



Progressive Democrats push for changes to US Israel policies

Ali Younes

June 24, 2020

Progressive supporters of Palestinian rights in the United States are urging both presidential candidates - and especially the presumptive Democratic nominee, Joe Biden - to rethink the country's policies toward Israel and the Palestinians in light of increasing evidence that political sands are shifting under one of the thorniest foreign policy issues of the day.

More than 100 US-based organisations this week signed letters to Biden and President Donald Trump urging them both to adopt a "just and principled" policy in the Middle East.

Organised and initiated by CODEPINK, a women-led grassroots organisation focused on human rights, the letter urged the candidates to adopt a policy that respects international law and explicitly opposes the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and its blockade of the Gaza strip.

Citing increased US support for Palestinians' rights - especially among young American Jews - the almost identical letters urged Trump and Biden to end what they called a one-sided American Middle East policy that enables Israel to violate Palestinians' human rights and allows for the continued occupation of their territories.

Progressive clout

The letter calls for the US to withdraw its recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocate the US embassy back to Tel Aviv, and supports conditioning US military funding to Israel on an end to its violations of Palestinian human rights.

"The United States should affirm the right of every human being to live with dignity, equality, freedom, and respect for human rights - and that should include Palestinians and Israelis," the letter said.

The letters were signed by a diverse group of religious, political and community organisations, including the Jewish Voice for Peace, Methodist Federation for Social Action, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Presbyterian Church, USA, Israel Palestine Mission Network (IPMN).

The groups are seeking to take advantage of the renewed clout of the Democratic Party's progressive wing following the strong showing of independent Bernie Sanders during the primaries. Sanders, whose campaign captivated many younger voters in the US, was and is an outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, told Al Jazeera that younger and more left-wing activists within the Democratic Party are more willing to challenge the establishment on the Palestinian issue.

"I do think we are seeing an important shift generationally and ideologically within the Democratic Party," he said.

An old guard

Former Democratic Congressman Jim Moran, from Virginia, told Al Jazeera that the party is indeed "slowly and gradually changing toward supporting Palestinian rights", but the struggle is still an uphill one.

"Part of the current problem within the Democratic Party as far as change toward more pro-Palestinian policy approach is that many of the senior leadership - especially chairpersons of committees - are the senior members and older and more dependent on groups like AIPAC for organisation and funding," Moran said.

AIPAC refers to the powerful pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Biden, Moran said, is one of those Democrats standing in the way.

Ariel Gold, the National co-director of CODEPINK, also told Al Jazeera that Biden is out of touch with public opinion among younger Democrats on the Palestinian issue.

"Biden does not know where the Democratic Party is now," she said. "He still thinks the Democratic Party is the party of AIPAC."

Joshua Cooper, a professor of mathematics at the University of South Carolina and a member of Jewish Voice for Peace, one of the letter's signatories, told Al Jazeera that, "It is particularly disturbing that Biden should claim his espoused agenda reflects the values of the Jewish Community."

New direction

Marie Newman, a Democrat who ran for Congress in Chicago's 3rd District - home of the largest Palestinian-American community in the US - represents the direction Gold and other signatories of the letter would like to steer the Democratic Party.

After losing to Democratic incumbent Dan Lipinsky in 2018, Newman defeated pro-Israel Lipinsky in the March primary and is expected to win the general election. During the campaign, she put Palestinian rights at the forefront of the debate in the district and called Trump's policies in the region "alarming".

Newman told Al Jazeera that violations of the human rights of the Palestinian people during the Trump administration and the president's support for Israel's annexation of land in the occupied West Bank and the water-rich Jordan Valley will hinder peace-building efforts in the region.

"It is critically important that our leaders work in a peace and justice seeking coalition to build a path forward for a viable two-state solution that gives self-determination and equality for the Palestinian and Israeli people side by side," Newman said.