PODCAST | POLITICS

The US Democratic Party's Moment of Reckoning with Tariq Kenney-Shawa

By: Tariq Kenney-Shawa · April, 2026

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 0:00

I think when we're looking at candidates running for office in the midterms, when we're looking at the eventual presidential candidates running for office in 2028, I think we need to pay attention to whether they're actually supporting initiatives that will rein Israel in, whether they're actually supporting initiatives that will cut Israel off from US weapons permanently, or whether they're just figuring out ways to reshape the US-Israel relationship in a way that will be more codependent and more mutually beneficial instead of just the endless flow of US tax dollars that have been going to Israel for free for so long.

Yara Hawari 0:37

From Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari, and this is Rethinking Palestine.

The Democratic Party is in crisis, and depending on who you ask, it's a crisis of identity, strategy, or moral collapse. While mainstream political commentary has focused on the fractures inside MAGA, there's a quieter but no less significant reckoning happening on the other side of the aisle — one being driven not by

party leadership or even politicians, but by grassroots organizers, independent media voices, and communities that have watched their government co-perpetrate a genocide in Gaza.

In this episode, we're getting into all of it. What is actually happening inside the Democratic Party right now? Is there a reckoning for its role in the genocide? Who is Hasan Piker? Why is the establishment so rattled by him? And will the 2026 midterms bring some form of accountability at the ballot box?

Joining me to discuss all of this is Tariq Kenney-Shawa, Al-Shabaka's US Policy Fellow. Tariq, thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 1:53

Thanks for having me on, Yara.

Yara Hawari 1:58

So Tariq, there is a lot that is being discussed about the schisms in MAGA on Zionism and support for the Israeli regime. But what is happening on the Democrat side?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 2:10

Yeah, well, I think there's a massive divide on the Democratic side between the Democratic establishment and the Democratic voters themselves — the Democratic constituency. So just to look at the numbers, for example: back in 2022, when Pew did a poll of Democratic voters, it found that 53% viewed Israel unfavorably. Now, a whopping 80% of Democrats or adults who lean towards the left view Israel unfavorably, per Pew's most recent polling on the subject. So that's just one example of how indicative it is of how much the Democratic voting base has actually moved on this subject.

More importantly, I've always kind of been very skeptical of polls that just discuss

favorability or sympathy, because what does that really mean when it comes down to it — whether from the standpoint of what people actually do with their votes or what people say about actual policy? But now we're also seeing that consistently between 60 to 70% and rising of American voters across the political spectrum — not just on the left, not just Democrats — are actually calling for conditioning or cutting outright US military aid to Israel. So why that is important is that that's tying their sympathies, tying these favorability numbers, to actual policy demands. And that's why that's more important, in my opinion, than the actual sympathy numbers.

But if you look at the Democratic voting base, they have substantially shifted to a position where the vast majority of Democrats are not only critical of Israel, don't only view Israel in an unfavorable light, but are actually starting to tie their voting decisions to candidates' positions on Israel.

And so now that runs up against this long-running establishment inertia in the Democratic Party that we saw in 2016, we saw in 2020, in terms of how the Democratic establishment itself actually positions itself vis-à-vis both where their base is at — which has always been a lot more left and a lot more progressive than they'd like to admit. And they're kind of stuck in this paradigm of reaching back towards the middle ground, trying to reach out to what they would call a centrist voter, an independent voter. And that is very much at odds — and the numbers obviously play out and support this — that is very much at odds with where the actual Democratic Party base is at.

So you have establishment Democrats like the Schumers, like the Pelosis, the Gillibrands, who are pretty much diehard Zionists on an ideological level. But they also can't wrap their minds around the fact that being pro-Israel is actually no longer good politics in this country. And they have no real answer to this newer generation that is demanding actual, tangible policy change on Israel-Palestine.

So I think there is a newer generation — and I guess we'll get into that further in this discussion — there's a newer and younger generation of Democratic candidates that are running for office across the country, at varying levels ranging from running for seats in Congress to eventually potentially running for the presidency, that recognize the sea change in public opinion on Israel-Palestine. And they also recognize that it's not just a passing phase. They recognize that people are actually demanding concrete policy demands. And they're coming up against the Democratic establishment — again, the Schumers, the Pelosis — who are kind of stuck in that institutional inertia in which they are unwilling and unable to budge on the issue.

So I think what we're going to be seeing in November is kind of a real crisis of identity for the Democratic Party. And I think we're absolutely seeing this on both sides of the aisle. On the right, obviously, there's been a lot of conversation around the shifting opinion when it comes to the American right, the fractures among and between different camps in the MAGA, America First cohort. But I think on the left too, it's really a moment of reckoning for the Democratic Party.

