

The US Presidential Elections: What Should Palestinians Expect?

By Randa M. Wahbe

The US presidential election is in under two months, and the stakes have never been higher as the country teeters towards collapse. The last six months alone have been marked by a woefully mismanaged global pandemic that has left over 184,000 Americans dead and 6 million infected with the COVID-19 virus, a plunging economy rivaling the 1930s Great Depression, and nationwide protests demanding racial justice and defunding the police. Democratic candidate Joe Biden and his running mate Kamala Harris promise to be the more competent leaders and protect the world from another four years of a Trump administration. Yet both Trump's and Biden's domestic and foreign pronouncements affirm that their policies are not that different on key issues of racial violence – both in the US and Palestine.

Trump's four years in office have cemented an already thriving relationship between Israel and the United States. Trump broke diplomatic practice by moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem (on Nakba day in 2018, no less) and abandoning the U.S. commitment to the two-state solution. Many Palestinians are critical of the two-state solution for its role as a smokescreen in political negotiations while Israel continues to build new settlements and entrench its military occupation. Yet Trump's abandonment of the two-state solution lowered the threshold of unfettered Israeli influence over US foreign policy. Subsequently, Trump has advocated for the active violation of international law as he recognized the occupation of the Syrian Golan

Heights, affirmed the building of settlements in the West Bank, and encouraged continued Israeli annexation of the West Bank. He worsened an already crippled Palestinian economy by slashing 200 million USD in aid to the Palestinian Authority and cutting funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the primary organization that provides humanitarian services to millions of Palestinian refugees in the Arab world. He engrained a hawkish attitude towards Palestinians by employing David Friedman, an outspoken Zionist and donor to the illegal Israeli settlement of Bet El, as US ambassador to Israel, and he also cut diplomatic ties with the Palestinian Authority by expelling the PLO Mission and Envoy from Washington, DC. Last but not least, he wielded a number of unilateral "peace deals" without Palestinian representation or consent – the Bahrain Conference for the Middle East Plan, the Deal of the Century, and most recently the Israel-UAE Alliance, known as the Abraham Accord. For Palestinians, the Trump presidency has meant an accelerated, increasingly violent and punitive Israeli military occupation and continued colonization of land.

While many of Trump's policies towards Palestine are characterized as unprecedented, in reality they are rooted in decades of US foreign policy meant to support Israel's continued colonial and militarized control of Palestine. Trump caused an uproar when he moved the US Embassy to Jerusalem, yet he actually just dusted off the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 passed under Democratic President Bill Clinton, which had already earmarked funds for the relocation. Trump did indeed give 3.3 billion USD in military aid to Israel in the 2020 budget, yet just before leaving office, Obama had signed a 38 billion USD military aid package; the largest such package in history. This assistance is touted by Biden today as part of his "record of unstinting support for Israel," but there is a long history of support for Israel by both the Republican and Democratic parties.

Support for Israel is one of the few policy agreements that has bridged the divide between the Republican and Democratic parties during Trump's tenure. In 2017, the Israel Anti-Boycott Act (IABA) that prohibits US companies and non-profits from boycotting Israel or Israeli goods was cosponsored by 58 senators across party lines. While the federal bill died in Congress, thirty-two states have enacted the law on the local level, including historically Democratic states such as California and New York. Policy that targets the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) has been vehemently supported by both presidential candidates and Congress, which has continued to make bi-partisan efforts to curtail Palestinian livelihoods and freedom. In 2018, Congress ratified the Taylor Force Act, a bi-partisan bill that cuts off aid to the Palestinian Authority until they agree to end living stipends to the families of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces (also known as the Palestinian Authority Martyr's Fund). Biden has affirmed that he will continue to enforce the Taylor Force Act through his presidency, and also remains committed to other Trump-era policies such as encouraging Arab countries to join the UAE in normalizing relations with Israel.

