

# The 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign: Changing Discourse on Palestine



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This essay examines the discourse on Palestine/Israel in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, charting the impact of the Palestine rights movement on the domestic U.S. policy debate. Policy analyst, author, and long-time activist Phyllis Bennis notes the sea change within the Democratic Party evident in the unprecedented debate on the issue outside traditionally liberal Zionist boundaries. The final Democratic platform was as pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian as any in history, but the process of getting there was revolutionary in no small part, Bennis argues, due to the grassroots campaign of veteran U.S. senator Bernie Sanders. Bennis also discusses the Republican platform on Israel/Palestine, outlining the positions of the final three Republican contenders. Although she is clear about the current weakness of the broad antiwar movement in the United States, Bennis celebrates its Palestinian rights component and its focus on education and BDS to challenge the general public's "ignorance" on Israel/Palestine.

IF ONE LOOKED ONLY at the presumptive candidates' rhetoric leading up to the 2016 presidential nominating conventions in the United States, one might conclude that the Republican and Democratic parties remained hostage to uncritically pro-Israel forces and that nothing had changed. Despite Hillary Clinton's campaign claims that she was leading the "most progressive" party platform in Democratic history, despite Donald Trump's sometimes wildly contradictory descriptions of how he would handle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, even despite Bernie Sanders's powerful rejection of key U.S. assumptions regarding the Israeli occupation, West Bank settlements, Gaza, and more, both major political parties and both likely candidates ended up situated within or just to the right of the standard U.S. pro-Israel policy positions.

If one looked only at the Democratic Party platform's draft language on Palestine-Israel debated through late spring and early summer 2016, one would conclude that it reaffirmed these longstanding positions.<sup>1</sup> The word "occupation" did not appear. A commitment to human rights, powerfully invoked in the international section, applied only to Syrians, Iraqis, Tibetans, Iranians, and Cubans—but not Palestinians. And any reference to international law was missing entirely, whether in regard to the Israel-Palestine question or any other issue.

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During the final platform committee meeting in early July, mild amendments were tabled to strengthen the party's position on Palestine and Israel. One of them would have used the word "occupation" and tepidly criticized Israeli settlements, using official U.S. policy language and Clinton's own words of criticism. Another urged the United States to provide humanitarian assistance to Gaza, without mentioning Israeli violations of human rights or Israel's war crimes in its attacks on Gaza, without mentioning the use of U.S.-provided weapons used illegally against civilian targets, and without holding anyone accountable. They were presented cautiously and legalistically by Maya Berry of the Arab American Institute (AAI), and defended with righteous outrage by Princeton professor and activist-intellectual Cornel West, only to be smacked down by Clinton supporters and party insiders without even a hint of a substantive response.

In fact, in a number of ways the 2016 Democratic platform position was even more directly anti-Palestinian than the Israel-pandering one of 2012.<sup>2</sup>

And yet . . .

In the seemingly endless 2016 campaign season, the question of Palestine-Israel—the strategic value of U.S. support for Israel, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, the settlements, the siege of Gaza, and more—was on the Democratic table for the first time in decades, to be debated and discussed as a legitimate campaign issue. There were even disagreements, substantive disagreements, far beyond the candidates' usual pandering competition before the various pro-Israel lobbies. And this wasn't only because of Bernie Sanders.

Certainly, the initially unanticipated rise of the Sanders campaign catapulted to center stage the critique of Israeli policy and the questioning of unconditional U.S. support for Tel Aviv, both within the Democratic presidential campaign and in the mainstream media's coverage of it. But Sanders's ability and, crucially, his willingness to challenge the heretofore assumed wisdom that any criticism of Israel entailed political suicide did not reflect simply his own personal commitment or a campaign director's reassessment of the traditional political calculus. Rather, they reflected the degree to which political, media, and public discourse on Palestine-Israel in the United States had been transformed in the preceding ten to fifteen years, with the consequent loosening of political strictures that were sometimes self-imposed.

Amplified by Israel's escalating and increasingly visible violence against the Palestinians, the discourse shift itself reflected the power of social movements. As filmmaker Josh Fox told Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!* a few days after the Democratic Party wrapped up their platform committee meetings, "All of our real gains are movement gains. These are not gains that Democratic establishment politicians came into office with."<sup>3</sup> At least within the Democratic campaign, the high-visibility challenges to conventional assumptions on Palestine-Israel reflected the strength of the movement working to change U.S. policy on the issue. The absence of a parallel challenge to U.S. militarism and the U.S. role in the wars raging across the Middle East and beyond, in turn, reflected the relative weakness of the broader antiwar/anti-militarism movement.

