are increasingly less likely to support Israel's brutal and illegal policies. In other words, the days of carte blanche support are numbered.

Although some have characterized the Sanders-Clinton exchange on Israel as a [surprise](#), it was [widely expected](#) by those watching closely.



Regardless of the outcome of this election, the lasting implications for American politics is the shattering of the taboos around what is politically possible on US-Israel policy. Elected officials will be emboldened to further test the limits of criticism before facing detrimental political costs. The Sanders-Clinton exchange was not merely a product of shifting opinion but will also help reinforce and further that shift.

New [opinion data released by Pew this week](#) shows that for the first time, a subsection of Americans; “liberal Democrats”, sympathize more with the Palestinians than with Israel. A decade ago, this subsection sympathized with Israelis over Palestinians 2 to 1. It is also clear from these numbers that sympathy for Palestinians is very prevalent among Sanders supporters. Considering this shift, coupled with sympathy for Palestinians among millennials, it is easy to see how the near future will include an evolution on Israel/Palestine policy in the Democratic Party.

In what was perhaps a poetic foreshadowing, when most candidates were lining up to speak at the AIPAC conference, President Obama was in Havana ushering in a new era in US-Cuba relations. Cuba was that other third-rail foreign policy issue where our policy could not effectively further our interests due to the constraints of domestic politics. Even though this shift in policy had support in the progressive base of the Democratic Party, change became possible in large part because of shifts in opinion in the Cuban American community and the shifting electoral demographics.

Such change was unthinkable just a few years ago when the conventional wisdom around US-Cuba policy was that there was no alternative but the status quo. Yet when President Obama announced this shift in policy last year, he said “After all, these 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked. It’s time for a new approach,” stating “I do not believe we can keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result.”

This June, the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem enters its 50th year. How much longer before a US President realizes the insanity of peace efforts that include carte blanche support for Israel as it colonizes what is left of Palestine?

It is hard to tell when a real change in policy will occur; perhaps it is five years down the line, maybe ten. When it does arrive however, we will look back at this election year as the moment when the stirrings of change began to come to the fore.