PODCAST | POLITICS

What Trump's Comeback Means for Palestine with Tariq Kenney-Shawa

By: Tariq Kenney-Shawa, Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · November, 2024

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

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 0:00

At the end of the day, both Biden and Trump essentially share the same vision for the region. The assumption that Biden represented a lesser evil when compared to Trump assumes that he was doing anything at all to constrain Israel. In fact, we see the opposite. He, at the end of the day, was giving Israel everything it needed to get away with genocide and regional escalation while also distracting everyone with empty human rights rhetoric.

Yara Hawari 0:26

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

On the 5th of November 2024, the US electorate voted in Donald J. Trump for a second term in the 60th presidential election. His victory and return to office after four years follows a turbulent Democratic presidential campaign, which saw President Biden abandon his re-election bid earlier this year, and his successor, Vice President Kamala Harris, double down on US support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Indeed, Gaza and Israel featured heavily in the coverage of this election cycle. While many aspects of the incoming Trump administration's foreign policy plans remain uncertain, they will undoubtedly continue to have devastating consequences for the Palestinian people.

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

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 1:36

Hi, Yara. Thanks for having me on today.

Yara Hawari 1:38

So Tariq, before we go into the results and what this will mean for Palestinians, can you talk to us a little bit about the campaigns of both Harris and Trump and how they positioned themselves around the genocide in Gaza?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 1:53

Yeah. So I think what we saw this time around is what we also see in every US election, which was a race to the bottom of sorts to see who could win the title of Israel's best friend. And then what that entailed in practice was a race to the bottom of, A. dehumanizing Palestinian Americans, seeing who can say the worst things about Palestinians, and B. more importantly, seeing who can promise the most unconditional support to Israel.

And so this process began before Biden dropped out of the election, before Harris took over as head of the Democratic ticket, when Biden was essentially claiming that his administration had given more support to Israel than any other in US history. And that was correct. The Biden administration up to this point has given more than any other previous administration.

So we went into the summer in a contest with who could rightfully claim the title of Israel's best friend between the Democrats and Republicans. This did not bode well for Palestinians and for people who were hoping that there would be a shift or something different when it came to Harris's campaign.

But she took it a step further, and Harris made it clear that nothing would fundamentally change between her and the Biden administration. And this is not just in relation to Palestine — her framing of her position vis-à-vis the Biden administration was that she would be a continuation of her predecessor.

I think that proved to be a big miscalculation on the wider Democratic part. But specifically in relation to the "Palestine question," I remember in an interview she had, I think it was with Stephen Colbert — Stephen Colbert asked her, in light of the fact that she hadn't provided very much in the way of policy specifics, he said, in practice, policy-wise, what will you do differently than Biden? And her response was inadequate. Her response was, well, I'm not Biden, but I'm not Trump. I think that really set the tone for the whole race essentially.

But more importantly, I think she, in addition to making it clear that nothing was going to fundamentally change between her approach and Biden's approach to Israel and Palestine, she actively scorned Arab American voters, Muslim American voters, Palestinian American voters, and we saw that with how her campaigning in Michigan, for example, kind of played out.

So, for example, she went on a campaign swing with Liz Cheney and kind of really embraced this moderate or rightward shift that the Democrats really leaned into in this election cycle. And for obvious reasons — it's not just Arab Americans and Muslim Americans who see people like the Cheneys as violent war criminals, it's a vast subsection of Americans who see that as well and who would agree with that framework.

So I think that really not only turned a lot of voters off from the Harris campaign

and supporting Harris, but it was really seen as rubbing salt in the wound or spitting in the face of these voters who are already hurting from losing family members to this genocide in Gaza or Lebanon or the wider region. That was seen as not only her not indicating any substantial policy changes between her and Biden, but she was actually taking a step further and saying, no, we will actually cast you to the side, and we are actually embracing the far-right neocons who started the forever wars that have really torn your families apart.

So in that sense, Harris dropped the ball, to say the least, in terms of taking the right steps to win this election. And Trump kind of saw that opportunity and he swung in and courted these disaffected Arab American voters, basically making empty promises, obviously, that he was going to somehow end the war, end the genocide.

