

## **Will Biden Cost Harris the Election?**

### **Despite signs that the vice president would pursue a less belligerent policy than her boss, his handling of Israel risks a repeat of 1968 — and could cost her the presidency**

President Joe Biden's continued support for Israel's far-right government, including his refusal to pressure Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to agree to the U.S. cease-fire proposal for Gaza put forward in May and his failure to demand an end to Israel's ever-widening warfare, has not only led to the loss of countless civilian lives — it could also lead to the election of Donald Trump.

In her interview with 60 Minutes on Sunday, Kamala Harris skirted a number of direct questions regarding U.S. support for Netanyahu, yet another sign of both her discomfort with Biden's hard-line support for Israel's far-right government and her inability to openly break with his policy.

Biden is putting his vice president in the same bind in which President Lyndon Johnson put the 1968 Democratic presidential nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who personally wanted to end the Vietnam War but had to continue to defend it. Like Washington's support for Israel's war in Gaza, and now Lebanon, the U.S. war in Vietnam was unpopular, particularly with Democratic-leaning voters. Another similarity is that Vietnam was not seen as a "single issue," but rather as a fundamental moral question, one that led millions of liberal and leftist voters to refuse to support the Democratic ticket, resulting in Richard Nixon's narrow victory.

The growing conflict between Israel and Iran, on top of Israel's wars on Gaza and Lebanon, bolsters Trump's message to undecided conservative swing voters that the alleged "weakness" of the Biden-Harris administration has resulted in a world of chaos, while simultaneously feeding Green Party arguments the administration's militarism is the cause of endless wars and is facilitating wholesale slaughter of civilians by a far-right government.

It is virtually impossible for a sitting vice president to openly break with their administration, particularly on foreign policy. To do so would be seen as disloyal and could create major divisions at a time when the Democratic Party is desperate to maintain a semblance of unity. So as long as Biden insists that U.S. military aid to Israel remain unconditional, Harris and her campaign staff have to respond to questions about her position by confirming that policy. This has led to countless Democratic-leaning voters — including those in swing states — saying that they will refuse, as a matter of principle, to vote for a candidate who appears committed to supporting unconditional military aid to a country engaging in a genocidal war.

Reflecting that political reality and possibly Harris' own personal sentiments, those who know the vice president have, according to a CNN report, said that in regard to U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine, "Harris is going to try to emphasize her independence from Biden without breaking with him."

She is inheriting some serious baggage, however.

Rejecting calls to make U.S. military aid to Israel contingent on upholding international humanitarian law, the 2024 Democratic platform calls the commitment to send the country tens of billions of dollars in additional aid "ironclad." Even President Ronald Reagan threatened to withhold military aid as part of his successful effort to force Israel to end its war on Lebanon in the early 1980s.

A recent poll of Middle East scholars in the U.S. revealed that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed regard Trump's Abraham Accords — based on the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab monarchies without addressing the Palestinian question — as having had a negative impact on the prospects of peace (with only 6% saying it has had a positive impact). Yet the party's platform praises Biden's effort to expand and strengthen this initiative, which was spearheaded by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. The platform also attacks the United Nations for its efforts to push Israel to abide by international humanitarian law by claiming that it somehow “delegitimizes” Israel.

The platform was largely written by Biden's team before he left the race and would have almost certainly been written differently had Harris' team been leading the effort, but as the party's presidential nominee, it is difficult for her to make a major break with the platform.

The Democratic National Convention was a disappointment for anti-war and pro-Palestinian Democrats. A report in Slate captured the sense of hostility toward such delegates — particularly those of Palestinian background — as well as the dissonance between the jubilation in the convention hall and their understanding of the carnage being enabled by the party. Some Harris delegates blocked signs held by other delegates displaying the names of Palestinian children killed with U.S. weapons and shouted down anti-war chants.

The party leadership blocked debate on the content of the platform or even a discussion of the issues. Despite welcoming scores of speakers from various political tribes and constituencies — including anti-Trump Republicans and Israeli-Americans -- Democratic leaders refused demands to include a Palestinian-American speaker. This came despite the delegates from the “uncommitted” movement accepting the speaker would not address the convention in primetime, would present a decidedly moderate, understated draft -- including enthusiastic endorsement of the Harris-Walz ticket — and would allow party leaders to vet the remarks. As a result of the **uncommitted movement** being marginalized at the convention, it has refused to formally endorse Harris, even while warning of the dangers of Trump and advising against those in swing states voting for a third party.