Although Israel has temporarily halted its official annexation plans, it still continues to expand illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, demolish Palestinian homes, arrest and criminalize Palestinians, and carry out military raids and incursions. Biden has stated his opposition to the Trump-endorsed annexation plan, but his track record and the history of US diplomacy in the Middle East almost guarantee that he will turn a blind eye. One of Kamala Harris' first acts as the vice-presidential nominee was to pledge her unconditional support for Israel and promise unconditional military aid. No matter the outcome of the November election, we can expect four more years of

unwavering commitment to Israel from the White House.

Indeed, the warmongering approach to Palestinian demands for justice are borne at home. As Joe Biden urges Americans to rise up and vote the Democratic ticket in the "Battle for the Soul of America," the painful memory of the past lingers as a deep reminder that every presidential candidate in recent history has further entrenched systemic racism and violence in the United States. Just like the anti-Palestine policies dating back decades, police brutality in the United States today is not born from the Trump administration, but rather from hundreds of years of anti-Black racism, exploitation and dispossession upon which the United States was founded on. No presidential administration has adequately addressed the structures of oppression inherent to American democratic and civic systems. Since May, protests continue across the nation demanding to defund the police and overhaul institutional racism. The protests erupted after the murder of George Floyd Jr., who suffocated to death under an eight minute and 46 seconds police chokehold in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 26, 2020. Yet it should be noted that in all of 2020, there were only twelve days that police did not kill someone. Rather than support the demands of the people on the streets, Biden has already admonished the protest calls by stating that he intends to increase local police funding by \$300 million. Kamala Harris, while being the first Black and South Asian female vice-presidential candidate in US history, is also a former prosecutor who further entrenched the prison industrial complex during her tenure in California. The engrained support for Israel's violent and colonial policies towards Palestinians demanding freedom is inextricably tied to the United States' foundation on exploitation and subjugation of Black and indigenous people and the refusal to reverse these systems domestically.

While the outlook seems dire on the executive branch level, there are some reasons to be hopeful. The past few years have seen a marked shift towards progressive politics at the congressional level, with newly elected members becoming more outspoken and action-oriented on issues of climate change, women's rights, racism, police brutality - and Palestine. The Bernie Sanders campaign trailblazed a new direction in electoral politics that mobilized young, progressive Americans and previously sidelined political parties such as the Democratic Socialists of America. Four congresswomen elected for the first time in 2018 -- Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, also known as "The Squad" - have reinvigorated marginalized voters to increase their civic engagement by pushing forth policies that

support working class, immigrant, Black, and indigenous calls for liberation and equality. Sanders and The Squad's ability to inspire new possibilities in a dysfunctional two-party democratic system has shaken the Democratic establishment, whose political platforms entrench the status quo. In a rush to preserve their foothold in a changing political landscape, the pro-Israel lobby poured money and resources into traditional Democratic candidates to run against progressive candidates such as Cori Bush in Missouri and Jamaal Bowman in New York, who are increasingly outspoken in their support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions of Israel. The establishment candidates lost by a landslide in almost every race.

This may prove to be a turning point in an already fracturing Democratic party, as demonizing and discrediting progressive candidates for their support for Palestine has increasingly become irrelevant in today's political climate. Progressive congresspeople have already made strides to halt Israeli impunity at the White House. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez penned a letter to US Secretary of State Pompeo urging him to prohibit the recognition of annexation. The Squad joined veteran representatives Betty McCollum, Mark Pocan and Andre Carson in cosponsoring an Anti-Annexation Bill that will pursue the condition on US military aid to Israel should annexation proceed. While Biden vows to invest in more policing, The Squad has endorsed The BREATHE Act legislation drafted by the Movement for Black Lives that calls for defunding the police. At present, the greatest schism in the Democratic party is on Palestine and police brutality, with the establishment refusing to take more progressive stances on either. The question now is: how long will the democratic establishment continue to ignore the reality of the changing demographic and political will of voters to pacify their older, conservative donors and leadership? While the immediate battle is to remove Trump from office, the next four years will see a struggle within the Democratic party and its ability to adapt to the demands of a mass movement demanding justice and freedom. Structures of oppression are toppled by people's movements, not by governments and electoral politics, but the small waves being made today indicate a slowly changing tide.

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