The issue here is that a lot of the communities that ended up giving their support to Trump are inherently conservative, right? A lot of them are conservative Muslim communities who would have voted Republican anyways or would have potentially leaned towards voting Republican regardless of the situation in Gaza and Lebanon.

But Harris's interaction with them, her decision to scorn them, only served to push them further into Trump's arms. And there was this one example of a Muslim community in Michigan that ended up coming out in support of Donald Trump. What had happened was they had reached out to the Harris campaign to meet with them and have a conversation, open a dialogue with them, and they were rejected.

So this was kind of a clear distinction in priorities between the two. And it's clear that the Trump campaign was a lot smarter, more tactical in courting these voters, even if in fact they were making empty promises. At least they played this political game. That's something that Harris didn't play at all. And the question of whether

that actually lost her the election is a different question.

Yara Hawari 6:55

Tariq, you touched upon this a little bit, but what we saw throughout this election cycle was really a certain circle of progressives being divided on this issue of Gaza and whether or not to vote for the Democratic Party.

I think it revealed, at least for me, who considers genocide a red line. Now there was this argument among some so-called progressive circles that voting for Harris was a safer option because who knows what Trump would do, and the implication there was that Trump will be worse for Palestinians.

But as you said, Harris ran on this ticket of neither being Biden nor being Trump and yet at the same time was very, very pro-Israel and very pro-genocide. Can you talk to us a bit more about this liberal argument that was sort of engulfing certain spaces?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 7:53

I would say that the debate amongst Democrats about whether it was Biden or Harris versus Trump was that the Biden-Harris campaign at the very least represented a lesser evil between the two.

I think, on paper, that's something that's easy to say because of all the rhetorical differences between the two campaigns and between the two individuals. But I think in practice that debate is a lot deeper. And unfortunately, just the toxicity of this specific election and the amount that was at stake made it extremely difficult to have this conversation about actual policy nuances between the two administrations and between the two candidates and their strategies and tactics. It made it impossible to have that debate because so many Americans felt there was so much on the line for this election and there was actual, deep, justified tension and fear.

And so in that sense, if I could describe that discourse that kind of engulfed these liberal circles in the US — it was toxic. It was hopelessly toxic. And I think this is largely because of the unique dynamics of this particular election. The high stakes of it, with quote-unquote democracy on the line, the justified fear of Trump — all those factors came together to create a sense that Democrats and liberals needed to maintain a level of party loyalty, and then they were very hesitant to criticize Biden, to criticize Biden's handling of the genocide in Gaza, to call out his complicity.

And I think ultimately what that did was that caused people to then lash out at those who did criticize Biden and those who did call out his complicity, and even more against those who simply could not bring themselves to vote for Biden or Harris because of their complicity in this genocide — because people fundamentally found it extremely difficult to give their active support to any candidate who was facilitating the genocide of their family, their friends, their loved ones. And that applies to both Harris and Trump.

I think what's left out of a lot of the current discussion about the results of the election was that sure, some Arab Americans voted for Trump or voted for the Green Party. Sure, some did. But the bigger, bigger story here is the amount of people who were left out, who stayed home, who just couldn't bring themselves to vote at all.

So basically tying this back to your question, this toxicity made it impossible to have a debate about the policy nuances that distinguish Biden's administration or Harris's future administration from Trump's. And I think that now what we're seeing, unfortunately, is a lot of liberals who are lashing out and scapegoating and blaming the Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Palestinian Americans for Harris's loss, even though before the election going into it, they were saying that these communities don't have any sway in the actual voting results.

And again, going back to whether these voter decisions had an impact on the election results — that's a bigger question. But at the end of the day, the unfortunate thing is Harris and the wider Democratic Party lost this election for a range of reasons. And while their scorning of the Arab American vote definitely played a role, it was not the leading factor.

And now a lot of liberals are blaming us and blaming Arab Americans for this and refusing to learn about the wider, more systemic issues that contributed to the failure.

Yara Hawari 11:41

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It's just really astounding — the audacity of lashing out at those who couldn't in good conscience vote for a party that facilitated a genocide, rather than lashing out at the party itself. But this isn't surprising in the context of American politics. The Democratic Party has historically been more supportive of the Israeli regime throughout history than the Republican Party.

