

US policy on Israel at crossroad of presidential election



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The 2024 US presidential election are looming with yet another major option for the upcoming administration at hand, which is US's unwavering support for Israel that has been a bedrock belief of many American voters. But now with Gaza in the midst of bloodshed, the situation has changed. Voters are now sending conflicting signals about the direction of US policy, particularly as the war in Gaza extends into its fourth month, resulting in more than 25,000 Palestinian deaths. The American voters seem to be deeply divided on Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza. According to a New York Times/Siena College poll, the electorate appears to be of two minds on what should come next, a cease-fire, or a continuing campaign against Hamas, whose attack on Oct. 7 killed around 1,200 Israelis.



Given a choice between two courses of action, a narrow plurality of voters, 44 percent, said Israel should stop its military campaign to protect civilian casualties. While 39 percent advised the opposite course: Israel should continue its military action even if it means civilian casualties in Gaza mount.

Meanwhile, as economic issues are top of mind for US voters, Israel is still a sacred cow for the US, with presidential candidates competing to surpass each other in demonstrating support for it.

However, the candidates on stage this term seemed to find a rare point of agreement on the US support for Israel, with some going as far as to call for deportations of pro-Hamas students after anti-Semitism struck universities including Cornell and Harvard.

Multiple GOP candidates say they would take punitive action, including canceling visas for international students who rally in support of Hamas, or even more broadly, "anti-American and anti-Semitic foreigners at our colleges."

Also, Joe Biden's re-election bid this year puts him up against Republicans vying to outdo one another in support for Israel.

When Biden met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his war cabinet during his visit to Israel in October, the US president assured them: "I don't believe you have to be a Jew to be a Zionist, and I am a Zionist."

Voters broadly disapprove of the way Biden is handling the bloody war in Gaza, the New York Times/Siena College poll has found, with younger Americans far more critical than older voters of both Israel's conduct and the administration's response to the war.

Some experts warn that the US support policy is a formula that may lock the country into deeper military and security engagement in the Middle East as hostilities worsen and Palestinian civilians continue



to suffer. This trajectory could deviate from the country's long-term interests.

"It's a self-defeating policy," said Brian Finucane, a former policy adviser in the US State Department on counterterrorism and the use of military force.

"What may be expedient in terms of short-term domestic politics may not be in the long-term interests of the United States," said Finucane, who is now a senior adviser to the International Crisis Group research organization. "Particularly if it results in the United States involving itself in further unnecessary wars in the Middle East."

So, to be aligned with US long-term interests, the Biden administration keeps pressing Israel to work toward eventual statehood for the Palestinians. Netanyahu keeps saying no. It is the biggest disagreement between the pair. Even on actions to alleviate the suffering of Palestinian civilians, the two allies are far apart on this matter.

It goes without saying that though the United States, as Israel's closest partner and largest weapons supplier, has stronger means to apply pressure on Israel, it shows no willingness to use them seriously.

Nevertheless, the United States considers Israel crucial to its Middle East policy, and its current stance toward Israel falls in line with its long-term interests. The US seeks to pressure Israel to get it on board with its policies. The ultimate goal appears to be resolving the Palestinian issue by establishing a Palestinian state, acting as a mediator between Israel and the Arab world, and achieving stability in the Middle East, while shifting focus toward the Far East, where China has emerged as the biggest challenger to US global dominance.

So, the division among voters regarding US policy on Israel, exposed by the recent poll, seems to limit the sitting president's



and other nominees' politically favorable choices.

The findings of the Times/Siena poll hold portents not only for Biden as he enters the campaign trail but also for long-term relations between Israel and its most powerful benefactor, the United States. Biden's current approach to Israel and Gaza raises questions about whether he will steer clear of unnecessary conflicts in the Middle East, like his two predecessors. Ensuring this requires a proactive pursuit of a cease-fire.

Therefore, the nominees' election promises for the US to "stand with Israel" is crucial for the country. The two former presidents successfully avoided direct involvement in Middle East conflicts. Considering the current administration's approach to Israel and Gaza, can we be sure the upcoming government will prevent the US from entering another unnecessary and destructive war in the Middle East?



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