## The Movements

Since the turn of the new century, the broad peace/antiwar movement has gone from being perhaps the largest, widest, most visible component of progressive mobilizations in the United

States to playing a much smaller role. From the early and brave, but generally small, post-9/11 rallies against a looming war in Afghanistan, through the extraordinary global protests of 15 February 2003, when millions poured into the streets in eight-hundred-plus cities across the United States and around the world chanting “the world says no to war” in scores of languages, the antiwar movement in the United States served as the focal point of the broader progressive movement. Part of the movement’s power lay in its ability to pull in a broad cross section of campaigns and organizations—working on antiracism, labor, immigration, women’s, LGBTQ\* rights, and others—to take up as their own the calls to oppose the Iraq war, to cut military spending, and beyond. For the next several years, both large national protests and a wide range of local actions throughout the country—education campaigns and teach-ins, protests, congressional and local advocacy campaigns, direct solidarity actions and more—continued. But by 2008 or so, with the global economic crisis refocusing attention away from U.S. military ventures overseas, as well as U.S./NATO troop reductions and the election of a president largely based on his pledge to end what in 2002 then state senator Barack Obama called the “dumb war,” the broader movement was faltering.<sup>4</sup>

The self-defined antiwar activists continued to mobilize, but fewer and fewer of their longtime allies were showing up. Those allies, particularly people of color and younger activists, were now moving to the center of a progressive movement being redefined by economic and racial justice, rather than opposition to war. The antiwar coalition continued its efforts to build and strengthen its capacity, but those still working in that movement now skewed older and whiter than during the G. W. Bush years, and their engagement with the broader justice movements didn’t go far or deep enough.

The movement challenging U.S. support for Israeli occupation and apartheid and in favor of Palestinian rights, on the other hand, witnessed enormous growth and consolidation throughout that period. The creation of the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation in 2001 provided a vehicle for bringing many local (and later, large national) organizations into one broad tent. In 2002, one of the biggest antiwar protests focused on Iraq included a huge Palestine contingent that served as a feeder march, joining the two issues within the broader demonstration. By 2007, the U.S. Campaign and United for Peace and Justice, the broadest and most important antiwar coalition, were jointly sponsoring the first national demonstration protesting what was then forty years of Israeli occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

Throughout those years and even more so since, the Palestinian rights movement, strengthened by its focus on human rights and strategically emphasizing U.S. policy as its target, has had ever-growing success in transforming public discourse, and to a lesser but still important degree, the discourse of the media. The rise of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement in response to the 2005 call from Palestinian civil society has furthered those developments, leading to dramatic shifts in the way many, if not most, Americans see the Palestine-Israel conflict. And BDS continues to grow. Especially for political actors concerned with reaching young people, the movement for Palestinian rights can no longer be ignored.

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\* Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning. —Ed.



A man stands to display a Palestinian flag amid of sea of delegates at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. (25 July, Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images)

## Where We Are Today

For generations, uncritical U.S. support for Israel was strongest among Democrats although that had already begun to change by the time the right-wing Benjamin Netanyahu was reelected prime minister of Israel in 2009. Following decades of traditional liberal support for an Israel imagined as a secular, sun-soaked, semi-socialist paradise, Democratic ties to the idealized Jewish state were suddenly fraying. Especially for younger progressives, escalating Israeli violence against Palestinians that was increasingly visible on social media, particularly the 2008–9 Operation Cast Lead assault on Gaza and Netanyahu’s subsequent return to office, made it harder and harder to accept Israeli actions that traditional U.S. progressives—mostly Democrats—had once been willing to ignore or even defend. Thus, the epicenter of uncritical support for Israel, which included funding, arming, and enabling occupation, apartheid, and colonization, rapidly shifted toward the Republican Right.

By 2010, in the words of noted pollster John Zogby,

The differences in opinion between Democrats and Republicans are stunning. Seventy-one percent of Republicans want President Barack Obama to lean the U.S. pursuit of Mideast peace in Israel’s favor. Among Democrats, 73% want a middle course, and the percentages who want either a pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian policy are nearly equal at just under 10%.