In her acceptance speech, Harris condemned the massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas, but used the passive voice in referring to Palestinians whose lives were simply “lost” — without attributing causality or mentioning who killed them. Similarly, she emphasized the imperative of releasing Israeli hostages without mentioning the thousands of nonviolent Palestinian prisoners held by Israel without charge. She condemned the sexual violence committed by Hamas forces against Israeli women on Oct. 7, 2023, but not the well-documented sexual violence by Israeli forces against Palestinian prisoners.

Significantly, however, one of the biggest applause lines of her speech was when she went beyond Biden's typical rhetoric by declaring she would work for a future where Palestinians can “realize their right to dignity, security, freedom and self-determination.”

As for Harris' record on Israel-Palestine, it has been mixed.

In her very first foreign policy vote as a U.S. senator in January 2017, she sided with incoming President Trump in criticizing outgoing President Obama's refusal to veto an otherwise unanimous, very modest and largely symbolic U.N. Security Council resolution reiterating previous calls for Israel to stop expanding its illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, which violate the Fourth Geneva Convention and a landmark ruling by the International Court of Justice. The Senate resolution — which Harris herself co-sponsored — also challenged the very right of the United Nations to weigh in on questions of international humanitarian law in territories under foreign belligerent occupation.

Indeed, in analyzing the positions Harris took on Israel-Palestine during her first two years in the Senate, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency observed that her record demonstrated that “She’s more AIPAC [The American Israel Public Affairs Committee] than J Street.”

It is not unusual, however, for new Democratic senators with little foreign policy background to defer to the party leadership on most issues, including Israel. Once they learn more about what is actually happening on the ground and as they gain a better understanding of the ramifications of U.S. policy, they sometimes modify their views. Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, for example, started out following the party line on Israel during her first year or so, but soon became one of the most prominent defenders of Palestinian rights in the upper chamber.

Some supporters of the Israeli occupation highlighted a photo of Harris celebrating Passover with her husband, Doug Emhoff, who is Jewish, and other family members, which displayed wine from the Psagot Winery, part of an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank located on lands seized from Palestinian farmers in the village of el-Bireh. The right-wing owners of the winery named one of its blends after a secretary of state in the Trump administration, Mike Pompeo, who recognized such illegal Israeli outposts as sovereign Israeli territory. A Harris aide, however, declared: “The wine served at the Seder was in no way intended to be an expression of policy.”

There are signs that Harris has indeed shifted to a more progressive position. The Washington Post has reported that Harris “has pushed the rest of the Biden Administration to more heavily consider Palestinian suffering in its response to Israel’s war in Gaza, lambasting the civilian death toll, calling on Israel to allow more aid into the territory, and speaking more forcefully and empathetically than President Biden about the Palestinian plight.”

Following her meeting with Netanyahu on July 25, which she described as “frank,” Harris underscored her middle ground by reiterating support for Israel’s right to self-defense and the imperative of releasing the hostages while also highlighting the massive civilian casualties, the ongoing suffering in Gaza, and the urgency of ending the war soon, noting “the images of dead children and desperate hungry people fleeing for safety, sometimes displaced for the second, third or fourth time. We cannot look away in the face of these tragedies. We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to the suffering, and I will not be silent.”

From near the start of Israel’s bombing campaign, she has been the first high-ranking Biden Administration official to speak out against the high civilian death toll and challenge how Israel has prosecuted the war. She was the first to publicly call for a cease-fire and insist that Israel limit civilian casualties. In June, while other administration officials were unconditionally praising an Israeli raid that freed four hostages, she highlighted the more than 270 Palestinians who were “tragically killed” during the attack.

While Biden has repeatedly blamed Hamas for the high civilian casualty rates, citing discredited Israeli claims of the widespread use of “human shields,” Harris has avoided doing so on the grounds that it gives Israel license to continue to attack civilian targets.

Politico reported that Harris believes the United States should be “tougher” toward Netanyahu and should be “more forceful at seeking a long-term peace and two-state solution.”

Along with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and the CIA’s director, Bill Burns, Harris has been among those within Biden’s inner circle who have tried -- thus far unsuccessfully -- to push him to get tougher on Netanyahu.

