

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

**ISRAEL/PALESTINE
IN THE 2020
DEMOCRATIC
PRIMARY:
JOE BIDEN**

OVERVIEW

Joe Biden served as the forty-seventh vice president from 2009 to 2017. He represented Delaware in the Senate from 1973 to 2009, and was a longtime member and former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He has a history with Israel and the Palestinians of more than forty-five years, including having worked with Benjamin Netanyahu. Biden has mostly avoided discussing Israel/Palestine on the 2020 campaign trail.

FRAMING OF THE ISSUE

Biden has mostly avoided speaking about Israel/Palestine since declaring his candidacy, despite a round of reporting in February 2019 that his campaign would focus on his foreign policy experience and expertise.¹

Even in articulating his foreign policy vision, Biden has not discussed Israel/Palestine in any depth. In a foreign policy speech at the City University of New York in July 2019, Biden named “the rapid advance of authoritarianism, nationalism, and illiberal tendencies around the world, not just in Russia and China, but also among our allies: places like Turkey, the Philippines, Hungary” as a major concern, leaving Israel off the list of US allies experiencing a rise in authoritarian, illiberal politics.² As the writer Peter Beinart has observed, Israel receives significantly more US aid than any of the allies Biden named -- or other allies facing rising authoritarianism, such as Poland, India, and Brazil.³ This makes the choice to leave Israel out significant and suggests that Biden has not confronted the reality of the current Israeli political situation.⁴ Biden’s only mention of Israel in the speech was to describe “sustaining our ironclad commitments to Israel’s security regardless of how much you may disagree with this present leader” as “essential.”⁵ He did not mention Palestine or Palestinians in the speech.⁶

In August 2019, when Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu acceded to President Trump’s request to ban two US Congresswomen who are Muslim women of color from visiting Israel and the West Bank, Biden tweeted: “I have always been a stalwart supporter of Israel—a vital partner that shares our democratic values. No democracy should deny entry to visitors based on the content of their ideas—even ideas they strongly object to. And no leader of the free world should encourage them to do so.”⁷

When confronted on two occasions in July 2019 by progressive activists affiliated with the anti-occupation Jewish group IfNotNow, Biden criticized the settlements as “unnecessary”⁸ and said he doesn’t “agree with a damn thing” Benjamin Netanyahu says.^{9*} He emphasized Palestinian culpability, saying that Palestinians “have to step up too, and be prepared to stop the hate.”¹⁰ In response to a question about how he would “support the freedom and dignity of Palestinians living under occupation,” Biden said he would “tell them to accept the notion that Israel has the right to exist,” as well as “insist on Israel... to stop the occupation of those territories.”¹¹ Asked about how he would put pressure on Israel to end the occupation, Biden first pointed to his record as evidence that he has put pressure on the Israeli government in the past,¹² then said he would pressure the Israeli government “in terms of what they can and cannot do relative to what is accepted internationally.”¹³

In a video message to the American Jewish Committee in June 2019, Biden spoke about “shared democratic values” and said that “Support for Israel is too important to be a political football or a partisan issue.”¹⁴ He has repeatedly said that Israel’s security is “critical” for US security,¹⁵ and that “were there no Israel, we’d have to invent one to secure our own interests in the region.”¹⁶

Biden’s relationship with Israel goes back to his first election as a senator in 1972; he frequently tells the story of meeting Golda Meir in 1973 as a freshman senator on a trip to Israel. Meir, Biden says, told him that Israeli Jews had “nowhere else to go.”¹⁷

ON THE CURRENT ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP

By the end of the Obama administration, the relationship between the US and the Netanyahu government was tense, and Biden was involved in some of the relationship’s highest-profile incidents.

In March 2016, Biden traveled to Israel to meet with Netanyahu, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Just before Biden arrived, and without first informing the White House, Netanyahu announced that he was canceling a planned meeting in Washington with Obama.¹⁸ While Biden was in Tel Aviv, a Palestinian assailant stabbed twenty people. Biden called on Abbas to condemn the violence and, in a remark aimed at Netanyahu and Abbas, said, “The violence has to stop, period... It cannot and will not be done just by physical force.”¹⁹

Upon returning from his trip, Biden told J Street that he had observed “no political will” among Israelis or Palestinians for continued negotiations.²⁰ “We have an obligation, notwithstanding our sometimes overwhelming frustration with the Israeli government... to push them as hard as we can toward what they know in their gut is the only ultimate solution—a two state solution, at the same time be an absolute guarantor of their security,”²¹ Biden said, in an admission of exasperation that made headlines.²² The Obama administration’s efforts to negotiate and pass the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2014 and 2015 inflamed relations between the US and Israeli governments.