Here are more examples: 92% of Republicans have a favorable attitude toward Israel, compared to 42% of Democrats; 84% of Republicans are favorable toward Israeli President [sic] Benjamin Netanyahu, compared to 20% of Democrats; . . . and 72% of Democrats say the U.S. should get tough with Israel, compared to 14% of Republicans.<sup>5</sup>

The shift in public opinion was also widening the growing divide between Democratic Party elites and the broad membership of the party base. The same Zogby poll asked voters to choose the sentence best describing their view of Israeli settlements. First choice said Israelis built settlements for self-defense and should be allowed to build wherever they chose. Second choice said the settlements were “built on land confiscated from Palestinians and should be torn down and the land returned to Palestinian owners.” Despite what is generally viewed as provocative language in the United States (though absolutely accurate in international law), 63 percent of Democrats chose the second.<sup>6</sup> Yet official Democratic Party policies remained far closer to what the poll showed was the new Republican position, leaning toward Israel, accepting Israeli settlements, and so on.

One new aspect in the political landscape regarding Palestine-Israel in the 2016 election season was the occurrence of some actual discussion and real disagreements among politicians, including major candidates, about key components of U.S. policy: whether settlements are actually illegal; how much military aid the United States should provide to Israel; whether Israel used disproportionate military force in its 2014 assault on Gaza; and others. Most of that public discussion was focused in the Democratic Party platform hearings and debates in the last two or three months of the primary campaign. In many cases those questions were ultimately answered with reassertions of the status quo, whether directly or by inference. Nevertheless, that such discussions and disagreements occurred reflected a much wider acknowledgment of differing opinions than was true in earlier election cycles.

## Party Leaders: Clinton and Trump

While every candidate in the 2016 race expressed unambiguous support for the historic “special relationship” between the United States and Israel, there were wide disparities among them. Hillary Clinton emerged early on as the most traditional, holding on to the Democratic Party’s uncritical pro-Israel stance even as that position was rapidly eroding within the party’s increasingly progressive base, which happened to be made up disproportionately of people of color and younger voters—exactly the cohorts she would need to win the election. She diverged from President Obama with a re-embrace of Prime Minister Netanyahu, ignoring the Israeli leader’s years of racist disrespect for Obama, his Republican-backed efforts to undermine the Iran nuclear deal, and his deliberately provocative actions, such as announcing new settlements during top U.S. officials’ visits to Israel.

From the earliest days of Clinton’s 2016 campaign, her popularity was dismal. Polls showed low approval ratings and high levels of anger toward a candidate widely viewed as dishonest and untrustworthy, even a liar. Her plan was to ride to the White House on the long coattails of the popular president she served. But while she claimed the mantle of protecting Obama’s legacy on virtually every other issue, Clinton was willing to toss that legacy aside on Israel. She wasn’t prepared, not even to demonstrate her closeness to Obama, to downplay her public support for

the far-right Israeli leader and his extremist government, announcing in November 2015 that in her first thirty days in office she would invite Netanyahu to visit her in the White House.<sup>7</sup>

Donald Trump's nativist, xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic campaign had little coherent to say about foreign policy. His theme was "America First," but with an overlay of isolationism—appropriating, knowingly or unknowingly, the slogan of those who two generations earlier had advocated that the United States appease Hitler and Mussolini and stay out of World War II. In his one official foreign policy speech in April 2016, Trump identified five problems with what he called the "complete disaster" of U.S. foreign policy. One was his claim that allies think they can't depend on the United States; and another that its enemies also don't believe Washington.

To prove his point, Trump claimed that "Israel, our great friend and the one true democracy in the Middle East has been snubbed and criticized by an administration that lacks moral clarity. Just a few days ago, Vice President Biden again criticized Israel—a force for justice and peace—for acting as an impediment to peace in the region. President Obama has not been a friend to Israel. He has treated Iran with tender love and care and made it a great power in the Middle East—all at the expense of Israel, our other allies in the region and, critically, the United States."<sup>8</sup>

Just two months earlier, however, Trump had told an MSNBC-sponsored town hall meeting that he would not take sides between Israel and the Palestinians. "If I win," he said, "I don't want to be in a position where I'm saying to you [my choice] and the other side now says, 'We don't want Trump involved.' Let me be sort of a neutral guy."<sup>9</sup> After that one remark, though, we never heard about a "neutral" policy again.

