

Trump's Far-Right Israel Stance Creates an Opening for the Left

But congressional Democrats won't act without a push.

It was a surreal scene: On February 15, President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met in Washington, D.C. and spoke of their “shared values” which have “advanced the cause of human freedom, dignity and peace,” while at the same time retreating from the longstanding call for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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Trump's appointee for ambassador to Israel, David Friedman has also [insisted](#) the United States should end the “two-state narrative” and [claims](#) that even moderate Zionist groups like J Street, which support an end to the occupation, are “far worse than kapos — Jews who turned in their fellow Jews in the Nazi death camps.”

Many progressives believe — as a result of ongoing Israeli colonization of land that Palestinians would need to have a viable state of their own — that a single shared state may be the best and most realistic solution. But the “one-state” solution Trump and Netanyahu now speak of is unlikely to be a democratic bi-national state where Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have equal rights. Instead, Trump and Netanyahu's solution would effectively be an apartheid state, where Israel would maintain its control over the Palestinian population indefinitely.

While the Obama administration refused to take any concrete actions, such as targeted sanctions, to stop the expansion of settlements, its public criticisms of Israel may have had at least some impact in curbing the extent of their expansion in the occupied territories. But the new administration is abandoning even those criticisms. Trump appears to be rejecting the long-held international consensus that Israeli colonization of the Palestinian West Bank and East Jerusalem is both illegal and an obstacle to peace, and pledged to block any international action to prevent it.

This gives particular urgency for peace and human rights activists to challenge U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine — and given Trump's unpopularity and the far-right extremism of his stances, it creates an opening to shift the terms of debate.

A Bipartisan Consensus

For years, the United States has been in the contradictory role of being the sole mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the primary military, financial and diplomatic supporter of the more powerful of the two parties. At this point, with the Trump administration effectively endorsing a permanent Israeli occupation, there should no longer even be the pretense that the United States is an “honest broker.”

The Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization have long recognized Israel within its internationally accepted borders, which encompass 78% of historic Palestine, and agreed to a mini-state comprising only the territories seized by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. However, as the remaining Palestinian population centers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank have

become surrounded by large Israeli settlement blocs, the creation of a viable contiguous Palestinian state alongside Israel is becoming increasingly problematic.

If changing demographics makes the creation of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel impossible, Palestinians would have no choice but to demand equal rights within a greater Israel. Israelis would then have to decide whether to remain a Jewish state, in which non-Jewish Palestinians are second-class citizens, or become a truly democratic state, in which both peoples participate in governance on equal footing. They could no longer claim to be both. This reality was recognized by then-Secretary of State [John Kerry's address](#) on Dec. 28, 2016 — an address that was strongly denounced by the Israeli government, the Republicans and many congressional Democrats.

That even Kerry's relatively moderate observation was opposed by members of both major U.S. party establishments shouldn't be surprising.

The Republican Party's 2016 [platform](#) not only fails to support the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, as it had in previous years, it puts the party in opposition to virtually the entire international community by proclaiming Republicans "reject the false notion that Israel is an occupier." It also insists that Israel "stands out among the nations as a beacon of democracy and humanity," that "support for Israel is an expression of Americanism," and that there should be "no daylight between America and Israel."

The platform also declares that the United States should withhold funding from the United Nations, the World Court or any other international authority that attempts to pressure Israel to withdraw or impose any kind of peace settlement.

The Trump administration has already put this extreme anti-Palestinian position into action. In early February, the United States blocked the appointment of former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, a pro-Western moderate, to become the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to help resolve the conflict in Libya — simply because he was Palestinian.

Ironically, this rightward shift in U.S. policy comes at a time when public opinion has never been more moderate. This is an area where the Democratic Party could take some leadership in distinguishing itself from Trump and the Republican-controlled Congress on a key foreign policy issue. However, it appears unlikely that this will happen any time soon.

For example, the [2016 Democratic Party platform](#)—while supporting the concept of a two-state solution in theory — insists it could only come on Israeli terms through direct negotiations, ignoring how the gross asymmetry in power between the occupying power and those under occupation provides little incentive for Israel's rightwing government to compromise. Not only did the platform refuse to oppose or even acknowledge the occupation and settlements, it criticized the United Nations and civil society movements for their efforts to stop them, while praising Israel's supposed commitment to "equality, tolerance and pluralism."

There is probably no issue where elected Democratic Party officials take positions so far to the right of their constituents. Polls show most Democrats believe the United States should impose sanctions or even more strenuous measures against Israel to stop the expansion of illegal settlements. Yet when Obama refused to veto a mildly worded and largely symbolic UN Security Council resolution critical of Israel's colonization drive, most congressional Democrats voted for a resolution criticizing the president. A majority of rank-and-file Democrats believe the United States should support the United Nations formally recognizing the State of Palestine, but the overwhelming majority of Congressional Democrats have gone on record insisting the United States should veto such a measure.

In fact, Democrats in Congress have joined bipartisan majorities this past year passing a series of bills and resolutions defining “Israel” as including “territories controlled by Israel.” Such a legal redefinition of what constitutes “Israel” has in large part been designed to make it more difficult to oppose the Israeli occupation or colonization of the West Bank, such as through boycotting or even simply labeling products produced in illegal settlements.