The Obama administration, already angry over Netanyahu’s continued settlement expansion, spoke harshly of the Israeli leadership; in October 2014, unnamed Obama administration officials called Netanyahu “a chickenshit” to *The Atlantic*.²³ (The next month, Biden insisted that he and Netanyahu were “still buddies.”²⁴) As the Iran Deal negotiations advanced in the spring of 2015, Netanyahu actively opposed it, going as far as directly addressing a joint session of Congress to speak against the deal.²⁵ Meanwhile, during the summer of 2015, Biden took the lead to promote the deal to skeptical US lawmakers.²⁶

SETTLEMENTS

Biden has touted his more than thirty-year opposition to the West Bank settlement project.²⁷ By the spring of 2016, following both the collapse of Sen. John Kerry’s peace talks and the passing of the Iran deal, Biden told both AIPAC and J Street that the expansion of settlements and the larger project of settlements was moving Israel “toward a one-state reality.”^{28,29}

In 2010, Biden visited Israel to assure the Israeli government of US support for restarting peace negotiations. On the first day of Biden’s visit, an opposition minister in Netanyahu’s government announced plans for an expansion of settlements: 1,600 new housing units in occupied East Jerusalem.³⁰ This violated a hard-won, ten-month settlement moratorium to which Netanyahu’s government had agreed less than four months earlier;³¹ and in a closed-door

meeting with Netanyahu, Biden reportedly excoriated the Israeli leadership, accusing them of endangering US troops in the region.³²

AID TO ISRAEL

Biden was involved in the sometimes-tense negotiations over the 2016 aid agreement,³³ in which the Obama administration and Israel negotiated a ten-year deal, the largest US foreign aid deal ever.³⁴ The deal includes \$38 billion in military aid to Israel. Of this money, \$5 billion is designated for missile defense and \$33 billion is foreign military financing (FMF). The US allocates FMF for other countries to spend on US-manufactured weapons, or, uniquely in the case of Israel, on Israeli-manufactured weapons through a practice called offshore procurement (OSP).³⁵ The deal tapers the percentage of aid allocated to OSP from about 25% in FY 2019 to about 22% in FY 2024, then sharply to 0% by FY 2028.³⁶

In June 2019, Biden told the American Jewish Committee Global Forum that he was “proud that an Obama-Biden administration demonstrated unprecedented support for Israel, including bolstering the life-saving Iron Dome system, and signing a new record-setting 10-year security agreement with Israel,”³⁷ bringing the 2016 deal into the 2020 race and claiming it as an accomplishment.

In April 2019, a former official of the Obama administration told *AI-Monitor* that during negotiations on the Iran deal, Biden had argued for promising more military aid to Israel in order to assuage Israel’s security concerns and get the deal to pass.³⁸ As part of this effort, Biden promised Israel five F-35 fighter jets in 2015.³⁹

Biden has experience with trying to put conditions on US aid to Israel. In 1982, as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden voted to increase US aid to Israel and “vehemently” supported a proposed amendment that would set Israel’s US aid at no less than the amount of debt repaid to the US by Israel. (At the time, Israel was repaying annually about \$125 million more than the US was giving in aid.⁴⁰) The amendment did not pass.

About a month later, Biden attempted to pressure then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, threatening to cut US aid to Israel over Israel’s settlement construction in the West Bank.^{41,42} Reportedly, Biden banged his fist on a desk, and Begin responded:

“This desk is designed for writing, not for fists. Don’t threaten us with slashing aid. Do you think that because the US lends us money it is entitled to impose on us what we must do? We are grateful for the assistance we have received, but we are not to be threatened. I am a proud Jew. Three thousand years of culture are behind me, and you will not frighten me with threats. Take note: we do not want a single soldier of yours to die for us.”⁴³

This story is one of Biden’s oft-repeated Jewish anecdotes;⁴⁴ he told it to J Street in 2016.⁴⁵

AID TO THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA) AND UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES (UNRWA)

Biden has not spoken publicly about restoring funding to UNRWA since Trump cut it entirely in September 2018.⁴⁶

In a 2006 letter applauding Congress’s passage of the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act, which established strict conditions on US aid to the Palestinian Authority,⁴⁷ AIPAC specifically thanked Biden for his advocacy of the bill.⁴⁸

BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, SANCTIONS (BDS)