Despite his penchant for complete reversals of positions, Trump remained consistent on supporting Israel. Speaking at the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in March 2016, his pandering matched and at moments even surpassed Clinton's. He began by describing himself as "a lifelong supporter and true friend of Israel" and a "newcomer to politics, but not to backing the Jewish state." He said, "When I become president, the days of treating Israel like a second-class citizen will end on day one. . . . I will meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu immediately." And moving to policy, sort of, Trump promised: "We will move the American embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem. And we will send a clear signal that there is no daylight between America and our most reliable ally, the state of Israel."

"An agreement imposed by the United Nations would be a total and complete disaster," he went on. "When I'm president, believe me, I will veto any attempt by the U.N. to impose its will on the Jewish state. It will be vetoed 100 percent." By the end, looking around the twelve thousand or so AIPAC supporters in the hall, including many of Israel's wealthiest and most influential backers, he gushed, "I love the people in this room. I love Israel. I love Israel. . . . My daughter, Ivanka, is about to have a beautiful Jewish baby."<sup>10</sup> (Even Clinton didn't feel she had to *kvel* [Yiddish for expressing pride or adoration] in public over her own half-Jewish baby granddaughter.)

## Those Other Guys

Then of course there were the Republican also-rans—more than a dozen of them. It was a moment of rising partisanship in support for Israel, and all of them ran on some version of the claim that the Obama administration and the Democrats were throwing Israel under a bus.

The longest competitors to hold out against Trump's rise to the candidacy were the two right-wing, pro-Israel Cuban-American senators, Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida.

In what *Foreign Policy* called "a naked appeal to Florida's sizeable Jewish population" shortly before the state's primary, Rubio told an audience at Temple Beth El in West Palm Beach, "It is unfortunate that in this election that the supposed front-runner, Donald Trump, has said that on the issue of Palestinians and Israelis he will not take a side. Let me be abundantly clear: When I am president, we are going to take a side, and we are going to be on Israel's side."<sup>11</sup>

Widely known for his close ties to right-wing Christian fundamentalism and Christian Zionism, Cruz began his speech to AIPAC with "God bless Israel." And it turned out that one of his key fundraisers, Farris Wilks (just four people contributed over \$31 million to Cruz's campaign, two of them billionaire Wilks and his brother), headed the evangelical/Christian Zionist Assembly of Yahweh, which the Jewish weekly the *Forward* called "a full-on hybrid of Judaism and Christianity that is powering Cruz's campaign for president."<sup>12</sup>

Then there was Ben Carson, the soft-spoken African-American surgeon who remained a Republican favorite way longer than anyone thought he would (or should). Some of Carson's pro-Israel language was more or less in the normal partisan Republican range, but he soon dropped into the nutty side of things, saying, "I don't have any problem with the Palestinians having a state, but does it need to be within the confines of Israeli territory? Is that necessary, or can you sort of slip that area down into Egypt? Right below Israel, they have some amount of territory, and it can be adjacent."<sup>13</sup> Carson appeared to have no idea that he was advocating commission of major war crimes, beginning with the forced population transfer of at least 1.8 million Palestinians out of Gaza and into Egypt.

## The Political Revolution

But then there was Bernie Sanders. Beginning as an insurgent crusade, the Vermont senator's campaign focused on the narrowly defined goal of putting economic inequality, Wall Street investment banks, and so-called free trade agreements at the center of the Democratic Party primaries. Soon, however, it turned into a serious presidential bid, as hundreds of thousands, then millions of people, particularly young people, responded to his call for fundamental change, what Sanders called a "political revolution."

As he suddenly transformed into a serious candidate, Sanders had to broaden his range of issues. The self-described socialist senator had been known during his years as mayor of Burlington, Vermont, for a range of international solidarity actions (for example, sister-city campaigns with Nicaraguan towns during the 1980s contra war). But in Congress and the Senate, besides trade-related issues and voting against the Iraq war, foreign policy had never been his strong suit. There was hope and more than a little expectation that this most progressive candidate in a generation would make opposition to U.S. wars and, more broadly, support for diplomacy over war and opposition to militarism, part of the centerpiece of his

campaign. While antiwar activists hold widely divergent views about what U.S. policy in Syria should look like, for instance, there is certainly widespread agreement among progressives in general on cutting the military budget, supporting diplomacy, and seeking nonmilitary solutions to global crises. Even while recognizing that such positions were not within his own comfort zone of familiarity, many thought it would have been easy for Sanders to include them in the core of his stump speech.