And who comes out on top and who wins their elections in both November and in 2028, in my opinion, are going to be the people who listen to the outspoken demands of the Democratic voting base and who take note from the polling. But to be honest with you, I wouldn't put too much faith in the Democratic Party for learning those lessons, because they didn't learn those lessons back in 2016. They didn't learn the lessons, or they refused to learn the lessons, in 2020. And now they're faced with more glaring evidence that the middle-ground approach doesn't work, doesn't mobilize voters, and is now continuing to hurt their chances to regain both the House and the Senate and then eventually the executive office in 2028.

Yara Hawari 7:06

You've kind of answered this, but maybe we can unpack it a bit deeper. For the Democrats, the 2024 election saw significant defections from Arab American, Muslim American, and young progressive voter communities, because they felt completely disgusted by the party's unwavering support of the genocide in Gaza. Do you think the damage is done now, or do you think they'll be able to win those communities back?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 7:33

I don't think the damage is necessarily done in a permanent sense, right? I think that it's obviously very early to discuss the 2028 cycle because we don't know exactly who the candidates are going to be. However, if we listen to the rumor mill that's kind of going around, I mean, people are already discussing the potential for Kamala Harris to jump back into the race. So in short, it all depends on who's going to run and it all depends on what positions they take.

However, I think there's two ways to think about this. The first way is just to recognize that, no, I don't think these Arab American voting blocs, Palestinian American voting blocs, progressive voting blocs, who really drew the line at support for genocide when it came to their decision for who they voted for in 2024 — I don't think they're going to leave their morals behind at the voting booth this time. The same considerations are going to be in play. And I think even more so now, in light of the fact that the Trump administration launched its war of aggression on Iran, basically fighting Israel's war in Iran. I think that has only added to the suspicion and demands of these voters. And I don't think that will be leading them to lower their standards at all for who comes into this race opposing Trump.

In other words, what that is to say is that progressive voters, Arab American voters, and other disaffected voters who drew the line at Kamala's support for genocide in 2024 are going to now demand of the forthcoming Democratic candidate that

they not only make clear the steps they're going to take to rein in Israel and to oppose genocide, but they're also going to demand clear steps to avoid further US entanglement in additional wars like the current war in Iran.

My read now is that the voting blocs are not actually reducing their demands and not watering down their standards — they're entrenching them. And we can see this at, for example, town halls, when they shout out to potential candidates and ask them where they stand on the genocide.

I think the other side of looking at this — and I'm not sure if there's actual polling out there yet, because again, it is early when it comes to the 2028 considerations for president — but I do think that by that time, there is going to be a significant amount of Trump fatigue. I think that is kind of inevitable. I think there will be more people who will simply look at the options given to them and say, "Listen, I'm at this point right now. The economy is faltering. Inflation is skyrocketing. We're getting entangled yet again in what we define as forever wars in the Middle East. Oil prices are skyrocketing." And their approach to this will be a lot more simple and a lot more crude, in the sense that "we just want to vote for anyone who isn't Trump."

So I think we're going to get a mix of both come 2028. I think a lot of people on the progressive side, a lot of marginalized communities — from Arab American communities to African American communities to, you name it — I think those communities are going to be sticking to their guns. I think they're going to be sticking to their demands. And I think they're going to want a Democratic candidate to come out forcefully against what the Trump administration is standing for. And not just that — come out forcefully against genocide, have a clear policy about what they'll do when it comes to Israeli aggression and the use of US weapons.

But then I think there will also be people who are going to feel that they have no

choice but to vote for a Democratic candidate. But then again, I think it's very early to discuss the 2028 presidential election because we don't know who's going to be running on the Republican side, we don't necessarily know who's going to be running on the Democratic side. But from what we're seeing right now, I think it's going to be a mix of those two camps: people who are sticking to their guns regarding standards and red lines when it comes to support for genocide and forever wars, and then people who are trying to balance that with the fact that Trump is causing severe harm to communities here in the United States and they're going to want him out at whatever cost.

I think those are the main considerations for the presidential election. But I think congressional elections upcoming between now and 2026 offer a fundamentally different calculus, because I think we're seeing a lot of action there in terms of people actually holding these candidates accountable and demanding actual concrete statements about where they stand — whether it's on the Iran war or on conditioning and cutting military aid to Israel.

