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The US Democratic Candidates on Racial Justice and Palestine: Divergence or Convergence?

By: Halah Ahmad · March, 2020

Overview

Leading US Democratic presidential candidates have chosen to address, among other progressive platforms, the rising demand for racial justice reforms, from prison reform to school funding and reparations. In particular, candidates have embraced reforms that respond to grassroots movements against police brutality and a host of criminal justice issues, and have sought to counter racism directed at refugees and immigrants.

Yet the moral and visionary high ground presumed by these domestic positions does not translate into parallel positions on inequality beyond US borders. Indeed, Democratic candidates' views on Palestine and human rights often reflect an inconsistency in their commitment to tackling inequality and racism. While foreign policy issues have rarely differentiated presidential candidates in the past, in this election they are a key litmus test for candidates' sincerity vis-à-vis their commitment to justice and civil and human rights.

As many vocal civil rights activists and scholars have argued, the struggle for equality for Black communities in the US has significant parallels with the Palestinian struggle for basic rights and dignity. In Palestine/Israel, Palestinians

face brutality at the hands of Israeli soldiers who are rarely, if ever, held accountable; Palestinian children are arbitrarily detained and arrested in the West Bank; and unequal sentencing practices in Israeli courts ensure mass imprisonment and detention of Palestinians without charge or trial. Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as those living under Israeli occupation, similar to Black Americans in the US, face severe and systemic discrimination, oppression, and institutionalized economic disadvantage.

Trump's recent executive order on the definition of anti-Semitism, effectively labeling critique of Israel as anti-Semitic, constrains those advocating for Palestinian rights. As activists for racial justice in the US know well, government stances on legality and licit or illicit speech have often historically silenced critics of systemic inequality. Meanwhile, as Israel continues to receive an annual $3 billion in unconditional aid from US taxpayers, Palestinians experience apartheid and face further annexation of their land. As Israel enjoys impunity, the issue of Palestinian oppression, as an extension of the same principles underlying racial justice in the US, is crucial for US presidential candidates to address.

This commentary traces the three top Democratic candidates' rhetoric and policy positions on Palestine and assesses those positions relative to candidates' stances on racial justice in the US.[1] The piece then discusses ways Palestinian civil society and its allies have been successful in creating a context for candidates to oppose racism and inequality across borders. It ultimately proposes strategies through which the public can demand that candidates place Palestinian rights alongside the other progressive causes they champion, including racial justice and criminal justice reform.

Tracking Candidates' Positions on Palestine

The 2020 race features perhaps the most progressive candidates the US has seen in decades, particularly in the figures of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Yet

even an establishment candidate such as Joe Biden has shifted his rhetoric leftward when it comes to issues of racial justice. Every major Democratic candidate has called attention to the historic disadvantage faced by Black Americans, with varied plans to counter it through such proposals as prison reform, bail reform, debt relief, and equitable access to healthcare.

The common thread across all of the candidates' racial justice agendas is an acknowledgement that US policies have been harmful and have not followed standards of racial equity, and that this is fundamentally at odds with the values of freedom, equal opportunity, and fairness. When compared to their positions on the rights of Palestinians, such progressive values generally come up short, with the candidates repeating one-sided rhetoric on Israel's right to exist in security and nominally supporting a defunct two-state solution and "peace process" that allows Israel to continue its colonization of Palestinian land and displacement of Palestinians. However, this election has also seen the development of further accountability for Israel and support for Palestinian self-determination – language that departs from the status quo and mirrors the shift in opinions among the Democratic Party's electorate.

Elizabeth Warren

Warren decried historic discrimination against Black Americans in her opening speech to declare her candidacy. She aims to work toward ending mass incarceration and claims her housing plan will reverse decades of redlining that have segregated and disadvantaged Black communities in US cities.

Yet on *de jure* apartheid policies in Palestine/Israel, Warren has reiterated establishment politics. Alongside her fellow Democratic candidates, she has backed a two-state solution. She has also said that the "bearing down" of Israel's demographic realities require action. This reference to the faster growth rate of Palestinian families is a troubling suggestion that Palestinian birth is undesirable

or problematic. The comment also ignores the historic displacement of Palestinians and reaffirms a false idea that Jews came to an empty land, populated it, and are only now, by happenstance, being surpassed in population.

In November 2019 the Israeli Air Force carried out a strike near Gaza City that killed 34 Palestinians. Though Warren welcomed the subsequent ceasefire and decried both rocket attacks on Israel and the humanitarian plight in Gaza, she stopped short of implicating Israel in the deaths. As Israel faces charges in the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Gaza in 2014 (an offensive that killed over 2,000 Palestinians, a third of them women and children) as well as ongoing war crimes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Warren's language grants Israel continuing impunity.