Instead, surprising many, Sanders chose Israel-Palestine as the centerpiece of his new foreign policy. While not entirely “politically revolutionary,” it was certainly unexpected, even though Sanders had been one of almost sixty Democratic legislators who had “skipped the speech” when Netanyahu came to address a joint session of Congress in March 2015 to urge opposition to the Obama administration’s then-central foreign policy goal, the nuclear deal with Iran.<sup>14</sup> The congressional boycott of the speech represented an unprecedented expression of outrage toward the Israeli leader’s chutzpah and entitlement, as well as what was widely viewed as his racist condescension toward President Obama. While the boycott won support from far more members than organizers had anticipated, Sanders was not among those best known for challenging AIPAC, voting against military aid to Israel, or speaking out forcefully against Israeli violations of human rights and international law. His instincts were mostly in the right place, but his priorities had always been elsewhere.

Suddenly, foreign policy observers were all focused on what he was saying about the Middle East. A year after boycotting Netanyahu’s speech, now-candidate Sanders broke with protocol, announcing he would skip again—this time the annual AIPAC gathering in Washington in March 2016. Officially, the candidate was simply otherwise engaged, campaigning in Utah—a state that had not gone for a Democratic presidential candidate in more than fifty years! It was blatantly clear that Sanders had decided once again to break the powerful rules mandating attendance for all serious candidates. He stayed away, and instead gave the AIPAC speech he “would have given” in a public venue in Utah.

By the standards of anyone whose analysis of the Palestine-Israel conflict is rooted in international law, human rights and equality for all, the speech was generally progressive, and reflected at least partial recognition of those criteria, albeit with a number of still-troubling components. But by the standards of U.S. electoral politics, especially for a serious Democratic Party presidential primary contender, it was breathtaking. And it provided clear evidence of the degree to which mainstream political discourse had shifted—and was continuing to shift—away from the longstanding Zionist assumptions of inside-the-Beltway party politics.

Sanders’s speech was grounded in the principle of equality—though he carefully did not use that word—between the two sides as the necessary basis of U.S. Middle East policy. While acknowledging his personal ties to Israel and the close alliance between Israel and the United States, he asserted directly that “peace also means security for every Palestinian. It means achieving self-determination, civil rights, and economic well-being for the Palestinian people. Peace will mean ending what amounts to the occupation of Palestinian territory, establishing mutually agreed upon borders, and pulling back settlements in the West Bank, just as Israel did in Gaza.”<sup>15</sup>



Unsurprisingly, he did not mention the right of return of Palestinian refugees, the apartheid nature of Israel's legal system, the legalized discrimination facing Palestinian citizens of Israel,<sup>16</sup> or other crucial questions; the Sanders "political revolution" had not yet completely shattered the narrow parameters of mainstream political discourse.<sup>†</sup>

But precisely because that discourse had so profoundly changed, Sanders went farther in his criticism of Israel than any other presidential candidate in modern history, with the possible exception of Rev. Jesse Jackson in the 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

Sanders said success in advancing the cause of peace meant "we have also got to be a friend not only to Israel, but to the Palestinian people, where in Gaza unemployment today is 44 percent and we have there a poverty rate which is almost as high. So when we talk about Israel and Palestinian areas, it is important to understand that today there is a whole lot of suffering among Palestinians and that cannot be ignored. You can't have good policy that results in peace if you ignore one side." He spoke powerfully about Israeli settlements and, significantly, went beyond the usual U.S. State Department and international criticism of the settlements to raise the urgency of water scarcity. "Israel controls 80 percent of the water reserves in the West Bank," he said. "Inadequate water supply has contributed to the degradation and desertification of Palestinian land. A lasting peace will have to recognize Palestinians are entitled to control their own lives and there is nothing human life needs more than water."

And beyond the occupation of the West Bank (in a political moment when the mere reference to "occupation" is considered too contentious for most politicians, it was significant that Sanders even used the word) the speech was particularly notable for its extensive and specific references to Gaza. Sanders called for ending the blockade of Gaza, noting that "today, Gaza is still largely in ruins. The international community must come together to help Gaza recover. That doesn't mean rebuilding factories that produce bombs and missiles—but it does mean rebuilding schools, homes and hospitals that are vital to the future of the Palestinian people." In discussing the summer 2014 Israeli assault, Sanders described how he had spoken out "strongly against the Israeli counterattacks that killed nearly fifteen hundred civilians and wounded thousands more," and "condemned the bombing of hospitals, schools and refugee camps." He went on to recognize that "peace will require strict adherence by both sides to the tenets of international humanitarian law," including "Israel ending disproportionate responses to being attacked—even though any attack on Israel is unacceptable."