Yara Hawari 12:10

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Tariq, maybe I'll just jump in here and ask: you mentioned about politicians being confronted at town halls over their support for the genocide and also around the war in Iran. And we've also seen them lose primaries. Has that pressure actually moved anyone in real time, or is that yet to be seen?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 12:43

I think a little bit of a mix of both. I think one example of where that pressure has actually moved candidates in real time — or sitting lawmakers in real time — is

Elissa Slotkin, right? Elissa Slotkin is a Democrat who sat out previous votes on conditioning or cutting US weapons shipments to Israel. And in this most previous round, Elissa Slotkin actually voted for blocking US bombs and bulldozers to Israel. And that came kind of on the heels of one of those infamous town halls in which she was confronted by a questioner who was pretty much asking her to take a firm, concrete stance on the issue. So I think we have already started seeing sitting lawmakers start to come to terms with the fact that this isn't just a passing phase.

But I think come 2028, I think we're going to start seeing more candidates feel the need to adopt slightly more concrete positions on the topic. However, I don't want to sound too starry-eyed on that, because establishment Democratic candidates are very much looking for ways to adopt rhetorical opposition to Israel while not actually adopting actual concrete opposition to Israel when it comes to policies. And this is something that we've kind of seen play out in some of the competing bills that are going through Congress right now, between the Block the Bombs Act and the Ceasefire Compliance Act, which I think we'll also get into in a later question.

But what we're seeing right now is that a lot of the establishment Democratic candidates either running for office or who are in office right now — some of them, for example, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, AOC, has shifted on the question, saying that now she will vote to block any and all weapons to Israel, whether they're "offensive" or "defensive." And this is a change from a previous position in which she was hesitant to block "defensive" missile defense systems to Israel because of her argument that they help protect civilian life. And she was kind of shot down on that, received a lot of criticism from the left and from her constituents, and she has since changed her position on that.

And then we are seeing also candidates who are running for office who are making it clear that they recognize the fundamental shift in the Democratic electorate, and they recognize that it's not just a passing phase and they need to

take actual stands that are going to satisfy these demands that aren't going away.

Yara Hawari 15:13

Tariq, you mentioned those two pieces of legislation, the Block the Bombs Act and the Ceasefire Compliance Act. Can you talk to us a little bit about those?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 15:24

So the Block the Bombs Act was introduced in June 2025 by Delia Ramirez, Sara Jacobs, Pramila Jayapal, and Mark Pocan. And basically, that legislation is designed to stop the transfer of a specific list of what they call offensive weapons — I'm talking about the 2,000-pound, 1,000-pound bombs that Israel has been known to drop on civilian areas. And that legislation is designed so that if passed, these bombs, these weapons systems, will no longer be provided to Israel, period. Obviously, it's imperfect because it's a limited list of specific weapons. It doesn't include ammunition for the Iron Dome. It doesn't include missile defense systems, which have been proven to just kind of continue to make it easier for Israel to engage in aggressive wars because they know that they have these defensive missile defense systems.

So that's kind of the main bill that's been floating around Congress for the past several months. And then Sean Casten, Democrat from Illinois, also recently introduced the Ceasefire Compliance Act, which was subsequently backed by J Street. And what that does is it calls for a complete block of the US provision of weapons to Israel if Israel is in violation of either the ceasefire that was agreed in October 2025, or found to be obstructing aid to Gaza, etc.

I think it gets kind of complicated to compare these two, both imperfect, bills. But basically, my concern — and a lot of others' concern — with the Ceasefire Compliance Act is that, first of all, it only limits Israeli use of US weapons in Gaza and the West Bank. So in other words, Israel is free to use US weapons elsewhere

— whether it's in Lebanon, Iran, Syria, wherever else they've been attacking, Yemen.

And then the other concern with the Ceasefire Compliance Act is that it all kind of falls on whether Israel is found to be in violation of the ceasefire in Gaza, whether Israel is found to be restricting humanitarian aid. And then we all know how these processes work, right? I mean, Israel can be — it could be very obvious that Israel is in violation of the ceasefire, it could be very obvious that Israel is continuing to restrict humanitarian aid. However, in these biased processes, a pro-Israel State Department can easily find Israel not in violation of these terms, which would allow the continuation of weapons provision.

So one of the main criticisms of the Ceasefire Compliance Act and of J Street's support for it is that it's essentially taking potential votes away from the Block the Bombs Act. And it's very unlikely that either of these pieces of legislation will pass Congress, but the supporters of the Block the Bombs Act were really trying to present the package as kind of a litmus test for people who are in Congress, right?

