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Harris vs Trump: Who is worse for Gaza?

The US presidential election is a toss-up between a ‘soft-on-Palestine’ Democrat whose boss has armed Israel’s genocide and an unabashedly pro-Israel Republican who doesn’t like war or war budgets.

While foreign policy issues have rarely been a decisive factor in past US elections, the war in Gaza might shift the balance in favor of one candidate, especially in a tight race where every vote counts. [A self-proclaimed Zionist](#), President Joe Biden’s unwavering support for Israel has contributed to his declining popularity, widening the gap between the progressive and moderate wings of the Democratic Party.

This has led to the loss of crucial constituencies, including young voters, Arab and Muslim communities, and many progressives. Additionally, many younger and left-leaning [Jewish voters](#) “no longer see unequivocal support for Israel as a litmus test.”

While the Democratic party is well aware of this vulnerability, many wonder whether its candidate, Kamala Harris, can win back disappointed voters and bring a new approach to policy toward Gaza – at this late date.

What to expect from Harris?

Media outlets have noted Harris's recent comments as a potential shift away from Biden's staunch pro-Israel stance, portraying her as a more empathetic voice within the administration. She recently stated she will "[not be silent](#)" about Palestinian suffering, which contrasts with Biden's rhetoric.

However, many progressive and pro-Palestinian advocates demand more than just a change in tone – these constituents will require a substantive shift away from the US's unconditional military support for the occupation state. As a genocide unfolds in Gaza, symbolic gestures, such as Harris's recent decision [to skip](#) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's address to Congress, are simply no longer enough to secure these votes.

Dr Eman Abdelhadi, Assistant Professor of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago, points out to *The Cradle* that Harris, so far, has not made any policy commitments on Gaza.

She has verbally reiterated a commitment to Israel's security, and a campaign spokesman said she would not consider an arms embargo. Essentially, only the tone has shifted, not policy ... her empathy is not enough.

Many also recall how Harris [opposed](#) former president Barack Obama's abstention in a December 2016 UN resolution condemning Israel's illegal settlement and how she [opposed](#) the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement (although she did not formally support the anti-BDS legislation).

Despite these critiques, George Bisharat, law professor at San Francisco's Hastings College of Law, does not foresee Harris significantly diverging from Biden's policies on Gaza unless she wins the election.

He believes she is unlikely to undercut Biden's authority until the end of his mandate. Also, as the election seems sure to be decided by razor-thin margins, Bisharat thinks that Harris will avoid any actions that minimize her chances of victory. He tells *The Cradle*:

She probably fears pro-Israel support for [Donald] Trump, particularly in the form of huge donations to his campaign, more than she sees advantage in gaining votes in Michigan and other states through a significant reorientation of policy.

Accordingly, "the Harris-Walz campaign will spend extraordinary energy monitoring the salience of the issue amongst the various groups they need support from to win the election, and therefore, for most Democrats, Gaza will not be a deal breaker," says Dr Ranjit Singh, Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Affairs from the University of Mary Washington.

For those Americans who want Harris to take a tougher stance on Israeli policies, the challenge will be to make the issue as prominent as possible. Dr Singh anticipates that pro-Palestinian groups might disrupt campaign events and even the national convention, telling *The Cradle*:

At this time, they have little incentive *not* to do so, and therefore, there could be chaos ahead if the Harris campaign doesn't get ahead of this in coming days.

It's a prescient observation: thousands of anti-war protestors have amassed at the Chicago convention this week, [demanding](#) that Harris institutes a ban on US arms transfers to Israel – or risk losing their votes.

'I'm Speaking'

To date, Harris has argued that such disruption only helps elect Trump. It is a line of argumentation she delivered once again – albeit quite condescendingly – at last week's [rally in Detroit](#). Her logic, in Singh's view, is “unassailable, but it's a weak and uninspiring argument.” Harris, who is rapidly running out of time, needs to make a positive, not negative, argument to support her campaign.