I think it was in 1986 that Biden gave that famous speech where he said that if there wasn't an Israel, they would have to invent an Israel, and that it was the best investment they had ever made. So really the question remains: is there any room for any kind of pro-Palestinian policies anyway within this kind of system?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 12:44

I think that's a hard question to answer. And I think it's a timely one because just yesterday, the US Senate voted down legislation introduced by Bernie Sanders that would block a portion of the $20 billion worth of arms and munitions sales to Israel. I think only 18 or 19 senators voted in support of the move.

And that is something like 18 to 19 percent of the Senate who would support this cutting of military aid to Israel or an arms embargo against Israel, even though it wasn't even a full arms embargo — when in fact over 61 percent of Americans across the political spectrum, so not just on the left, not just amongst Democrats, more than 61 percent of Americans do support an arms embargo on Israel.

So I think what that shows is just how out of touch the US ruling class is with the actual demands and interests of the voters they supposedly represent. But it also goes to show just how little hope there is in affecting policy change in the US within potentially the next few years or even our lifetime.

And I think that over recent months and years, we've seen a real shift in public opinion in the US. For the first time, a growing number of Americans sympathize with Palestinians more than they do Israelis. A growing number of Americans are beginning to see Israel as the violent apartheid entity that it is. And that is being translated into data like the fact that more than 60 percent of Americans are supportive of an arms embargo.

However, it's in many ways reaching the point where it's kind of analogous to the gun restrictions issue, and the vast majority of Americans want tighter restrictions around gun usage and gun ownership. However, due to the realities of partisan politics and the realities of the gun lobby, those voters aren't heard from. And a very similar dynamic is being applied when it comes to US-Israel policy.

And I don't think it's impossible to fundamentally change the "special US-Israel relationship." But I think it's going to take a lot more than shifting public opinion. And obviously we're not done shifting public opinion — this is a process that's going to take years, if not decades. But I think what's going to be needed to actually shift US policy towards Israel, to actually start chipping away at the unconditional support the US has given to Israel since essentially 1967, is to start building the lobbying infrastructure that can compete with the pro-Israel lobby.

And I think that's just the unfortunate reality of US politics in which democratic will is subordinated to the interests of lobby organizations and different interest groups.

So going to your question of whether there is space for fundamental policy change in the US — there is, if the pro-Palestine movement can build the lobbying infrastructure. But that is the bigger question: can the Palestine movement in the US build a lobbying infrastructure to compete with pro-Israel lobbies? I think there's potential for them in the long run, but this is something that will take years if not decades to actually start seeing shifts in policy.

And I think that vote today — the US Senate vote on whether to block a portion of military aid to Israel — is kind of very emblematic of this wider national dynamic. It's also important to note that it took more than a year of genocide. It took more than 43,000 dead Palestinians, plus potentially hundreds of thousands more when you count indirect deaths or those missing. It took all of this just for 19 US senators to vote in support of blocking a portion of US military aid to Israel.

So what happens if there's a ceasefire someday, right? What happens if the situation in Gaza returns to pre-October 7th norms, which was a suffocating blockade, which was apartheid, which was suffocating military occupation? That bare minimum support that this fraction of the US ruling class has given will also disappear.

I think what we need to shift in terms of how we look at this is that there's hope that the US will act as an honest peace broker here, right? But the truth is the US and Israel act in lockstep together. This is their genocide. This is their war. And their interests are essentially eye to eye.

I think this means that we need to continue our efforts to shift US public opinion. We need to continue our efforts to shift US policy through increased lobbying efforts. But I think we also need to just focus on increasing our support in the rest

of the world. As the international community shifts away from this unipolar order into more of a multipolar international system where someday the US won't hold all enforcement mechanisms when it comes to international law, I think we need to be focusing on alternative alliances and alternative relationships to build, that don't solely rely on trying to convince America — a settler colonial entity in itself — to essentially forget about its history and forget about its "special relationship with Israel." I think we need to diversify how we approach that fundamental relationship.

Yara Hawari 18:44

Just on that point, I think it's crucial to understand the Israeli regime as not only a product of Western imperialism but also as this quasi US outpost in the Middle East that continues to serve American interests in the region. And so it's a very codependent relationship and it's in many ways also an existential one. Without US material and diplomatic support, Israel would face serious challenges to its existence as a settler colonial and apartheid entity. And vice versa, the US would also face serious challenges to American unipolarity.