And I think one of the main criticisms of the Ceasefire Compliance Act is that it dilutes that process. It makes it more difficult to present the Block the Bombs Act and to present actual conditioning and aid-cutting initiatives as this litmus test moving into the midterm elections and then eventually the presidential election in 2028. So J Street has argued that both bills can be supported at the same time. But if we're talking about lawmakers who are hesitant to sign on to the Block the Bombs Act and they're presented with legislation that is potentially easier, less strict, then they're likely going to sign on to the Ceasefire Compliance Act. And that takes away support from the original litmus test, which was the Block the Bombs Act.

Yara Hawari 19:23

So I did mention this in the intro, so we're going to have to talk about it. Hasan

Piker has been one of the most consistent, high-profile voices in the US media calling out the genocide in Gaza in real time, and has been reaching millions of people, especially young people, in a way that legacy media has really failed to do.

For those who don't know who Hasan Piker is — he's a Twitch streamer, he's a left-wing commentator. And he's been exposing something quite interesting: that there's an enormous audience, particularly among the under-35s, that is deeply opposed to US complicity in the genocide and is hungry for media that reflects that. And he's making the Democratic establishment incredibly uncomfortable.

For those maybe less familiar with him, can you tell us why?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 20:17

Yeah, I think you laid it out pretty effectively. I mean, Hasan Piker has become a very well-known Twitch streamer. He's also kind of seen as what some would call the Joe Rogan of the left — Joe Rogan being this leaning-right figurehead who also had his own podcast that really blew up and has gained a lot of attention and has kind of become a political bellwether.

So I think Hasan has caused such consternation for two things, right? First, because of the fact that he speaks to young audiences in such an effective way. He speaks to them in their language. And that is something that fundamentally doesn't sit right with the older Democratic establishment, who are kind of stuck in this mindset of decorum and civility. And so when people like Hasan throw around curse words or describe things in an admittedly, sure, slightly crude manner — but it's a common way of talking about politics that doesn't really sit well with the Democratic establishment but reaches a lot of people, especially young people. I think that's the first issue that the Democratic establishment has with Hasan.

The second issue is that he is outspoken in his support of Palestine and

Palestinians and his support of Palestinian resistance. And I think this is the issue that a lot in the Democratic center and the Democratic establishment are really latching onto. And I think this is why they're making him such a martyr, to be honest. It's because Hasan speaks about Palestinians in an honest way and supports Palestinian resistance.

The relationship that Hasan has with the Democratic establishment is in many ways a microcosm of the wider Democratic voting base. And this isn't just anecdotal evidence. If you line up Hasan Piker's statements, even some of the most outrageous according to the Democratic Party establishment, they line up with the Democratic voter. Hasan calls the Gaza genocide a genocide. Most American Democrats now call Israel's conduct a genocide.

And I think that is what fundamentally frightens the Democratic Party the most, because they in many ways just don't know how to engage with someone like this. And in many ways, they also just don't want to admit that the Democratic Party base is far more progressive than they are, and far more progressive than they project or want to be, and supports Palestine in ways that is fundamentally unrecognizable to them.

So basically, I think the relationship that the Democratic Party establishment is having with Hasan is very representative of the relationship that it's going to be having with the party base going into the midterms, going into the presidential election. Because I think in many ways, Hasan represents a lot of at least the under-35, under-40 Democratic voter right now. And the longer the Democratic establishment fights back against that reality, I think the more it's going to hurt them, whether it's in the 2026 midterm elections or 2028.

I think the relationship right now that they have is very much a microcosm of the wider chasm that we're seeing between the establishment and the base itself in terms of what people are actually demanding — concrete steps to oppose

genocide, concrete steps to fundamentally change the "special" US-Israel relationship.

What the Democratic establishment is doing is they're trying to sacrifice Hasan as a scapegoat. And it's not working, unfortunately for them. It's kind of just giving him more attention, turning more people to his Twitch streams, his YouTube channel. And I think it's further entrenching this chasm between the party base and the establishment heads that continue to control it.

Yara Hawari 24:01

Tariq, just as a final question — ahead of the midterms in November, what or who should we be watching out for as this all plays out?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 24:09

Yeah, so I think there's two things I want to discuss. The first one I want to talk about are the actual candidates who are running that we should pay attention to. And then the second thing I want to talk about is how the Democratic Party establishment is co-opting the language of the progressive left — of people who want to hold them accountable for support for genocide — and trying to repackage their support for Israel in a way that will be palatable to the left, to the Democratic voting base, without actually fundamentally changing the situation on the ground.