It was an extraordinary moment. Calling Israeli actions "disproportionate" and referencing international humanitarian law, or the laws of war in any context involving Israel, were unprecedented actions in mainstream party politics. And Sanders's focus on Israel-Palestine continued through the June and July 2016 meetings of the Democratic Party platform drafting committee, providing evidence of a seemingly counterintuitive but in fact common reality: that movements matter and that, sometimes, even expanding, creative, and global movements are also insufficient.

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<sup>†</sup> For more on legalized discrimination in Israel, see Doc. C1, *JPS* 45 (4), at <http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps>. —Ed.

## Democratic Platform

During the Democratic platform hearings, the continuing U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Pakistan and militarism elsewhere were hardly mentioned. But Israel-Palestine, so often excluded from any mainstream debate within the main political parties, emerged as a major focus of the public hearings.

The reason was obvious. As noted earlier, the movement to end U.S. support for Israeli occupation and apartheid and to support Palestinian rights is probably the only part of the broad antiwar/anti-militarism movement that remains on the rise. It is energetic, empowered, creative, grounded largely in the country's youth, many of them people of color, and its enormous successes in recent years have resulted in major shifts in public discourse. The strength of that movement is certainly a large part of the reason that Bernie Sanders chose Jim Zogby, the founder of AAI, and Cornel West, both longtime supporters of Palestinian rights, among his appointees to the platform committee. Their presence on the committee, reflecting the strength of the Palestinian rights movement outside, transformed the debate.

## The Good . . .

Zogby and West oversaw a significant reversal, one that saw Palestinian rights, Israeli violations of international law, and the consequences of U.S. support for Israel become central and mainstream discussion points rather than marginalized or ignored altogether. There is little doubt that many people from inside the Washington bubble either continued to ignore or were unaware of the shift in public discourse, and went on operating from the outdated view that any criticism of Israel meant political suicide. But because of the demands of a powerful movement and despite Washington insiders, Palestinian rights and the need to change U.S. support for Israel *were* in the platform debate.

That notwithstanding, the movement's measurable success has yet to become visible in the realm of political institutions, let alone policy. The 2016 discussion was of course not the very first time that the issue had come up in platform debates. In 2012, an unexpected challenge had erupted over the question of Jerusalem. After language from the 2008 platform identifying Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital was left out of the final version of the 2012 platform, the then Republican candidate Mitt Romney criticized the Democrats for the deletion, and a last-minute amendment to reinsert the language was put forward on the floor of the Democratic convention. Party leaders seemed to have assumed it would easily win the necessary two-thirds majority, and the convention chair, Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, called for a voice vote. It was audibly stronger on the "no" side, and Villaraigosa, visibly flustered, called for two more voice votes with the same result, eventually ruling, despite the strong opposition, that the two-thirds vote in favor had been achieved. The anger from numerous delegates at the blatant assault on democracy was evident, but the decision stood.<sup>18</sup>

Neither the 2016 debate on Israel-Palestine nor the refusal of powerful party insiders to acknowledge the demand for change was brand new. What *was* new was the strength of the movement outside—strong enough to result in movement activists having a seat at the table.

## The Bad . . .

The movement's strength and the presence of its champions on the platform committee notwithstanding, these were not ultimately sufficient to change the language of the party platform. The power of pro-Israel lobbies and Hillary Clinton's own unwavering commitment to supporting Israeli military occupation, apartheid, and violations of international law meant that the passionate debates during the public platform hearings did not lead to anything remotely resembling a progressive party position.

Both the 2012 and 2016 Democratic Party platforms included the Netanyahu-demanded and AIPAC-mandated language of Israel as a "Jewish and democratic state," thus legitimizing Israel's fifty-plus apartheid laws mandating privileges that accrue only to Jewish citizens and are denied to non-Jewish citizens. Both platforms describe Jerusalem as "the capital of Israel"—despite its lack of recognition as such by the United States or any other country—and "an undivided city accessible to people of all faiths"—an interesting notion to any Palestinian Christian or Muslim trying to enter the city.

## And the Ugly . . .

In other aspects, the language of the 2016 platform actually emerged significantly worse than its predecessor. While the 2012 platform had opposed "any attempt to delegitimize Israel on the world stage," the new version opposed "any effort to delegitimize Israel, including at the United Nations or through the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement."