Selecting Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as her running mate, rather than pro-Israel hardliner Pennsylvania Governor [Josh Shapiro](#), might be a strategic move to win back disillusioned voters. Walz contrasts sharply with Shapiro, who previously served in the Israeli army and holds strong anti-Palestinian views.

Additionally, as a woman of color who has experienced racism in the US, Harris's expressions of compassion for Palestinian civilians might reflect her personal understanding of injustice. Bisharat believes this personal connection, combined with her keen political instincts, indicates that she is attuned to the shifting sentiments in the US, particularly among younger voters.

Should Harris win, “she could not afford to ignore the new generation who are disgusted by the Democratic Party's support of the Gaza genocide,” Bisharat reminds *The Cradle*.

Although most Democrats are unlikely to base their voting behavior on the Gaza issue alone, Singh contends that Harris will also need to offer a plausible set of proposals for ending the war, and at least suggest what should come after the guns go silent - and even hold Israeli officials at least minimally accountable for what they've done.

Powerful Israeli lobby

Speaking to *The Cradle*, Professor Joshua Landis, head of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, observes that both political parties have decided

that support for Israel and the “money that pro-Israel Americans contribute to elections is indispensable.”

“One cannot expect candidates to turn their backs on Israel,” Landis notes, a view reinforced by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, who tells *The Cradle* that “the American political system is still in the hands of the Israel Lobby.”

Sachs argues that “both major parties in the US currently stand behind Israel’s murderous ways and are complicit in them—at least for now.” He warns that this unwavering support is leading to disaster not only for the US and Palestine but also for Israel itself, as unchecked cruelty and extremism threaten to tear apart Israeli society and its “legitimacy.” While Harris may offer some improvement over Biden, Dr Joseph A. Kéchichian, a senior fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, believes that her primary focus should be restoring the US’s global reputation.

He emphasizes that only a handful of countries still align with Washington, and if the US cares about its tarnished image, it will have to “listen” to the concerns of the international community.

‘Trump is a wild card’

Harris maintains some ambiguity on the Gaza issue to dissociate from Biden’s destructive policies while allowing her leeway to snap right back to them after the November election.

For some voters, that noncommittal position on Palestinian rights may be preferable to a Trump return to the White House. The former US president has repeatedly made it clear that he believes Israel must “[finish the job](#)” and achieve “[victory](#).”

According to Abdelhadi, although “Republicans and Democrats have had a virtually identical policy on Israel, Trump is a wild card,” and his words should be taken seriously.

Kéchichian recalls that during his first term, Trump served Israel’s interests well: controversially moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, supplying Israel with advanced weaponry, and engineering the Abraham Accords, which further polarized West Asia into the [Axes of Normalization and Resistance](#).

With opinion polls indicating that the upcoming election will be decided in key swing states like Michigan, Arizona, and Wisconsin, it wouldn’t be surprising to see pro-Israel groups channel significant resources into securing a Trump victory. There’s also concern that Trump’s return could lead to harsher measures against activists, including legal challenges and orchestrated social media attacks designed to ostracize dissenting voices.

Bernd Kaussler, Professor of Political Science at James Madison University, believes there's no doubt that Trump would give Netanyahu or any other Likud leader free rein, potentially allowing the resettlement of Gaza by Israeli settlers and greenlighting further atrocities against Palestinians.

Yet Trump also remains the first US president, in a consecutive stream of them, who has not only not initiated a war but has sought – against the will of the Washington security establishment – to withdraw US military troops and bases from West Asia.

Professor Bisharat cautions that while Trump may not impose any more limits on Israel's military actions than Biden has, he also doesn't think Trump is eager to ignite a regional war any more than Biden is: "For different reasons and following different logics, Trump and Biden's policies might end up in somewhat similar spots."

This creates a dilemma for voters in swing states who are reluctant to reward a Democratic Party that hasn't shifted its pro-Israel stance – which they see as pro-genocide and pro-apartheid – yet also recognize the need to preserve opportunities for more fundamental changes in the future.

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