So first, let's talk about the people who we should be keeping an eye on. For example, we have Abdul El-Sayed, who is running for the Michigan Democratic Senate primary. He, funnily enough, did some campaigning with Hasan Piker, which drew a lot of attention and only ended up pushing him up even higher in the polls. And he is obviously extremely pro-Palestine. He supports cutting all US military support for Israel, whether that's "offensive" or "defensive." He has been gaining a lot of popularity in Michigan — in part, but not solely, because of

Michigan's large Arab American population, but because of the fact that he's also just gaining a lot of attention from the progressive left because of his populist positions, his progressive positions that are actually extremely popular across the political spectrum.

Clara Valdez in New York 7 is someone we should also pay attention to. Chakrabarti is in the race for Nancy Pelosi's open seat in San Francisco. So these are kind of the three names that we should pay attention to on that first tier.

And then in tier two, we have Adam Hamawy in NJ-12. And Brad Lander is challenging Dan Goldman in lower Manhattan, Brooklyn. And so all of these candidates are also talking about their support for conditioning and cutting all forms of US military aid to Israel.

And I think these are the candidates, importantly, who are kind of recognizing that chasm between the Democratic establishment and where the rest of the party stands. And these, I think, are the people to look to to see whether they actually take substantive and concrete policy positions that would actually fundamentally change the status quo — not just performative rhetorical positions that are designed to just please the voting base in election season, after which they'll then turn around and change their position.

So those are some of the names I think we should keep an eye on. But then I think there's also a wider trend that we're seeing that we need to pay a lot of attention to.

So a couple months ago, Netanyahu, Lindsey Graham, various pro-Israel think tanks kind of came out and surprised a lot of people by saying that they support initiatives to essentially wean Israel off of US military support over the coming five to ten years. And each one of them has a different timetable on when they would like that done. But I think a lot of that is coming from the position of these figures recognizing the fact that support for Israel in the US is crumbling, and recognizing

the fact that Israel cannot forever count on the US to be footing the bill for its forever wars, footing the bill for its occupation, footing the bill for its genocide, and that there needs to be a new paradigm of this "special" US-Israel relationship.

And so since then, we've seen a lot of figures, lawmakers, think tanks, lobby organizations on the left or on the Democratic side that are kind of adopting this language. For example, Rahm Emanuel went on Bill Maher's show the other day and also started echoing this point about saying that Israel should be paying its fair share for US weapons, that Israel shouldn't be getting any of these weapons for free.

J Street recently came out saying that they also are now calling for cutting military aid to Israel. And a lot of people approach this kind of like, "Oh, this is what we've been wanting forever." But I think it really needs to be analyzed and seen against the backdrop of Israel's recognition that the current paradigm of US support for Israel isn't sustainable.

What that means is that a lot of people, a lot of candidates — for example, Rahm Emanuel, who is also considered to be a potential presidential candidate in 2028. Rahm Emanuel is a staunch Zionist. What he is trying to do is repackage US support for Israel in a way that will be palatable to the voting base, which is now extremely critical of Israel, but in a way that can continue giving Israel the impunity and the ability to wage endless wars of aggression, occupation, and genocide — yet in a way that is palatable to the US voting base.

And how they're doing this is they're calling for more cooperative co-development models of US-Israeli military development, right? So that we can eventually get to a point where the US isn't necessarily straight-up just gifting Israel US weapons through US tax dollars and is instead doing more to co-develop weapons in a more codependent relationship. And what this does is — obviously, this does nothing to actually stop Israeli genocide, this does nothing to deter the Israeli

occupation. But what it does is it chips away at that arguing point in which many across the political spectrum in the US are saying, "We shouldn't be using our tax dollars to fund Israeli war crimes."

So I think, moving into the midterms, moving into the 2028 presidential election, we need to be really cognizant of that as a strategy. We need to be very, very aware that they're using that not because they're sincere about reining Israel in, but because they want to find ways to support Israel that will be more sustainable in the long run.

I think when we're looking at candidates running for office in the midterms, when we're looking at the eventual presidential candidates running for office in 2028, I think we need to pay attention to whether they're actually supporting initiatives that will rein Israel in, whether they're actually supporting initiatives that will cut Israel off from US weapons permanently, or whether they're just figuring out ways to reshape the US-Israel relationship in a way that will be more codependent and more mutually beneficial instead of just the endless flow of US tax dollars that have been going to Israel for free for so long.

So I think those are the two angles we need to pay attention to in the lead-up to the coming midterm and the presidential elections.

Yara Hawari 30:47

Tariq, thank you so much for that comprehensive analysis. I think we'll leave it there. I'm looking forward to having you on a future episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 31:00

Thank you, Yara.

Yara Hawari 31:05

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