Moreover, Warren refers to Israel as a "liberal democracy," a misnomer now more than ever. In 2018, the Israeli Knesset passed the nation-state law proclaiming Israel as a state for Jews, affirming the legality of preferential policies toward its Jewish population. As Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, reports, this is one of over 50 laws that discriminate against Palestinian citizens of Israel, from Jewish-only neighborhood laws (much like historically racist redlining in the US) to restrictions on marriage. In 2017, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia released a report confirming an apartheid system in the West Bank. In addition, Netanyahu has been charged with corruption and incitement against members of the Palestinian Joint List, the Israeli party representing Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Warren's critique of Netanyahu as a corrupt leader aligned with Trump does not mean that she stands against decades of race-based and systemic discrimination and violence experienced by Palestinians. Rather, Warren shies of criticizing Israel's abuse of Palestinian human rights. Coupled, then, with her legislative record, such as supporting a bill that gave Israel emergency aid in 2014 during its onslaught on Gaza, Warren's calls for justice reflect inconsistency on justice for

Palestinians.

However, Warren has increased her rhetoric in favor of Palestinian self-determination and against the occupation, and was the first candidate to say she would skip the annual American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference this year, something that has been a tradition for all major candidates. Warren has also said that "everything is on the table" when it comes to halting Israel's expansion of settlements, including US aid. This stance is an unprecedented push for accountability, and was first raised by Sanders.

Bernie Sanders

Sanders has built his campaign around a critique of dramatic wealth inequality and healthcare for all. Within that platform are several positions he has explicitly called out as a response to racial inequality, mass incarceration, and criminal justice reform.

On Palestinian rights, Sanders has expressly mentioned tangible ways to hold Israel accountable for human rights violations. He was the first to say he would use aid to Israel as leverage in facilitating peace in the region. Sanders has openly criticized Netanyahu, as well as other heads of state and dictators complicit in human rights abuses globally. His lens on inequality lends to some consistency in foreign policy, as he has criticized Saudi Arabia and others for brutality, corruption, and dictatorship.

Moreover, Sanders was the only candidate in 2016 to miss the AIPAC annual conference, and is missing it again this year, tweeting that the decision stems from his concern "about the platform AIPAC provides for leaders who express bigotry and oppose basic Palestinian rights." Sanders is also the only candidate to repeatedly invoke Palestinian rights, dignity, and justice as a logical extension of critiques of human rights abuses by other countries, stating, "It is no longer good enough for us simply to be pro-Israel. I am pro-Israel. But we must treat the

Palestinian people as well with the respect and dignity that they deserve."

As he still glosses over the history of the Israeli state, focusing on the far-right Israel of Netanyahu, he misses the broader issue – and broader inequality – within the Zionist vision of a Jewish state that Israel represents and for which it advocates. Yet his invocation of Palestinian rights has pushed Democratic candidates to discuss the issue of Palestinian equality in a way it rarely has before.

Joe Biden

On criminal justice reform, Biden has endorsed a host of baseline policies common to all the Democratic candidates, such as ending mandatory minimums in sentencing, closing private prisons, discontinuing juveniles in adult prisons, reforming the bail system, and decriminalizing marijuana. Notably, however, Biden has been unable to account for his historic involvement in "the war on crime" and its policies that resulted in mass incarceration and criminalization of Black Americans. Thus, while one can critique his lack of cohesive principles on racial justice outside the US, it is necessary to note that his changes of position are strictly rhetorical at this stage, with his record much less progressive than his current campaign language implies.

On Palestine/Israel, Biden is a self-described Zionist who has long touted the need to preserve and protect "a Jewish Democratic state." He has repeatedly affirmed his support for a two-state solution as the "only solution" that can work given "demographic realities," repeating some of the same pitfalls as Warren in affirming this without corollary promises to hold Israel accountable for undermining such a solution repeatedly.[2] Moreover, while Warren and Sanders have referenced the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and opposed bans on boycotts of Israel, Biden makes no mention of abuse of Palestinian rights. Instead, he consistently commits to upholding a blanket notion of Israel's right to defend itself against those it

oppresses that gives no regard to the necessity of accountability.

Even as former US President Barack Obama's relationship with Netanyahu soured toward the end of his presidency, Biden remained on good terms with him. He has called Netanyahu a friend despite other Democrats, such as Warren and Sanders, decrying his extreme politics, aggressive settlement expansion, and corruption scandals. Biden represents establishment Democrats' longstanding complicity with Israel's oppression of Palestinians, never holding it to account for its violations of human rights and international law and sanctifying Israeli "security" over any concerns about Palestinians' systematic subjugation.

As chair and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for 12 years, Biden maintained a steadfastly pro-Israel position. However, as vice president, he condemned Israel's announcement of 1,600 new settlements in East Jerusalem in 2010. Biden appears to understand that Israel has consistently undermined the preconditions to good-faith negotiations with Palestinians. However, he never doubts the undergirding racism of a "Jewish state" that undermines the rights of non-Jews not as an aberration, but as its very manifestation.

De-Exceptionalizing Palestine and Empowering Platforms that Respect Palestinian Rights

As Biden and even Warren continue to repeat the tired discourse of blind support for Israel, and even Sanders appeals to views of Israel's Zionist colonial project as a valid expression of Jewish self-determination despite it being at Palestinians' expense, their platforms for justice prove weaker and more limited than their rhetoric may imply. A racial justice and equality-oriented agenda that excludes Palestinians only reinforces the decline of accountability to human rights around the world.

