

[DNC Platform Condemns BDS But Not Israel's Occupation of Palestine](#)

The Democratic National Committee is ignoring 90 percent of its base to side with Trump and the GOP on Israel.

[Part of the Series Struggle and Solidarity: Writing Toward Palestinian Liberation](#)

Due to a series of decisions by the Democratic National Committee's (DNC's) platform committee, progressives are concerned that the Biden-led Democratic Party's foreign policy toward Israel and Palestine will more closely resemble that of Republicans than that of the Democratic rank-and-file.



There has already been much consternation among party activists over [Biden's key role](#) in pushing the Iraq War resolution through the Democrat-controlled Senate in 2002, and [his support for the invasion](#) despite the return of UN inspectors and absence of “weapons of mass destruction,” weapons programs and weapons systems he falsely claimed Iraq possessed. As a result, Democratic activists were hoping the 2020 platform would offer reassurances of a less militarist foreign policy in light of the increasingly liberal views within the party with regards to the Middle East. Instead, the incipient nominee's representatives on the committee were solid in their defense of continued U.S. backing for Israel's corrupt right-wing government, defeating proposed amendments to modify such unconditional support by a nearly 4 to 1 margin.

[The draft plank](#) on Israel and Palestine fails to criticize or even mention the occupation. Nor does it offer any criticism regarding the vast network of more than 250 illegal settlements Israel has established in the West Bank and other occupied territories in violation of the [Fourth Geneva Convention](#), a series of [UN Security Council resolutions](#) and a landmark ruling by [the International Court of Justice](#). The draft does, however, criticize international civil society campaigns to boycott companies and other entities supporting the Israeli occupation and settlements.

The platform stresses Israel's “right to defend itself,” which would not be problematic except for the fact that the majority of [congressional Democrats](#) have referred to massively disproportionate Israeli attacks on Palestinian and Lebanese civilian population centers as “legitimate self-defense.” Neither the Palestinians nor any other government in the world is specifically mentioned in the platform regarding their right to self-defense — only Israel.

In response to a [new law](#) pushed through by Israel's right-wing government that “the right to exercise national self-determination” in Israel is “unique to the Jewish people,” there was [a proposed amendment](#) to support Israel as a state for all its citizens. The idea of equality was apparently such an anathema to the DNC majority that it was not even allowed to come for a vote. Instead, the language in the platform emphasizes U.S. support for Israel as a “Jewish” state.

The platform also says that Jerusalem “should remain the capital of Israel” but makes no mention of Palestinians’ demand to share that multiethnic, multi-faith, and historically Palestinian city as their capital as well. Nor does it address Trump’s highly controversial decision to formally recognize Jerusalem as solely Israel’s capital and to move the U.S. embassy there — a move made possible by [a 1995 bill](#) co-sponsored by then-Senator Biden.

The Democratic platform also opposes “any effort to unfairly single out and delegitimize Israel, including at the United Nations.” Given that [Biden](#) and the [majority of congressional Democrats](#) have repeatedly gone on record claiming that virtually any UN-backed effort to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international legal norms is somehow unfairly singling out Israel or attempting to “delegitimize” Israel, this appears to be yet another effort to marginalize the role of the United Nations in resolving the conflict.

U.S. Taxpayer Subsidies for the Israeli Military

For decades, human rights advocates have tried — with only limited success — to condition U.S. military aid and arms transfers on recipient governments’ adherence to internationally recognized human rights criteria and other international legal tenets. Israel’s use of U.S. weapons in its occupation of the Palestinian West Bank and bombing of civilian targets in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere have proved particularly controversial. However, the Democratic platform insists that [the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding](#) — which called for \$38 billion in unconditional taxpayer-funded military aid to the Israeli government over the subsequent decade — is “ironclad,” rejecting calls that it be made conditional to Israel ending its human rights abuses or as a deterrent to Israel’s planned annexation of additional occupied territories.

While the mass majority of U.S. arms transfers worldwide is through commercial sales, this insistence on direct military aid also raises questions as to why U.S. taxpayers should foot the bill for Israel’s military procurement, given that Israel is one of the world’s wealthier countries and could easily pay for American arms itself. Indeed, Israel provides its citizens with free universal health care and other social programs that the Democratic Party platform refuses to endorse as supposedly being “too costly” for Americans.

The answer may lie in the fact that 80 percent of this aid comes in the form of subsidies for U.S. arms manufacturers for weapons, ordinance and weapons systems that the Israelis might not otherwise purchase. While the platform says, “We can maintain a strong defense and protect our safety and security for less,” there are no specific calls for how or where to reduce Trump’s bloated military budget other than a vague call to “end waste and fraud.”

Rather than simply calling for Israel to have adequate military resources for its defense, the platform instead calls on the United States to ensure Israel maintains a “qualitative military edge” against any conceivable military rivals in the Middle East, presumably to enable Israel to play a more hegemonic role in the region.