I want to switch gears a bit and ask you about this incoming Trump administration. Firstly, how do you think it's going to compare with the Biden administration vis-à-vis the genocide in Gaza and the broader US-Israel relationship?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 19:42

I think with this question, we're turning back to that eternal debate about which administration actually represented the lesser evil between Biden versus Trump.

I think, unfortunately, we fundamentally missed the fact that Biden and Trump fundamentally share very similar, if not the same, ultimate visions for the Middle East. And where they differ is in tactics. So the difference here is in style versus

substance.

I think we can start by just comparing the policy resumes prior to this genocide, right? Trump kind of made history by taking unprecedented moves, like moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He recognized Israeli sovereignty over occupied Syria's Golan Heights, and he cut funding to UNRWA. And these were all substantial steps that marked a huge deviation from the typical US position of trying to masquerade as an honest peace broker. He kind of shook the ground in that sense.

But when Biden came into office in 2021, he really did have an opportunity to make his support for the quote-unquote two-state solution clear, and basically all he would have had to do was the bare minimum of reversing these earth-shattering Trump administration moves that kind of upended decades of US diplomacy on Israel-Palestine. But he didn't. He kept basically all of the Trump administration's policy changes. He kept the US Embassy in Jerusalem. He continued to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan. And while he did resume funding to UNRWA temporarily, he was quick to remove it again when Israel launched its latest smear campaign against the organization.

So in many ways, Trump and Biden's actual policy resumes look almost identical. And this was before October 7th, before the genocide. Now, post-genocide, as I mentioned earlier, the Biden administration has given Israel more military and financial support than any other administration in US history to this day. In addition to the $3.8 billion that Israel already receives in military aid, the Biden administration has allocated over $22 billion to Israel for military assistance. So this kind of really bolsters Biden's claim to be Israel's best friend — his hopes of gaining that title of Israel's closest ally — because in the material sense, he has given Israel more support than any other administration in US history.

I think this underscores the fact that we need to remember that Trump and Biden

have essentially the same goals in the Middle East and where they differ is style and rhetoric. Perhaps the biggest difference between them is the rhetoric they use. Trump is known for not mincing words. For example, he said things like, if he had been president this whole time, he would have given Israel the tools it needed to quote-unquote finish the job. He's used the term Palestinian as an actual slur against his political opponents.

Then people say that, well, on the other hand, Biden has expressed concern for civilian casualties. He talks about international law and he uses lofty human rights rhetoric. But in many ways, I think that has actually done more damage than Trump's blunt honesty because it distracts both Americans and the international community from the fact that the Biden administration has given Israel all the tools it needed to get away with genocide for a year, to carry out this genocide and to escalate across the region. At the end of the day, Israel is finishing the job in Gaza, in Lebanon, and across the region, regardless of what words the Biden administration chooses to use. And I think that's something that's been fundamentally missed from this debate about which administration represents a lesser evil.

What we should expect is essentially just a closer relationship with Israel and one that's a lot more unapologetic. We also need to recognize that Trump is known to be unpredictable and he's known to be a lot more transactional and self-interested than Biden. So where Biden was kind of a self-avowed Zionist — he was a proud Zionist and he really made sacrifices, or what he saw as sacrifices, for what he believed to be Israel's self-interest and Israel's defense — I don't see Trump doing the same thing or taking the same approach.

So for example, where Biden was willing to deploy US troops and assets to come to Israel's defense, there's a question as to whether Trump would do the same, because he might see that as violating his America First principles, or making it more difficult for him to achieve his wider goals of, for example, expanding the

Abraham Accords, reaching an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. So where Biden was willing to sacrifice US and regional interests for the defense of Israel, Trump might not be as willing to do so.

That's where we might start to see some differences in how the two administrations interact with Israel directly. But then it's also extremely important to consider the fact that Trump is going to be surrounding himself with some of the most bloodthirsty neocon war hawks in US history. So these are people like Brian Hook, Marco Rubio, Mike Huckabee, and Jared Kushner, who all will attempt to drag Trump into more confrontational US foreign policy in the Middle East. They'll have no reservations about deploying US forces and assets. And I think this will come into conflict a lot with Trump's America First approach and Trump's reluctance to actually spend money and actually devote resources to these conflicts.