As president of the Senate (a constitutionally designated role), the vice president normally presides over joint sessions of Congress, especially those hosting a foreign leader. Although she used the pretext of having another engagement, Harris’ absence during Netanyahu’s controversial speech on July 24 was significant.

She has been fervent and explicit about the need for a viable Palestinian state, while Biden — despite claiming support for the idea — has done little to make it possible or hold the Israeli government accountable for preventing it. Her legal background as a prosecutor could lead her to be more sincere and consistent than Biden in attempting to uphold international law. She is far less likely to attack the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court to the degree that Biden has. In discussing the conflict, she has also emphasized that Israel has a right to defend itself “but it matters how” — a key principle in the laws of war, or international humanitarian law. She has also been tougher than Biden on humanitarian issues, as seen in her statement that there are “no excuses” for not allowing more aid into Gaza.

As president, Harris would likely engage in a major reevaluation of U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine, including conditioning aid to Israel. As the Washington Post has reported, “Despite her public support for Biden’s position, her private comments and concerns as the war has unfolded suggest she would be open to challenging Israel more directly, according to people familiar with her views.”

In his time in the U.S. Senate, as a member of the Obama administration and as president, Biden has staked out positions on Israel and Palestine well to the right of most Democrats. Harris, by contrast, appears to be part of the center-left of the party, which, while certainly “pro-Israel” writ large, also recognizes that it is wrong — for moral, legal, strategic and political reasons — to support Netanyahu to the degree Biden has been doing.

Her principal foreign policy adviser is Philip Gordon who, while not exactly a progressive, is widely seen as a pragmatic internationalist. Unlike Biden and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who were strong supporters of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Gordon has been an outspoken opponent of regime-change efforts in the Middle East. Gordon is also known to be a critic of Biden’s refusal to get tougher with Israel, recognizing that Israel’s strategy of destroying most of Gaza — and U.S. support for this scheme — is wrong. He appears to recognize the downside for long-term U.S. interests of such uncritical support for Netanyahu. In 2015, he wrote that it would be impossible for Israel to “remain a secure Jewish and democratic state — at peace with its neighbors — if it tries to govern the millions of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.”

Harris, with less foreign policy background than the incumbent president, would rely more on aides like Gordon. This stands in contrast with Biden who, resting on his decades of foreign policy experience, has insisted he knows better than the broad consensus of State Department professionals, Middle East scholars and other experts who have long pressed him to use the White House’s considerable leverage to crack down on Netanyahu.

Harris, by contrast, is far less of an ideologue when it comes to Israel and would be far more likely to consider the views of Gordon and those most familiar with the region. The Washington Post reported that, as president, “Harris would probably conduct a full analysis of U.S.-Israel policy to determine what is working and what is not, according to several people familiar with her thinking, with Gordon leading the effort.”

Gordon recently raised eyebrows, however, for referring to a Druze village in the Israeli-occupied Golan region of Syria as being in “northern Israel,” in apparent defiance of a unanimous 1981 U.N. Security Council resolution (which even the Reagan administration supported) declaring Israel’s illegal annexation of that conquered area “null and void.” This has raised concerns that Gordon could try to pressure Harris to recognize further Israeli annexations of lands seized by military force. It’s more likely, however, that he was simply following the official U.S. position — initiated by Trump but extended by Biden — that Israel’s annexation was legitimate and that that area of southwestern Syria now belongs to Israel. (The U.S. is the only country in the world besides Israel to adhere to this position.)

Harris' choice of Tim Walz over Josh Shapiro — despite the importance of winning the key swing state of Pennsylvania, of which Shapiro is governor — was a huge relief to anti-war activists. Shapiro had compared anti-war protesters to the Ku Klux Klan, pressured college administrators to crack down on peaceful protesters, insisted that state employees refrain from engaging in anti-war activism and supported legislation to defund public universities if they boycotted Israel.

Walz, while strongly pro-Israel overall, has taken a very different perspective. During the anti-war student protests, he advocated allowing for spaces “where political dissent or political rallying can happen,” noting: “They are asking to be heard and that’s what they should be doing. Their message is clear that they think this is an intolerable situation and that we can do more.” He acknowledged that anti-war protesters in Michigan are “speaking out for all the right reasons. It’s a humanitarian crisis.” Walz also said, “We can’t allow what’s happened to Gaza to happen. The Palestinian people have every right to life and liberty themselves.”

