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The Arab/Muslim vote in the 2024 US elections

How does the Democratic Party's stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict influence the voting behavior of Arab/Muslim voters in swing states during the 2024 presidential elections and future conflict resolution initiatives towards de-escalating this conflict?

The Israel-Palestine conflict resurged in October 2023 after Hamas's attack on Israeli citizens and, as of October 2024, has now spread to Lebanon and parts of Yemen as well. The conflict has had world-wide ramifications, but this policy brief will only study its impact on the 2024 United States presidential elections. The issue is of great importance to Arab/Muslim voters, a constituency making up a large percentage of swing-states. In order to facilitate a de-escalation of the conflict, it is of utmost importance for American and European heads of state to work quickly towards conflict resolution initiatives. All state leaders should push for the delivery of humanitarian aid to those civilians in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, as well as civilians affected by Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Additionally, those European state leaders should pressure the US state leader to halt its support to Israel in the form of weapons deliveries to avoid escalation of violence and warfare in all concerned regions.

The Democratic Party's switch

Before he dropped out, President Biden was actively losing a part of his voter base, specifically Arab/Muslim voters. Voters were vowing to remain 'uncommitted' in unprecedented numbers as a public display of opposition to the US's support of Israel. These voters have three main demands: "achieving an enduring ceasefire, imposing an arms embargo on Israel, and lifting the siege on Gaza" (Harb, 2024). President Biden's strong stance in support of Israel has kept him alienated from these voters. Although Vice President and Democratic nominee Kamala Harris has been significantly involved in overseeing US policy on the war, her support of Israel and its war seems more tempered than Biden's (Harb, 2024). Harris becoming the new Democratic nominee has already attracted large swaths of voters. For example, the Black Muslim Leadership Council Fund who had previously declared itself uncommitted to Biden has now publicly endorsed Harris (Alcindor, 2024).

The Arab/Muslim vote in the US

Although Muslims only make up about 1% of the American population, they are concentrated in swing states. In 2020, about 65% of Muslim voters in swing states voted for President Biden – this support was essential to his electoral victory, because he won those states by small margins (Mogahed and Selod, 2024). He won in Georgia by only 12,000 votes, where 61,000 Muslims voted, and in Pennsylvania by 81,000 votes, where 125,000 Muslims voted. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that Muslim Americans are more inclined than other religious groups to be in support of Palestinian sovereignty (Alpher et al. 2024). Muslim Americans are

united in support of the Palestinian cause in a way that has not yet been seen in American political history, and this could be costly to the Democrats if policies important to key constituencies are not addressed before the elections.

Harris's approach towards this conflict

Though Harris has shown some vocal support for both Israel and Palestine, the Palestinian community and their allies feel an air of silencing in regard to support for Palestine. Leaders of the previously mentioned “Uncommitted” movement had long been negotiating for a Palestinian-American to speak at the Democratic National Convention held in August 2024. Their request was denied, and the Harris campaign entirely refused to comment on that decision. Despite that, the parents of a hostage taken by Hamas, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, were allowed to speak at the convention. This decision led to the belief by Arab/Muslim constituents that her administration is wanting to include one side of this issue more than the other, which led to a massive protest outside of the venue hosting the convention (Cappelletti, 2024).

Disclaimer

This policy brief focuses only on possible outcomes where the Democratic candidate is successful in order to explicitly detail those outcomes. The possibility of a Republican electoral victory lies beyond the scope of this brief.

Scenario 1: Harris wins and shifts policy

If Harris takes office in January 2025, she has the ability to shift the US's current policies and diplomatic relations with Israel. Though this brief touches upon both before and after election night, here the potential aftermath of the election will be detailed.

Firstly, in this scenario, Harris increases the amount of aid given to those communities devastated by the impact of Israel's strikes in Palestine and Lebanon. The military aid currently being given in the form of weapons to the Israeli military makes up over 300 billion US dollars. Here, a portion of the money being sent would be halted to give humanitarian assistance to civilians, in the form of food, clothes, shelter, and medical care. The US announced an amount of over 300 million US dollars will be given to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank (Psaedakis, 2024). In this scenario, Harris pledges more than 500 million US dollars, and this aid continues in increasing increments that match the needs of those communities.

Israel is already the largest cumulative recipient of US aid, both economic and military (Masters and Merrow, 2024). In a policy shift, Harris reconsiders the aid given to Israel in accordance with the Leahy Law, which prohibits US aid from going to foreign military units or individuals suspected of committing gross human rights violations (Lumpe, 2014). Even before October 7, the United States “found five units of the Israel's security forces responsible for gross violations of human rights”, and yet they did not bar any of those units from continuing to receive US military aid, four of which were able to “remediate” the cases in line with State Department policy (Lewis

and Zengerle, 2024). These violations reported by human rights groups included extrajudicial murders, torture, and physical abuse, mostly committed against Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank (US State Department, 2024).