While past Democratic (as well as Republican) presidents had consistently used U.S. vetoes, pressure, threats, and more to prevent UN initiatives that might have had real potential for ending Israeli oppression of Palestinians, this kind of official party statement opposing UN engagement on the issue was new. Elsewhere in the platform, the party stated its belief "that global institutions and multilateral organizations have a powerful role to play" even though it went on to define those institutions in a narrow nationalist way as "an important amplifier of American strength and influence." But Palestine was different—and the UN was out of bounds.

The harsh and specific condemnation of BDS reflected the growing influence in the United States of the global movement based on the 2005 Palestinian civil society call for nonviolent economic, cultural, and academic pressure on Israel until it ends three sets of violations of international law: the 1967 occupation and colonization, the discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the denial of the Palestinian refugees' right of return. With the growing strength of BDS around the world, particularly in Europe, many Israeli officials and analysts have acknowledged that by undermining the legitimacy of Israeli actions, this nonviolent movement threatens Israel much more than any claimed threat of military attack from Iran or anywhere else.

But BDS's gathering strength had also led to a harsh backlash from Israel's increasingly desperate international supporters. The inclusion of the specific anti-BDS reference in the Democratic Party platform reflected the continuing power of uncritically pro-Israel forces in the party, and simultaneously represented a threat to join the pattern of increasing repression being launched

against BDS activists across the United States and around the world. As the governments of New York and other U.S. states, and also college campuses across the country, yield to pressure from pro-Israel forces to stamp out BDS, there is a serious menace to First Amendment rights in the United States.

## Republican Platform

What the polls show about the Republican claim to be more-pro-Israel-than-the-other-guys took very real form during the GOP's platform discussions in mid-July. As the Jewish weekly the *Forward* described it,

Oh, the irony. The “radical” positions of West, Zogby, and Ellison—who were chosen by Bernie Sanders for the platform committee—were later soundly defeated by Democrats. Instead, it's the GOP that has broken with the long-standing bipartisan approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by rejecting a call for a two-state solution and further rejecting “the false notion that Israel is an occupier.” Sadly, this isn't the Old Republican Party anymore. While a party platform is a largely symbolic document, this development puts to rest the notion that a common vision of what's best for Israel's future is shared across the political spectrum.<sup>19</sup>

Trump's Republican platform language certainly went beyond that of the Democrats in support for Israel—it even went beyond at least the official words of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Titled “Our Unequivocal Support for Israel and Jerusalem,” the platform uses language that links Israel to the United States in its origins (“aspiration for freedom”) and exceptionalism (“standing out among the nations as a beacon of democracy and humanity”). The United States and Israel share strategic interests and, apparently, “our most essential values.” Israel is, for the Republican Party, “the only country in the Middle East where freedom of speech and freedom of religion are found.” Who knew?

The conclusion, of course, is that “support for Israel is an expression of Americanism [*sic*], and it is the responsibility of our government to advance policies that reflect Americans' strong desire for a relationship with no daylight between America and Israel.”<sup>20</sup>

The Republican position supports a “comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East,” but significantly never mentions a two-state solution, for so many decades the linchpin of bipartisan U.S. policy. Looking ahead to the possibility of a UN or other international proposal, the revival of the Saudi/Arab League or perhaps French peace initiatives, or anything else outside U.S. control, the Republicans also “oppose any measures intended to impose an agreement or to dictate borders or other terms and call for the immediate termination of all U.S. funding of any entity that attempts to do so.”

The Republican platform uses language that, while deliberately more extreme than the Democrats', is in substance almost identical. The GOP recognizes Jerusalem as “the eternal and indivisible capital of the Jewish state,” and while it goes on to include the perpetual AIPAC demand to move the U.S. Embassy there, the platform's main language differs little from the Democrats' (Jerusalem as “the capital of Israel, an undivided city”). Both documents support maintaining Israel's “qualitative

military edge.” And both name and condemn the BDS movement, although the Republicans go further, claiming that BDS is “anti-Semitic in nature and seeks to destroy Israel.”<sup>21</sup>

Mainstream Zionist voices are increasingly unnerved by the shifts on Middle East positions within and between the two parties, and especially by fears of the consequences of mainstream abandonment of a two-state solution. They recognize that continuing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories means Israeli rule over a population that will soon be majority Arab, and that the apartheid nature of the state will become undeniable. There is still little willingness to acknowledge that whatever the appeal of a two-state solution in the past, it is no longer a viable proposal. Even leaving out considerations of justice, Israel’s imposed facts on the ground make it impossible: Israeli settlement expansion and the apartheid wall, land theft and ethnic cleansing, the siege and isolation of Gaza, and crucially, Israel’s ability to rely on U.S.-guaranteed impunity for all the violations of international law inherent in those realities. The two-state solution is over, but so far it appears that, as in Israel, it’s only the most extreme U.S. political forces that are prepared to give up calling for it.