The list goes on: Eighty percent of Democratic voters believe the United States should at least be neutral (some even said the U.S. should favor Palestinians) in the peace process, yet the voting records and statements of congressional Democrats near-universally favor Israel. Less than one-third of registered Democrats believed that Israel’s actions during the 2014 war on Gaza were justified, yet congressional Democrats joined Republicans in backing a series of resolutions by unanimous consent giving unconditional support for the Israeli offensive.

This disconnect between the Democratic rank-and-file and their elected leadership is growing, particularly given that younger Americans take a far more critical, or at least more balanced, view of Israel than older Americans. The movement on college campuses in support for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against the Israeli occupation has support comparable to similar campaigns on South Africa thirty years ago, yet Democrats in both Washington and in state capitols have joined Republicans in denouncing BDS as “anti-Semitic,” alienating many up-and-coming activists whose support they will need in future campaigns.

Going on Offense

As with Vietnam, Central America, the nuclear arms race, South Africa, East Timor and Iraq, this could simply be another case where there is a lag time between when anti-war/pro-human rights sentiments first take hold among rank-and-file Democrats and when these sentiments lead to changing Democratic Party policy, and eventually U.S. policy. So, it should be possible to eventually force the Democratic Party to support a policy on Israel/Palestine more consistent with human rights and international law. Indeed, Sen. Bernie Sanders’s campaign shattered the myth that a serious Democratic presidential candidate could not take a more balanced stance on Israel and Palestine.

Israel will not end its occupation, colonization, and repression in the Palestinian territories as long as it continues to receive unconditional military, financial and diplomatic support from the United States. Washington will not end its military, financial and diplomatic support for the Israeli government as long as congressional Democrats continue to support the administration’s right-wing policies.

And the Democrats will not end their support for the administration’s policies until progressives, peace activists and human right advocates make ending the Israeli occupation a priority. These groups could counter the perceived clout of the pro-Israel lobby and pro-occupation campaign contributors by forming a committed anti-occupation bloc dedicated to opposing members of Congress and candidates for federal office who support the Israeli occupation and related violations of international humanitarian law.

Unfortunately, some progressive organizations have continued to endorse even some of the most hardline Democratic supporters of Israel’s right-wing government, effectively overlooking the sort of hawkish foreign policy positions that would have been seen as unacceptable during prior struggles against U.S. policy in Iraq, Central America and elsewhere.

Targeting anti-Palestinian candidates is not a single-issue approach. Rather, it is a matter of consistency, of applying progressive principles of human rights and international law in Israel and Palestine in the same way that earlier like-minded activists approached Vietnam, Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa and East Timor. In

the 1980s, for example, organizers protested the offices of “Death Squad Democrats” who supported Reagan’s policies in Central America. Today, any political office-holder or candidate who advocates unconditional support for a right-wing government engaged in a persistent pattern of gross and systematic violations of human rights and international law should not be considered “progressive except Palestine,” as some describe them. They aren’t progressive, period, and must either be convinced to change or be replaced.

The way to create such a movement is to avoid getting bogged down in ideological debates over the nature of Zionism or about conflicting historical narratives or past atrocities, but to focus on human rights and international law. Most Americans are sympathetic toward these normative values of peace and justice, and in past struggles they’ve proven a powerful tool. Whether the solution should be one state or two is a legitimate question, but whatever the answer, the movement must emphasize the need to recognize that both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs have equal rights that must be acknowledged and defended.

It should no longer be acceptable for pro-Democratic groups to avoid addressing Israel/Palestine because it is supposedly “complicated.” Instead the movement can emphasize that the situation is not exceptional, that this is yet another case of the United States aiding and abetting a repressive right-wing ally engaging in gross and systematic violations of international legal norms.

By emphasizing the same kind of pro-peace and pro-human rights agenda that resulted in stopping U.S. support for other repressive governments and occupations, movements like BDS are more likely to be understood and accepted by the mainstream as advancing a consistent agenda for peace and justice — and thus more likely they can force a change in U.S. policy.

While allegations that progressives unfairly “single out” Israel are often unfounded, a broader anti-militarist and pro-human rights campaign might include calling for an end to U.S. arms transfers to Israel, Saudi Arabia and all governments that violate human rights. It could do more to challenge those elements of the far Left who really do rationalize human rights abuses by perceived “anti-imperialist” actors like Syria. And it could expand the BDS campaign to include Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara, the only other case of a UN-recognized non-self-governing country suffering under a foreign belligerent occupation.

While a plethora of other urgent issues brought to the fore by Donald Trump’s election could distract activists from the plight of the Palestinians, the striking similarities between Trump and Netanyahu — discriminatory practices towards Muslims, the defense of war crimes in the name of fighting terrorism, close ties to the religious right, militarism, ultra-nationalism, intolerance of dissent, opposition to the United Nations and more — could help build broader alliances against their two administrations.

As a result, the election of the most right-wing government in modern American history might paradoxically allow for Americans to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a new light. The starkness of Trump’s policies could break down the bipartisan consensus in support of the occupation and end the political marginalization of pro-Palestinian activists, drawing attention to the underlying racism of denying a conquered people their fundamental rights. And a renewed peace movement could draw on the tradition of past foreign policy struggles to paint the conflict in simpler terms: Those who support peace, human rights, international law and self-determination versus those who do not.