In recognition of Harris' increasingly moderate views, the liberal Zionist group J Street — which did not endorse her when she was running for Senate due to her right-wing proclivities regarding Israel and Palestine — has now endorsed her for president.

Harris' shift to a less hard-line position could be attributed to a number of factors. Her network, in contrast to Biden's, is younger and more diverse. Like other women of color from a younger generation, Harris is less inclined to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the same one-dimensional way as Biden and many older white male leaders. And for many liberal supporters of Israel, shock and horror at the killing of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians in Gaza since Oct. 7, 2023, has led to a critical reevaluation of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Some Biden administration officials who resigned in protest over the president's support for Israel's war in Gaza have expressed hope that a Harris administration would be better. A former State Department official, Josh Paul, said that Harris seems less “fixed and intransigent” than Biden. Lily Greenberg Call, who was an organizer for the 2020 Harris presidential campaign in Iowa, said, “I’ve worked for Kamala, and I know she’ll do the right thing.”

Despite some signs that Harris would pursue a less belligerent policy on Israel-Palestine, the issue could still cost her the presidency.

The Hill has noted that peace activists “are growing increasingly frustrated with Vice President Harris as she remains in public lockstep with President Biden on the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, but some are holding out hope she could take a harder line on Israel if elected as president.” The article quoted a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute saying, “To many of the activists, Harris's talking points about maintaining more or less unconditional military support for Israel just sound like a continuation of the Biden policy and approach.”

This provides Netanyahu — who would clearly prefer Trump as president — with yet another reason to continue blocking the implementation of a cease-fire agreement by continuing to add new conditions. Reports out of the White House indicate that Biden realizes that Netanyahu's resistance to a cease-fire deal and continuation of the bombing is in part to assist Trump in the November election. Trump has supported Netanyahu's opposition to a cessation of hostilities in return for the release of the hostages, saying, “From the start, Harris has worked to tie Israel's hand behind its back, demanding an immediate cease-fire, always demanding cease-fire,” claiming it “would only give Hamas time to regroup and launch a new Oct. 7-style attack.”

It would be ironic, then, for supporters of Palestinian rights, by voting for the Green Party nominee, Jill Stein, or the independent candidate Cornel West, to support Netanyahu's efforts to put Trump back in the White House. Trump has indicated that he supports the most extreme elements in Israeli politics — those that advocate further

annexation and ethnic cleansing — and he has called for punishing international organizations and allied governments that seek to hold Israel responsible for its actions. As president, he would strengthen Netanyahu and bolster his increasingly unpopular government, giving a green light to violence by Israeli settlers and occupation forces in the West Bank, and promoting the explicitly racist and expansionist agenda of Israeli extremists.

Trump has also promised to crack down even harder on those opposing U.S. policy toward Israel — and other expressions of dissent against his policies, foreign and domestic. A Harris loss, then, would be a major tragedy — not just for the Palestinians, but for the United States and the entire world. Allowing the understandable anger and frustration at Biden administration policy to result in a refusal to support Harris would be a gift to Netanyahu and Israel's far right.

Concerned with that prospect and with polls showing 80% of Democrats supporting a cease-fire, Harris, Biden and other Democrats are insisting that the administration has been working “tirelessly” or “around the clock” to make it happen. Yet the Biden administration continues to modify its proposals, which were initially accepted by Hamas, in Israel's favor and then blame Hamas for not accepting the amended versions. Like the long-standing Democratic Party claim to support a “two-state solution,” the Democratic leadership will say they are in favor of a policy supported by their constituents while refusing to do anything that would force Israel to make it happen.

Only a minority of Democratic voters support the position pushed by Biden, Harris and the party platform calling for continued unconditional military assistance to Netanyahu's far-right government. Indeed, a full 62% of registered Democratic voters support suspending military aid to Israel. Another poll shows that a majority of Democrats would prefer a presidential nominee who does not support military aid to Israel. A YouGov poll in May showed that support for a suspension of military aid would substantially help the Democratic ticket in several swing states. And, while not among the top issues for the majority of voters, a Zogby poll released in September shows that 15% of voters consider the war on Gaza “very important” in determining their vote, with another 33% saying it is “somewhat important.” Given the closeness of the election, those voters could prove decisive — particularly in the key battleground state of Michigan, which has the largest Arab-American population in the country. With more than 17,000 Palestinian-Americans and 82,000 Lebanese-Americans, anger in Michigan at the Democratic leadership insisting on arming those killing their kinfolk in the Middle East could hand the state to Republicans. Furthermore, polls are showing that Jill Stein leads both Biden and Trump among Muslim voters nationwide.