But in many ways, I think the more concerning fact are the people that Trump surrounds himself with. These are the people who will go to bat for any wider regional war and definitely try to drag the administration in with it.

But I think it's really important to remember that at the end of the day, going back to what I was saying earlier, both Biden and Trump essentially share the same vision for the region, and how they go about it is the question. And in many ways, a lot of these "worst case" scenarios have been underway this whole time. Israel has been carrying out a genocide in Gaza. Israel has killed more than 3,000 people in Lebanon.

The assumption that Biden represented a lesser evil when compared to Trump assumes that he was doing anything at all to constrain Israel. In fact, we see the opposite — he, at the end of the day, gave Israel everything it needed to get away with genocide and regional escalation, while also distracting everyone with empty human rights rhetoric.

Yara Hawari 27:00

I think it's fair to say US foreign policy will always have devastating consequences for Palestinians on the ground, but I wanted to ask you a bit about what this means closer to home. What does the incoming Trump administration mean for US-Palestine organizing moving forward?

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 27:19

I think it means we have our work cut out for us. We have a clearer enemy and a clearer message in that the struggle for Palestinian liberation is indelibly tied to a wider struggle for democracy, because we've seen how tactics that are currently being used to suppress Palestinians can be turned around and used against Americans at large.

We see this, for example, in efforts to silence Palestinian advocacy and activism by constricting our constitutional rights like freedom of speech and expression. That's something that's going to affect not just us, not just Palestinians and Palestinian Americans, but any American who opposes the incoming Trump administration's far-right agenda. So that's a concern to everyone, not just us.

But I think it's also really important to recognize that this crackdown on Palestinian solidarity and this crackdown on the wider movement has been ongoing for years, if not decades now, and is very much bipartisan. The US House is going to be voting on H.R. 9495, which is a resolution that will give the incoming Trump administration — any official within the Trump administration — the ability to remove the nonprofit status of any organization that they deem to be a terrorist organization or supporting terrorists. And they don't need to provide evidence for that, they just need the accusation.

This is a bill that will be passed with bipartisan support. It was actually voted down a week ago, but it's being reintroduced and will only need a simple majority to

pass it. But in the first iteration of the vote, over 50 Democrats actually supported the measure.

So it's really important to recognize that this crackdown on Palestinian solidarity has been a bipartisan process, and some of the most vocal opponents of Palestinian rights and some of the most vocal opponents of Palestinian solidarity organizing here in the US have been Democrats themselves.

So while we recognize that this process has been bipartisan, and while we recognize that both Democrats and Republicans have kind of led the charge in efforts to silence the movement, we also need to reckon with the fact that with Trump's trifecta control of US governance — with Trump in the White House, Republicans in control of the US Senate, and Republicans in control of the House as well — that's going to make it a lot easier for them to pass bills and get away with much more sweeping measures that target the Palestinian solidarity movement in the US.

We're already seeing this with initiatives like Project Esther, which was recently announced by the Heritage Foundation, which also published the infamous Project 2025, which aims to take advantage of Trump's second term in office and completely reshuffle US democracy. Project Esther recognizes that there has been this fundamental shift in US public opinion on Israel and Palestine, this growing support for Palestine amongst everyday Americans. And what they want to do is, essentially — since they've lost the argument, since they can't respond to the fact that more and more Americans are becoming critical of Israel — they aim to silence Palestinians and they aim to silence the Palestinian solidarity movement by targeting US-based pro-Palestine organizations with lawfare, and in that sense shutting them out of the conversation entirely.

So I think that, again, while this process is very much bipartisan, it's going to accelerate and it's going to intensify under the Trump administration. And that is

something that we need to brace for. But I think it also opens up new opportunities because in many ways, very much like the Trump administration itself in terms of its policy directly with Israel, it lays out the reality for what it is. And in this case, it exposes the crackdown on the Palestinian solidarity movement as a sweeping crackdown on all of our constitutional rights here in the US. I think that is going to be something that we as a movement need to leverage in order to mobilize opposition. The question of how liberals react to this assault on all of our constitutional rights is to be seen.

Yara Hawari 31:52

Tariq, thanks for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa 31:57

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Yara Hawari 32:07

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