Lastly, the Harris administration applies enhanced pressure to push the United Nations' Security Council Resolution 2735 (2024) into acceptance by both the Israeli government and Hamas. The resolution encompasses three phases, including the release of hostages by both sides, return of Palestinian civilians to their homes, safe distribution of humanitarian assistance, an end of hostilities, and a reconstruction plan. The resolution was announced by the US, who claim Israel has accepted it. However, no action has been taken since its proposal in June 2024. Netanyahu is skeptical of the deal, wanting to continue with "destroying Hamas"; while Hamas has said they are ready to negotiate the deal with Israel, but will still "continue its struggle against Israeli occupation" (Lederer, 2024). The Harris administration increases momentum in mediating negotiations between both the Israeli government and Hamas by sending diplomats to the region and facilitating outreach towards Iran, encouraging them to pressure Hezbollah, who have now become a major participant in this conflict, and Hamas.

Scenario 2: Harris wins and sticks with current policy

If Harris is elected and does not shift policy at all, the likelihood of the war continuing with even more devastating impact to more regions in the Middle East is probable. Here, Harris' actions before the elections will be discussed in order to attempt to understand what her cabinet is planning to do in regard to this issue.

In this scenario, once in office Harris continues a cautious and unclear approach towards the conflict in Gaza. So far, this strategy has allowed her to maintain the support of most of Biden's supporters as well as bring in some voters who would be considered more progressive or are a part of communities concerned about the conflict.

Vice President Harris hired Nasrina Bargzie as her liason to Arab and Muslims voters. Bargzie's role will be to lead the outreach initiative to these communities (Lucente, 2024). Harris also appointed Ilan Goldberg as the lead for outreach to the Jewish community. These appointments show that Harris is attempting to include all relevant parties to the conflict in Gaza in her campaign approach. In a muddled scenario, once elected the Harris administration loses focus on these outreach efforts, while divisions between the two groups grow.

In the scenario in which Harris follows in the footsteps of her predecessor, she will face a lot of opposition from his constituents and possibly also people working with her. For example, Tariq Habash quit his position within the US Department of Education in January 2024 since "he could no longer represent an administration that does not value all human life equally" (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Post-election policy

If the Democratic Party keeps the White House American and European state leaders must work to emphasize the importance of working towards conflict resolution initiatives in regard to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, the occupied West Bank, and Lebanon. Until after the election is complete, it will remain in the interest of Harris to please all constituents with varying views on the direction needed to be taken. After her inauguration, Harris will have room to amend policy decisions. This is where the proposed policy recommendations come into action.

Firstly, it is crucial for interest groups, US governors and congress members, and European leaders to apply diplomatic pressure towards Harris to reconsider US aid to the specific units of the Israeli military, in accordance with the Leahy Law. To uphold its own credibility, the US must stand in accordance with the Leahy Law in the context of this conflict. If the Israeli military is accused of gross violations of human rights, it is the responsibility of the Harris administration to halt military aid to them or their subsections.

Secondly, American and European state leaders must ensure humanitarian assistance is delivered to those communities devastated by conflict. This conflict has now spread to other regions of the Middle East, including Lebanon. It is pertinent to ensure an adequate humanitarian response goes to all affected communities. This should be done by working with NGOs in the communities themselves, ensuring them an adequate amount of financial assistance to carry out their work. The advice of international humanitarian organizations must be heeded when deciding how to deliver aid. The UN and other humanitarian organizations have advised that the aid given by the US is a small fraction of what is needed and that they must use land routes to get resources to Gaza. Additionally, the American government must ensure the financial aid they administer is received by its target, especially since the US-built pier proved ineffective (Gritten, 2024). It is pertinent for American and European policymakers to lobby with Israeli military officials to lift restrictions on delivering aid to civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law.

Lastly, American and European state leaders must push for negotiations between the Israeli government and Hamas in accordance with the UNSC's resolution 2735 (2024). This initiative should include frequent visits by key figures of the Harris administration, especially the Secretary of State, to Israel and Palestine in order to emphasise urgency of decision-making. As there is currently no political will from either side to end the conflict, it is pertinent for the US and its allies to create an urgency for them both. The European Council of the EU should also be involved in these negotiations to show transatlantic unity in regard to this conflict.

Note: The respective author is responsible for the content of the article. The contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung and the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg.

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