The mainstream Zionist weekly the *Forward* worried that,

The Republican Party seems unmoored. With the apparent acquiescence of the presumed nominee [Trump], the GOP flat-out rejected endorsement of a two-state solution, which has been the official policy of U.S. administrations under both parties for decades and has been supported, at least rhetorically, by Netanyahu himself. Even though the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful Israel lobby, has veered to the right politically—vociferously and unsuccessfully opposing the Iran deal, for instance—its embrace of a two-state solution was roundly ignored by the Republican platform writers. AIPAC is now philosophically closer to the party of Obama and Clinton on this key issue. And the Republican Party has positioned itself to the right of Netanyahu. Who could have imagined that?<sup>22</sup>

Anyone trying to predict what a Trump administration might actually do regarding U.S. policy toward Israel had better hold on to their hat.

## Looking Ahead: Still All about the Movements

Despite the terrible final language in both platform documents, it remains an important victory that the issue of Palestine and Palestinian rights played such a central public role in the Democratic platform debate. The centrality of the issue as something that had to be discussed at the highest levels and for which unity could not be, as in the past, simply assumed or asserted, provided a powerful lesson for both the Palestine-specific and the broader antiwar movements, and for other social movements as well.

In contrast, the lack of attention paid to U.S. wars in the platform debate demonstrated not only the current antiwar movement’s lack of strength and engagement, but also the willingness of the broad progressive movement as a whole to accept largely unchallenged the limited priorities set by elected officials—however progressive they may be on other questions. As a result, those in power could ignore far too many issues without consequence. At the post-primaries People’s Summit, bringing together supporters of Bernie Sanders’s political revolution and others, the wide range of

issues deemed to require continuing mobilization after the election—the Movement For Black Lives, the \$15/hour minimum wage, economic inequality, the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, Wall Street and bankers’ power, reproductive rights, environmental justice, and beyond—did not include a call to reinvigorate the movement against U.S. wars around the world, or even to cut the military budget.

Despite its ultimate failure to win good language in the platforms, the election-based discussion of Palestine-Israel demonstrated how a movement—albeit one that has not yet succeeded in changing actual policy—can have enormous influence on the debates at the highest levels of power. Bernie Sanders’s campaign certainly played its part in that process but it was the power of social movements that mattered most.

The shift in public discourse was the result of a strategy to leave behind years of focusing on solutions that had long since lost potency or relevance and to turn instead toward a rights-based approach focused primarily on changing U.S. policy. That shift allowed for the creation of a much broader and more powerful movement for Palestinian rights and against Israeli oppression. The increasing willingness of mainstream churches to support boycott and divestment campaigns against corporations profiting from Israeli occupation and apartheid, the rise of Jewish Voice for Peace transforming public opinion especially among young Jews, the growing links being built between Palestinian rights organizations and anti-racism groups including Black Lives Matter, the emergence of the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation coalition with its four-hundred-plus member groups . . . all are indicia of the shifts in public discourse and public opinion, which they catalyzed.

In 2001, the strategy paper that helped frame discussions to create the U.S. Campaign described the urgent need “to confront the crisis of American ignorance with a new strategy for human rights-based education about Palestine, Israel and occupation here in the U.S.” It recognized that “we confront an American people largely ignorant about the existence, let alone the nature and illegality, of military occupation in Palestine; an American people largely unaware of the violations of human rights inherent in occupation and the degree to which those violations are consciously exacerbated by Israel’s version of occupation; an American people largely ignorant about the direct involvement—financial, diplomatic and military—of the U.S. in the current crisis; an American people largely ignorant of the real histories of Palestine, of Israel, of U.S. involvement in the region.”<sup>23</sup>

Fifteen years later, the American people are no longer “largely ignorant” about those realities; the struggle now is to transform the discourse shift that was enabled by education, advocacy, and mobilization into a policy shift with impact on the ground. It was that new terrain of struggle for policy change, and not just the discursive shift on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, that was so evident in the 2016 presidential election campaign.

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