[Biden all but acknowledges](#) that U.S. military aid to Israel is not about protecting Israel, but about using Israel to advance U.S. strategic influence in the region. “It is the best \$3 billion investment we make,” Biden said in 1986 in reference to the annual largesse in military assistance, implying it was worthier of funding than any other federal funding. “Were there not an Israel,” he continued, “the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region.”

Pushback on the Platform

Last week, some delegates proposed [a series of amendments](#) to the draft plank. An amendment stating that Palestinians have the right to live “without occupation” and that U.S. aid should not be used “to facilitate annexation or violate Palestinian rights” was soundly defeated. Even the leadership of the moderate Zionist group [J Street](#) called on the Democrats to criticize the occupation by name, but the majority on the platform committee instead sided with right-wing Zionist groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in rejecting such a call.

On the issue of Israel and Palestine, the Democratic platform does not support the views of most Democrats or even most Americans. A 2019 [poll](#) showed that 71 percent of Democrats and 56 percent of American voters overall believe the U.S. should discontinue unconditional military aid to Israel if it continues its expansion of settlements or annexes portions of the West Bank. Instead, the DNC sided with Trump and the Republicans to maintain the current policy.

[Bernie Sanders](#), [Elizabeth Warren](#), [Pete Buttigieg](#) and other Democratic candidates raised the issue of conditioning aid to Israel during the primary campaigns, a suggestion which Biden [referred](#) to as “absolutely outrageous” and a “gigantic mistake.”

Josh Ruebner, a human rights activist and active member of the Fairfax County (Virginia) Democratic Committee, [noted](#) how the platform “conveys tepid support for Palestinian statehood and opposition to Israeli annexation, but fails to press Israel in any meaningful way to end its military occupation and stop its land grab.” Indeed, by ruling out conditioning military aid, enforcing UN Security Council resolutions and condemning civil society activism, the platform is effectively making the ongoing occupation and likely annexation inevitable.

Similarly, prominent journalist and commentator [Peter Beinart](#) tweeted: “Understand what this means: Most Democratic leaders don’t actually support 2 states. In practice, they support 1 state that denies millions of Palestinians basic rights.”

The explicit opposition in the platform to the boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement is particularly striking, given that [only 15 percent of Democrats](#) familiar with it are in opposition. And the clear favoritism toward Israel relative to Palestine in the document contrasts with the views of [close to 90 percent of Democrats](#) who believe the United States should either favor the Palestinians or take a more neutral stance in the peace process.

And, despite the platform’s insistence that Israel remain a “Jewish” state, [81 percent of Democrats](#) “favor Israel’s democracy more than its Jewishness” and believe — should a two-state solution no longer be possible as a result of continued Israeli colonization of the West Bank, which may already be the case — they would “support a single democratic state in which Arabs and Jews are equal even if that means Israel would no longer be a politically Jewish state.”

Glimmers of Hope

There are some improvements in the platform, however. While not opposing Israel’s existing illegal settlements, the platform for the first time goes on record opposing their further expansion. The platform also for the first time explicitly opposes further Israeli annexation. While condemning campaigns utilizing such tactics like BDS against the occupation, the platform did confirm the constitutional rights of those advocating such nonviolent tactics. [Said Ruebner](#), “At least under a Biden administration, BDS advocates would not have to fear federal

prison time for coordinating with the UN to boycott Israeli settlement goods, as was proposed in the Israel Anti-Boycott Act by Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD) in 2017.”

The platform also goes on record supporting “the right of Palestinians to live in freedom and security in a viable state of their own.” Effectively blocking the means to make that a reality, however, raises questions as to whether it is simply a throwaway line for Democrats concerned about human rights and international law.

It’s not clear why such an overwhelming majority of Democratic leaders feel obliged to support such hawkish views as outlined in the platform since most voters who support the Israeli occupation will likely [vote Republican anyway](#). Indeed, despite the language of the plank, [Republicans have nonetheless denounced](#) the platform as “anti-Israel.”

Taking positions on this important international conflict so contrary to the views of most Democrats is not simply a matter of influence by right-wing Zionist groups. The committee also voted against amendments in support of Medicare for All or even those simply calling for expanding Medicare to children or lowering the Medicare eligibility age from 65 to 55 — ideas which have overwhelming support among Democratic voters. The DNC voted down amendments to legalize marijuana and other initiatives from the progressive wing of the party which also reflect majority views of the rank-and-file. Taking such hardline positions on foreign policy is just another way of saying to those who supported Sanders, Warren and other progressives, “We won. You lost. Now get over it, since you have to support Biden regardless, to defeat Trump.”

[Left-leaning millennials](#) — whom the Democrats need to turn out in high numbers in order to defeat Trump — are particularly opposed to unconditional support for the Israeli government. U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine is as big an issue for this generation as was U.S. policy toward Central America and Southern Africa in the 1980s. Such failure to support human rights and international law could, potentially, lower turnout during one of the most high-stakes elections in U.S. history. Even if it does not, the entrenchment of these hawkish policies in the Democratic platform demonstrates how out of touch the Democratic Party leadership is with its base — and portends continued U.S. condonement of brutal human rights violations against Palestinians.

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