Claims that taking positions more consistent with popular concerns about human rights and international law would make Harris vulnerable to charges that she is anti-Israel or antisemitic ring hollow in light of the fact that the Trump campaign is making those attacks anyway.

And the Biden administration's stance is hurting Harris' overall foreign policy agenda, such as her support for Ukraine against Russian aggression. The striking double standards in Biden administration policy regarding international law, illegal annexation of territory, attacks against civilian population centers, and targeting journalists and medical facilities are obvious to most Democratic-leaning voters.

The aforementioned Zogby poll released in September showed that if Harris were to demand that Israel accept calls for an immediate cease-fire and allow unimpeded humanitarian aid into Gaza, including threatening to withhold military aid until they did, she would win the support of an overwhelming majority of voters with only a small percentage in opposition, even among Jews. She would also win back a plurality of Democratic-leaning voters currently undecided or supporting third-party candidates.

It's hard enough for a sitting vice president to be elected in their own right. Only four have tried since the mid-20th century (Nixon in 1960, Humphrey in 1968, Bush in 1988 and Gore in 2000) and three of them lost. Given what's at stake with the real possibility of a Trump victory, one has to question Biden's refusal to take a tougher line against Israel's far-right government despite the political advantage it would provide Harris.

Just as Hubert Humphrey's "happy warrior" moniker was so out of sync with the national mood during the ongoing tragedy in Vietnam, Harris' emphasis on the politics of joy rings hollow in the face of the carnage in Gaza, especially among skeptical young voters who see the suffering unfolding daily on their cellphones.

Analogies with 1968 are imperfect, though. While Israel-Palestine is certainly a major issue for some Democratic constituencies, it is not the central issue that the Vietnam War was, with military conscription and hundreds of Americans coming home in body bags every week. And the party is more unified in support of Harris than it was for Humphrey.

Still, like Humphrey, she is hamstrung by the policies of her boss.

Even if Biden decides not to change his policy by pushing Israel to accept a cease-fire prior to the November election, Harris could probably still get away with staking out a policy more acceptable to Democratic-leaning voters. While she couldn't explicitly say she would threaten to withhold aid to Israel, she could say that as president she would suspend certain arms transfers to any country that is using such weapons in violation of U.S. law. She could be more explicit that she agrees with the hundreds of thousands of Israelis in the streets who recognize that it is Netanyahu who is the major obstacle to a cease-fire. She could say that the United States should join the U.K., Germany, France and other countries in resuming aid to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). She could be more explicit in opposing Israel's rejection of Palestinian statehood, just as she is of Palestinian factions that refuse to recognize Israel.

For the risk-averse Harris, however, even those modest steps may be more than she is willing to pursue.

Unfortunately, these second-hand reports from the Washington Post and elsewhere that Harris is not as hard-line as Biden will do little to soothe the anger of left-leaning voters as the civilian death toll from American bombs continues to mount. Harris has to win back the votes lost by Biden due to his support of that genocidal war against Gaza, which has now expanded to Lebanon. The best way that can happen is for Biden to demand that Netanyahu accept the unamended U.S. cease-fire plan adopted by the United Nations Security Council and agreed to by Hamas back in July.

Harris' insistence that the war should "end immediately" has little credibility as long as she is seen as unwilling to advocate the one thing that could end the war — using U.S. aid to pressure Netanyahu to agree to a cease-fire. Biden must do so to lessen the frightening possibility that Trump could eke out an Electoral College majority.

Failing that, in order to both prevent a Trump victory and force a change in U.S. policy, anti-war activists will need to push Harris while not attacking her. They must be clear that U.S. policy needs to change while understanding that, as long as Biden is still in the White House, she is not to blame. And, as horrific and inexcusable as the Biden administration's policy toward Israel may be, they must not allow their understandable anger and frustration to depress Democratic turnout and increase votes for third-party candidates in swing states, which would allow Trump to win.

Biden finally cracking down on Netanyahu, therefore, would not only help alleviate the suffering of Palestinians and Lebanese, it could also save us from another Trump presidency.