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Progressive Democrats Changing the Politics of Israel in America

In defending the Palestinians, candidates like Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez are grabbing the third rail.

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The domestic third rail of U.S. politics is still Social Security. It doesn't matter that the program has become a Ponzi scheme, headed towards insolvency. Politicians who suggest trimming benefits risk cutting their careers short.

The foreign policy equivalent of Social Security is Israel. Both major parties have embraced many of its government's most extreme claims. Despite vigorous debate in Israel, in the United States even mild criticism of Israeli policies frequently leads to charges of weakness and even anti-Semitism.

However, rising progressive influence in the Democratic Party is changing the politics of Israel in America. During this last election campaign, the GOP continued to reflect the views of its large evangelical constituency, many of whose members hold to a so-called dispensationalist eschatology, in which Israel plays a major role in Jesus's return (ironically after most of its Jewish population is killed). In contrast, many Democrats view Palestinians as human beings too.

For instance, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who defeated a long-term incumbent in a heavily Democratic district, denounced Israel's "occupation of Palestine." Ilhan Omar, running for an open Minnesota seat, criticized Israel's "evil doings." She defended her stance: "Drawing attention to the Apartheid Israeli regime is far from hating Jews." Michigan's Rashida Tlaib criticized military aid for Israel: "I will be using my position in Congress so that no country, not one, should be able to get aid from the U.S. when they still promote that kind of injustice."

The GOP attacked all these candidates. California Congressman Duncan Hunter, indicted for using campaign funds for personal use, ran ads denouncing his opponent for being the grandson of one of the terrorists who murdered Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics.

At least U.S. congressmen actually have to deal with foreign policy. Florida Representative Ron DeSantis criticized Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum during their gubernatorial race for receiving support from a group favoring boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel, and giving a speech welcoming members of the Council on American-Islamic Relations to his city.

DeSantis charged that Gillum would not be a “friend” of Israel, however defined. He himself supported moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, as if that was Florida’s decision, and complained that Gillum backed the nuclear agreement with Iran, which, ironically, was supported by much of Israel’s national security establishment. DeSantis even promised to punish Israel’s critics: “If you boycott Israel, the state of Florida will boycott you.”

There is more. DeSantis pledged to visit ever-expanding Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, which act as colonial outposts promoting annexation of the West Bank. He called the settlements “Judea and Samaria,” names used by Israelis to claim Palestinian land as their own. “Florida is going to trade with all of them,” he proclaimed.

How is any of this the Florida government’s business? Was DeSantis running for Florida’s chief executive or Israel’s Florida ombudsman?

There are other strong ethnic lobbies, of course: for Turkey, Greece, and Armenia; for Eastern European nations; for South Korea. In all these cases, Americans often act as advocates of foreign states.

Unfortunately, much of this activism runs counter to the Founders’ vision of America. In his famous Farewell Address, George Washington pointed to the danger posed by foreign connections: “Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded, and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated.” America’s future was at stake: “The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.”

Permanent antipathy creates obvious problems. But so does “passionate attachment” to other nations. Warned Washington: “Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification.” For example, ties to Israel entangle America in the Middle East; the U.S. treats Iran, which doesn’t threaten America, as a permanent enemy, and coddles Saudi Arabia, which routinely undermines U.S. interests, as a permanent friend.

Foreign involvement also creates perverse incentives for American citizens. Cautioned Washington, passionate attachment “gives to ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favorite nation), facility to betray or sacrifice the interest of their own country, without odium, sometimes even with popularity; gilding, with the appearances of a virtuous sense of obligation, a commendable deference for public opinion, or a laudable zeal for public good, the base or foolish compliances of ambition, corruption, or infatuation.”

This obviously is bad for America. Against “the insidious wiles of foreign influence,” Washington expanded, “the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.” After all, said Washington, “Excessive partiality for one foreign nation and excessive dislike of another cause those whom they actuate to see danger only on one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other. Real patriots who may resist the

intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious, while its tools and dupes usurp the applause and confidence of the people, to surrender their interests.”

He was particularly concerned about European entanglements: “Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice.” But the underlying principle is broader: “It must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.”

Today, the city named after Washington has a long history of being used and abused by its supposed friends. Shortly after the colonies won their independence, Francophiles attempted to bring the U.S. into war with revolutionary France against the United Kingdom. A century ago, friends of the UK helped drag Washington into Europe’s imperial kill-fest, known as World War I, on London’s side.

More recently, the U.S. armed Turkey while Ankara assaulted Kurds and divided Cyprus. Americans hailing from Eastern Europe successfully pressed for their distant homelands to be added to NATO, planting the seeds of potential conflict with Russia. Ukrainian Americans still push for Kiev’s membership in the transatlantic alliance. Ethnic Albanians campaigned for Washington to forcibly dismember Serbia and make Kosovo independent. Korean Americans support essentially permanent U.S. defense guarantees for South Korea. Taiwan’s advocates, especially strong in Congress, want Washington to guarantee the island state’s security and more.

Americans should be involved in the world. That includes building relationships with foreign nations and peoples.

However, U.S. foreign policy should advance American interests. This isn’t a new idea. It is time to follow Washington’s advice and set aside “passionate attachments” to other governments and nations.

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