

## Hillary and Bernie Part Ways on Israel

The foreign policy divide between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders could not have been more obvious than in last week's debate in Brooklyn when the moderator brought forward the issue of Israel and Palestine. The answers they gave not only revealed differing emphases among two politicians who both strongly identify as being "pro-Israel," it revealed a striking contrast regarding the role the United States should play as a mediator in international conflicts and attitudes towards international humanitarian law.



Screenshot taken from MSNBC debate coverage

Referring to the fighting between Israeli and Hamas forces during the summer of 2014, Bernie Sanders reiterated both his longstanding position condemning Hamas rocket attacks on Israel and supporting Israel's right to self-defense. But he also declared that the killing of nearly 1,500 Palestinian civilians by Israel during that fifty-day conflict represented a "disproportionate" use of force.

Comparable observations were made at that time by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Secretary of State John Kerry, UN ambassador Samantha Power, senior White House official Valerie Jarrett, the U.S. State Department, the leading Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, and the Israeli veterans' group Breaking the Silence, as did—as Sanders put it—"countries all over the world."

But Hillary Clinton refused to acknowledge that Israel had done anything wrong, responding "You have a right to defend yourself," even though Sanders was not disputing that. She insisted the civilian deaths were because of "the way that Hamas places its weapons" and that Hamas "often has its fighters in civilian garb." However, independent human rights investigators found very few of the Palestinian civilian deaths were a result of such actions.

Clinton's ongoing defense of Israeli military operations that have killed hundreds of civilians in the name of "self-defense" and "fighting terrorism" and her previous attacks against reputable human rights groups and respected international jurists for documenting apparent war crimes during these offensives, raise troubling questions about her position on rules of engagement for U.S. armed forces in the "war on terror" if she becomes Commander-in-Chief.

Also troubling during the debate was that while Sanders reiterated the longstanding U.S. and international position that there should be a viable independent Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, Clinton would only go as far as saying Palestinians should be able to have "self-government" and "autonomy."

Sanders noted how, in addition to maintaining the United States' longstanding commitment to Israel, "if we are ever going to bring peace to that region . . . we are going to have to treat the Palestinian people with respect and dignity," noting how in a recent speech Clinton gave on the topic, there was "virtually no discussion at all about the needs of the Palestinian people."

While Clinton has long supported allowing Israel to annex large swaths of the occupied West Bank and other Israeli negotiating positions, Sanders went on to note that “there will never be peace in that region unless the United States plays an even-handed role trying to bring people together and recognizing the serious problems that exist among the Palestinian people.”

And, in contrast to Clinton’s strong support for Israel’s right-wing prime minister—whom she promises to invite to the White House her first day in office—Sanders observed, “if we pursue justice and peace, we are going to have to say that Netanyahu is not right all of the time.”

A number of commentators noted that not only was this the most criticism the Israeli government has ever received in a presidential debate by either party, it came from a Jewish candidate at a forum in Brooklyn on the eve of the New York primary, challenging the conventional wisdom that criticizing Israel is bad politics, particularly before an electorate with a large number of Jewish voters.

The truth is that there [has been a marked change](#) in attitudes towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in recent years, even among American Jews. Polls show the Democratic base is far closer to positions espoused by Sanders than by Clinton. This is particularly apparent among younger Democratic voters, who have been favoring Sanders by more than 70 percent.

Indeed, within such bastions of traditional Democratic voters as college campuses, liberal churches, and peace and human rights groups, Israel/Palestine has emerged as important in the same way Central America and Southern Africa were in the 1980s. Hillary Clinton, therefore, by siding with a right-wing government with a history of discriminatory policies and large-scale attacks on civilians, is seen by increasing numbers of progressive Democrats as akin to politicians of the previous generation who defended the Salvadoran junta, Nicaraguan Contras, and South Africa’s apartheid regime.

No matter how things go in the race for delegates to secure the Democratic nomination, alienating your base is not good politics in a general election.

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