If the International Criminal Court found enough evidence, as it has, to raise a case against Israel for war crimes against Palestinians in not only Gaza but East Jerusalem and the West Bank, US presidential candidates can no longer make Palestine the exception to their progressive stances on equality, justice, and dignity. Voters find in this election a more real choice in foreign policy than they have seen in a long time: establishment policies from Biden and even Warren (although less so in her more recent rhetoric), or a more consistent doctrine of human rights from Sanders.

The election also provides notable lessons for Palestinian rights activists and their allies. Sanders' position on Israel and Palestine would not have been possible for a leading presidential candidate without the work of grassroots, academic, and cross-movement solidarity activists. Palestine activists, including members of National Students for Justice in Palestine, set out to make Palestine a priority among progressives, and particularly for Sanders, in his first presidential campaign. In 2015, a group of activists at a campaign rally raised a large banner stating, "Will Ya Feel the Bern for Palestine?," using the popular slogan of his supporters. After a staffer forced them to leave, the campaign apologized, causing a national media storm about allowing pro-Palestinian discourse a place in a progressive Democratic campaign.

While this event was just one of many initiatives of pro-Palestinian rights activists to push the establishment to include Palestine in the question of a progressive agenda, it modeled effective direct action that can raise mainstream media attention, much like the more recent direct action of groups like IfNotNow, who have forced candidates to respond on issues of Israeli military aid, the occupation, and illegal settlements.

Meanwhile, while the work of such activists certainly played a role in bolstering a national conversation about Palestine, the shift in discourse among Jewish Americans is crucial given the number of influential groups that claim to represent

their views, such as AIPAC. The shift of Jewish Americans, especially youth, to be critical of Israel has relied on, among other things, post-Zionist scholarship increasingly available to English readers since the 1990s.

Moreover, intersectional, anti-racism solidarity has advanced the cause of Palestinian human rights. In 2015, protests against police brutality in Ferguson found natural solidarity among Palestinian protestors in Palestine, who advised on methods of dealing with tear gas from the police – police who are often trained by Israeli occupation forces. With the founding of Black Lives Matter, solidarity with Palestinians was re-inscribed in a national progressive agenda on justice, as the published stances of the Movement for Black Lives in 2016 called out Israeli apartheid policies, a move that drew criticism but forced progressives-except-for-Palestine ("PEPs") to grapple with the inconsistency of their stances on Israel. Black-Palestine solidarity is in no way new, however. Figures in the black civil rights movement such as Angela Davis, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Cornel West, and Michelle Alexander have all decried the circumstances of Palestinians and the systematic racism of the Israeli state.

A growing discourse that criticizes Israeli policies and advocates for Palestinian rights, built on student activist and academic work on campuses across the country and the world, has likewise raised awareness of Israeli rights violations, despite campaigns to repress that work. Israeli Apartheid Week, for example, has become an annual event at many universities that aims to deepen the analysis of Israel as committing the crime of apartheid. In 2017, Professors Virginia Tilley and Richard Falk produced their report on Israeli apartheid, using international law and human rights conventions to assess, and ultimately affirm, the existence of an apartheid system in the West Bank. The popularization of this discourse for the better half of a decade has helped push a candidate like Sanders, critical of Israeli policy, to receive the support he has. No candidate can profess as much consistency across progressive policies as Sanders.

A number of lessons and actions inform this history and the growing demand for racial justice and Palestinian rights across any legitimate progressive platform:

- Supporters of any of the Democratic presidential candidates should demand more than establishment stances on Israel. Just as direct action can hold institutions and individuals accountable to their expressed principles and values, civil society advocates should push progressive campaigns and their champions, such as those of Sanders and Warren, to support Palestinian human rights and self-determination not only in rhetoric but also in policies that hold Israel accountable for its violations of Palestinian rights.
- Activists who seek to push candidates to de-exceptionalize Palestine in their progressive agendas must continue to connect the struggles of Black Americans and Palestinians, as well as other groups struggling against systematic oppression. Such solidarity comes from deepening learning on issues of oppression beyond Palestine and taking action as allies in advocating for justice, equality, and dignity; the past decade has seen effective examples in direct action, joint demonstrations and statements, and even collective, mass petitions led by major figures from allied movements.
- As campus activism and academia has proven influential in creating an increasingly informed electorate on Palestinians' historic and current oppression, it must continue to be a space for uplifting unbiased, inclusive studies and discourse on Israel and Palestine. As student activists and academics continue to highlight Palestinian indigenous history and ongoing injustice, supporters of racial justice and broader progressive values should demand greater protections for freedom of expression and the right to organize.

1. At the time of writing, Michael Bloomberg and Amy Klobuchar

have fewer delegates than the three candidates discussed in this piece. Furthermore, Bloomberg may be seen as a noncontender on the issue of racial justice and Palestine; on both issues, he strays from the rest of the candidates with a centrist and even right-wing stance that many have critiqued for complicity with racism in the criminal justice system and with oppression in Palestine/Israel.

2. Biden's speeches to J Street and AIPAC in 2019 reiterate this stance.

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

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