

Voters sending clear message ahead of DNC

Arms embargo on Israel good policy, good politics



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OPINION

As Democrats prepare for their National Convention in Chicago this week, anti-genocide protesters and advocates are gearing up to meet them there. While Democratic leaders hope to demonstrate unusual party unity at the Convention, the yawning gap between those leaders and most Democratic voters — especially the key sectors of young voters, progressives, Muslims, and Arab-Americans — stands in the way of that unity.

Democratic policy toward Palestine is not the only problematic issue in the Democrats' policy book, but it's a prominent one. Neither Vice President Kamala Harris nor her running mate, Governor Tim Walz, has demonstrated any commitment to changing that policy despite its manifest failure and its unpopularity among Democratic voters.

Harris hoped that a change in tone to one that is more empathetic to the suffering in Gaza and one that makes anti-genocide protesters and members of the Uncommitted movement "feel heard" would give her breathing room on this issue. That is both misguided and insulting, to the American advocates for an end to US support and enabling of Israel's genocide, but even more, to the victims of the genocide itself in Palestine.

Arms embargo on Israel

While polls have long shown that an overwhelming majority of Democrats want a permanent cease-fire in Gaza and that a clear majority believe that Israel is committing genocide, Harris seems to be banking on the crowds at her rallies who, while they may fall into those groups, don't find their enthusiasm for her dampened by Harris' role in that genocide.

Harris has shown that she has learned some of the lessons of the Democrats' recent failures, but she is still betting on being able to dupe and buy off supporters of Palestinian rights on the cheap. There have been clear messages sent, particularly from the Uncommitted movement (which, it is fair to say, represents more moderate Palestinian advocates) that they are desperate for something substantive from the Democratic nominee. But they don't seem likely to get it.

A new poll, just released Wednesday by YouGov and the Institute for Mideast Understanding (IMEU) showed that in three key battleground states, "About a quarter of those surveyed across these states say the violence in Gaza will sway how they vote," and that "60% or more disapprove of more weapons to Israel." Even more stunning, the number of Democratic and Independent voters who would be less likely to vote for Harris if she vowed to stop arming Israel is minuscule. In Pennsylvania, only 7% said they would be less likely to vote for Harris if she pledged to stop sending weapons to Israel; in both Arizona and Georgia, that figure was just 5%.

The gaps are huge. In those same states, the numbers saying they would be more likely to vote for Harris if she pledged to stop arming Israel were 34% in Pennsylvania, 39% in Georgia, and 35% in Arizona. The rest said it wouldn't affect their vote.

These are unprecedented numbers when it comes to sending weapons to "our closest ally," Israel. It is clear that the idea that forcing Israel into a cease-fire by withholding weapons would be beneficial to Harris, and all the more so if Israel then stops its genocide, and Iran and the rest of the Axis of Resistance stand down, as has been promised, and is the overwhelmingly likely result.

2024 Democratic platform

Despite this clear political incentive, it seems unlikely that such a massive break with Israel would be possible, es-

pecially while Joe Biden remains in office. Even if Harris wants to pursue such a course — and there is absolutely no evidence that she does — it is doubtful that she would break with Biden publicly on such a high-profile issue.

But, if she wanted to do that, there are ways she could indicate it without actually throwing the gauntlet down in front of Biden. The Democratic platform for 2024 offers such an opportunity.

The technical reasons for holding a National Convention are to officially nominate the party's choice for president and to formally adopt the party platform. Democrats have already nominated Harris, via delegate count. So, her nomination at the Convention is simply going to be an acceptance speech. That leaves the platform.

A party platform is a non-binding statement of positions. No elected official — whether the president or members of Congress — is bound by the platform. But it's still an important political document. It gives voters a sense of where the party claims to stand on the issues and, ostensibly, should give party activists, delegates, and voters a way to gauge how well their elected officials are keeping to their campaign promises.

But the 2024 Democratic platform, drafted for a Joe Biden campaign, needs revision in many ways, and the Middle East/North Africa section is the most obvious place for it as it is a massive step backward from 2020.

In 2020, the Democratic platform promised to elevate diplomacy over warfare in its Middle East approach. It promised to de-escalate tension with Iran and reinstate the JCPOA. It vowed not to indulge "authoritarian impulses, internal rivalries, catastrophic proxy wars, or efforts to roll back political openings across the region." And it pledged to find a way to end the civil war in Syria and stand for the civil and human rights of all Syrians.

On Israel-Palestine, the 2020 platform promised to work for a Palestinian state, restore diplomatic ties with the Palestinians, and restore aid to the Palestinian people. Less aspirational than much of the platform, it was mostly a bland statement of standard Democratic policy and was left intentionally vague.

But the 2024 platform is radically different. Since the platform was drafted before Biden stepped aside in favor of Harris, it is essentially an endorsement of Biden's disastrous policies in the region.