During his 2020 presidential campaign, Biden has not yet spoken publicly about anti-boycott legislation.^{49,50} However, Stuart Eizenstat, one of Biden’s foreign policy advisors,⁵¹ is closely tied to the monitoring of BDS efforts on college campuses.⁵² Eizenstat called BDS “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” at AIPAC’s policy conference in March 2019. He spoke positively of anti-boycott legislation (likely S.1., the anti-boycott legislation that passed the Senate in February 2019), saying that it “is very careful to say it does not preclude any company, any individual from criticizing Israeli policy. Don’t like the settlements? You can say so. There’s no bar on it. It only bars commercial implementation ... it has nothing to do with free speech.”⁵³

This argument is dubious at best and disingenuous at worst. It is true that S.1. includes language asserting that it does not “infringe upon any right protected under the First Amendment.”⁵⁴ However, as the ACLU has argued, the bill is still an attempt “to give legal cover to state laws... barring or restricting certain people and companies from doing business with the state solely because they participate in politically-motivated expressive boycotts.”⁵⁵ It is part of a larger, years-long effort at the state and federal level to discourage participation in boycotts of Israel—an effort that extends, in some cases, to discouraging boycotts of products made in the illegal settlements as well.^{56,57} Boycotts are a form of free speech explicitly recognized by the Supreme Court, most prominently in the 1982 ruling *NAACP vs. Claiborne Hardware*.⁵⁸ The nonviolent tactic of boycotting has been integral to the success of numerous social movements, including the US civil rights movement⁵⁹ and the movement against apartheid in South Africa.⁶⁰ Two federal courts have ruled that state restrictions on boycotts of Israel violate Americans’ First Amendment rights.⁶¹

In the recent past, Biden has echoed the language of boycott opponents, implying that BDS is antisemitic and an effort to delegitimize Israel. Speaking to J Street in 2016—at a moment when anti-boycott legislation had been signed into law in multiple states,⁶² and anti-boycott legislation had been introduced in the House and Senate⁶³—Biden applauded J Street U student activists’ efforts in “pushing back against calls to boycott, divest, or sanction Israel,” and touted the Obama administration’s work “against any and every attempt to delegitimize Israel on the world scene.”⁶⁴

RELATIONSHIPS

J Street

Biden spoke at the 2016 J Street Gala and the 2013 J Street conference.⁶⁵ J Street and the J Street PAC were established after Biden’s time in the Senate, so he received no funding or endorsements from them directly.

AIPAC

Biden spoke at the 2016 AIPAC Policy Conference, describing “30-some years” of participation in AIPAC events.⁶⁶

Biden’s first appearance at an Israel-related event after leaving office was as the keynote speaker at the 2018 gala for Seeds of Peace, an NGO bringing together Israeli and Palestinian young people as well as youth from other high-conflict zones.⁶⁷

As a senator, Biden received at least \$476,000 from pro-Israel lobbies between 1998 and 2009.⁶⁸

OTHER POLICIES

Regarding President Trump's unilateral decision to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem, Biden's campaign told Axios in July 2019 that he "would not move the American embassy back to Tel Aviv. But he would re-open our consulate in East Jerusalem to engage the Palestinians."⁶⁹ As a senator, Biden voted for the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act, which made it US policy to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, but also allowed the president to invoke a waiver every six months to maintain the status quo.⁷⁰

ANTISEMITISM / WHITE NATIONALISM

Biden has consistently linked increases in hate crimes and racist violence to the Trump administration. He launched his presidential campaign with a video criticizing Trump's reaction to the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville, VA, in 2017, describing the marchers as "baring the fangs of racism, chanting the same antisemitism bile heard across Europe in the 1930s."⁷¹ In a tweet after the mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, Biden mentioned "antisemitism in Pittsburgh" and "racism in Charlottesville."⁷²

In August 2019, after the president launched an antisemitic attack on the more than seventy percent of Jewish Americans who vote for Democrats by calling them "disloyal" to Israel, Biden said: "Mr. President, these comments are insulting and inexcusable--just like your previous dual loyalty insinuations. Stop dividing Americans and disparaging your fellow citizens. It may not be beneath you, but it is beneath the office you hold."⁷³

Biden was one of the few presidential hopefuls to not make a statement about Rep. Ilhan Omar's controversial statements relating to Israel.⁷⁴

In a 2014 speech to the Legal Services Corporation, Biden used the antisemitic word "shylocks" to describe predatory lenders that exploited veterans. He has since said it was a "poor choice."⁷⁵

*Disclosure: I am a cofounder of IfNotNow and organized with the group for years, although I am not currently active with the organization.

ENDNOTES

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