Pro-Palestinian protesters are barricaded in Harlem, New York, across the street from a fundraiser for Vice President Kamala Harris' presidential bid, on August 14, 2024, with some of their placards declaring "No Arms Embargo No Vote".
SAM COSTANZA/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

De-emphasizing diplomacy, the 2024 platform features Biden's efforts to build a Mideast NATO to "counter Iran," and the attempt to wipe out what little diplomatic leverage Palestinians had by brokering a normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel. On these bases, the platform is less a statement of positions than a defense of a Middle East policy that has been an utter disaster in every regard.

Here's how the draft platform describes the current situation in Gaza: "Many vulnerable civilians are suffering deadly consequences of the Israel-Hamas war. Residents of Gaza have been displaced, and food insecurity has been severe. The Administration has worked relentlessly to deliver food, medicine, and other aid to the people of Gaza and to set the conditions for the reconstruction of communities in Gaza that have been devastated by the war."

That hardly sounds any different than the conditions in Gaza for many years before October 7. It not only fails to describe the horrific conditions in Gaza, but it also completely avoids naming a responsible party, as if Gaza's condition was the result of a natural disaster. Without updates, this packaging of Biden policies stands as a statement that such policies are meant to continue under a potential President Harris.

It is for this reason that a coalition of DNC delegates is calling on the party to reject the platform when it comes up for a vote at the convention.

Still, because the platform is non-binding, and especially since it was written when Biden was still the presumptive nominee, it could, in theory, be changed, and even changed dramatically. That is, it could if Harris really wants to make changes to it.

Harris' options

It would be politically sensible and clearly in the best interests of the Palestinian people, the Middle East, the United States, and the Israeli people as well if Kamala Harris paid attention to the most recent polls and declared that, if she is elected, she will not continue to support Israel's operations in Gaza, and that she will not send them any more weapons until they agree to and implement the plan President Biden presented at the end of May.

This is, of course, the most basic demand of protesters, the Uncommitted movement, and supporters of Palestinians (as well as many whose primary concern is the well-being of Israelis). But it is impossible to imagine Harris doing something so explicitly at odds with current US policy.

So, what might she do instead?

Jim Zogby of the Arab American Institute, and a longtime leader in the Democratic party, published a list of recommendations for Harris. They include a demand for a cease-fire, with consequences for "either side" if the terms are violated; an end to settlement expansion; and mutual condemnation of "incitement and terror" aimed at Palestinians and Israelis, civilian and official. That's a pretty moderate list and one that really shouldn't present issues for Harris, though it certainly would. But we could go further, even without bringing in more radical suggestions that might be more divisive.

Democrats could state:

- That the Democratic Party does not recognize the acquisition of land by force, nor the annexation of land taken in war by any state;
- That Israel's settlements are illegal, or at the very least, inconsistent with international law (consistent with the language the State Department used for decades);
- That the Democratic Party calls for a full review of all arms sales, grants, and other forms of support to all foreign nations to ensure compliance with the Arms Export Control Act, the Foreign Assistance Act, and the Leahy Law;
- That the Democratic Party holds all parties with governing authority over

the Palestinian people responsible for protecting the human and civil rights of those under its jurisdiction.

None of these are radical suggestions. Indeed, they are all applications of US law, which includes adherence to international law. These positions would provide a basis for a different direction in US policy toward Israel and Palestine, something that most Americans demonstrably want.

This would not bind the Harris administration, but it would certainly bring a loud response from the pro-Israel world as it would send a message to the nominee of what the rank and file will expect on this issue. What would be important to Harris for her campaign, which is certainly what she cares most about, is that it would send a signal to Palestine advocates that she would be different from Biden and that change is possible, even if there would still be plenty left for them to fight for.

It would surely push the pro-Israel zealots even further toward the Republican party. But the more liberal pro-Israel groups, such as J Street or Americans for Peace Now should be fine with these positions, as they largely codify things they have been saying themselves, at least during the 10 months of the Gaza genocide.

These suggestions reflect the will of most Democratic voters, and many others as well. Those voters see an Israel they don't like, doing things with their tax dollars they find objectionable or even reprehensible.

This is an opportunity for Kamala Harris to not only lay the foundation for a US policy in the Middle East that is sensible and in the interests of all concerned, but also for her to show the kind of leadership we haven't seen in the United States in my lifetime. It's the right call, and it will help her win. And it will give advocates for Palestinian rights — and, yes, also those who want a better future for Israeli citizens as well — something concrete to work with for the first time. The struggle for Palestinian rights would have made not just a gain but would open up possibilities for real justice, which these suggestions certainly do not bring.

It's the very definition of a win-win, except for Benjamin Netanyahu, his band of right-wing zealots, and their servants in AIPAC and related organizations.

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Protesters rally against President Biden's support of Israel, in Chicago in March 2024.
JAMIE KELTER DAVIS/THE NEW YORK TIMES