

CANDIDATE PROFILE

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

**ISRAEL/PALESTINE
IN THE 2020
DEMOCRATIC
PRIMARY:
PETE BUTTIGIEG**

OVERVIEW

Pete Buttigieg is the mayor of South Bend, IN. He is the only leading Democratic candidate with military experience, having served in Afghanistan as a naval intelligence officer in 2014,¹ and one of the eight languages he speaks is Arabic.² Buttigieg’s public record on Israel/Palestine reaches back to May 2018, when he took a trip to Israel sponsored by the American Jewish Committee.³ He has built relationships with the pro-Israel Jewish Democratic establishment, and has condemned the occupation in clear terms. He has indicated that he would be willing to put conditions on aid if Israel were to annex West Bank settlements.

FRAMING OF THE ISSUE / ON THE CURRENT ISRAELI GOVERNMENT AND PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP

Buttigieg’s preferred framing of the issue is to emphasize complexity and nuance; however, over the course of his 2020 presidential campaign, he has come to speak more about Palestinian suffering. In July 2019, an activist from the Jewish progressive group IfNotNow asked Buttigieg to “condemn the occupation.”^{4*} Buttigieg responded: “The occupation has to end.”⁵ He continued: “even people from, you know, associated with the Israeli right, have had to confront—like Sharon, toward the end of his life, recognized that this state of affairs is unsustainable. And the pathway to peace has to include Israelis and Palestinians living side by side with self-determination.”⁶

Buttigieg consistently articulates his support for Israel’s security as an “essential tenet of US foreign policy”⁷ and emphasizes his opposition to Netanyahu. He describes his loving-but-critical relationship to Israel as similar to his relationship to the United States. In a May 2019 interview with the Washington Post, Buttigieg said:

“Being supportive of Israel does not have to mean that you are on board with the agenda of the Israeli political right wing. I am not. I believe that this move to walk away from peace will harm Israeli interests, will, of course, continue to contribute to the immiseration of the Palestinian people, and is not good for the U.S. either. And so what Israel can expect from the U.S., as any friend ought to be able to expect from an honest friend, is that when they take a step that is harmful, you put your arm around your friend and you try to guide them somewhere else.”⁸

When Netanyahu, at Trump’s urging, banned Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, two US Congresswomen who are Muslim women of color, from visiting Israel in August of 2019, Buttigieg did not issue a formal statement or tweet.⁹ Asked about the ban at an Iowa campaign stop, Buttigieg said: “It’s disappointing to see an undemocratic act like banning somebody from your country ’cause you don’t like what they say.”¹⁰

In a June 2019 speech outlining his vision for US foreign policy, Buttigieg said, “The suffering of the Palestinian people—especially the humanitarian disaster in Gaza—has many authors, from the extremism of Hamas and inefficacy of the Palestinian Authority to the indifference of the international community and, yes, the policies of the current Israeli government. And now, Gaza has become a breeding ground for the kind of extremism that only exacerbates threats to Israel and the region.”¹¹

Media observers had previously noted Buttigieg’s reluctance to criticize Israel’s treatment of Palestinians.¹² Although his May 2018 AJC-sponsored trip took place just before the IDF killed dozens of Palestinian protesters, Buttigieg opted not to mention the killings in his post-trip interview on the AJC’s podcast. Instead, his comments centered on how impressed he was with Israeli stoicism in the face of rockets coming into Israel from Syria: “this was not causing society to grind to a halt... it didn’t stop people from living their lives.”¹³

Buttigieg describes the current Palestinian leadership as inadequate partners. At an event with Jewish leaders in May 2019, he said: “One of the “biggest problems” facing American policy with respect to Israeli and Palestinian leadership, ... is “we don’t have the right kinds of partners in leadership on the Palestinian side, is that we have to invest more energy in constraining their worst impulses than in trying to get a good outcome.”¹⁴

After his Israel trip in May 2018, Buttigieg described the Palestinian leadership as fractured and placed blame on Hamas for the dire situation in Gaza: “one of the first things that was very clear to us was the extent to which there really is not a unified or single voice for the Palestinian ... people. Most people aren’t aware of the difference between what’s happening in Gaza run by Hamas in a way that is contributing to a lot of misery there but also totally different than an environment where you would have a negotiating partner across the table is really important.”¹⁵

SETTLEMENTS

When Netanyahu promised to annex settlements in the West Bank in April 2019 during his election campaign, Buttigieg tweeted, “This provocation is harmful to Israeli, Palestinian, and American interests. Supporting Israel does not have to mean agreeing with Netanyahu’s politics. I don’t. This calls for a president willing to counsel our ally against abandoning a two-state solution.”¹⁶

AID TO ISRAEL

Buttigieg’s red line on aid to Israel is annexation of West Bank settlements. In a major foreign-policy speech in June 2019, Buttigieg said that if Netanyahu “makes good on his threat to annex West Bank settlements, he should know that a President Buttigieg would take steps to ensure American taxpayers won’t help foot the bill.”¹⁷ He had not previously threatened changes to US aid to Israel.

Buttigieg has no voting record on aid to Israel.

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

We found no public statements from Buttigieg on UNRWA¹⁸ or aid to the Palestinian Authority.¹⁹

BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, SANCTIONS (BDS)

We found no public statements from Buttigieg on BDS.²⁰

RELATIONSHIPS

Buttigieg spoke about the US-Israel relationship and antisemitism at a May 2019 meeting coordinated by Bluelight Strategies, a Democratic PR firm with close connections to mainstream Democratic politicians and pro-Israel Jewish organizations.²¹ There were roughly forty leaders in attendance, “including former Mideast peace negotiator Amb. Dennis Ross, Executive Director of the Washington Institute Rob Satloff, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Democratic pollster [and founder of Democratic Majority for Israel] Mark Mellman and Alan Gross, the former USAID contractor who was detained in Cuba for five years,”²² and others.

Buttigieg was not invited to speak at AIPAC in 2019.²³ However, Steve Grossman, a former head of AIPAC and chair of the DNC, endorsed him in April 2019.²⁴

No Israel-related groups are among Buttigieg’s top donors as of early August 2019.²⁵

OTHER POLICIES

In an interview with Axios on HBO in June 2019, Buttigieg said, “I don’t know that we’d gain much by moving [the US embassy] to Tel Aviv,” and that he would keep the embassy in Jerusalem.²⁶ In May 2019, Buttigieg criticized Trump’s decisions to move the US embassy to Jerusalem and recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, calling them bad deal-making and undeserved gifts to Netanyahu. “I mean, at the very least if we’re going to talk about things like Jerusalem or the recognition of Golan, having an actual deal around that... You don’t do something specifically for the purpose of reinforcing him politically and domestically. Even if those gifts are endorsed.”²⁷

ANTISEMITISM / WHITE NATIONALISM

Although he called in the first debate for Democrats to reclaim religious language on behalf of progressive values,²⁸ Buttigieg has not spoken up when Jewish Democrats have been explicitly targeted by President Trump. In August 2019, President Trump made explicitly antisemitic statements American Jews who vote for Democrats (seventy-nine percent of American Jews voted Democratic in 2018).²⁹ Trump said that American Jews who vote for Democrats show “either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty,”³⁰ and then clarified that “If you vote for a Democrat, you’re being disloyal to Jewish people and you’re being very disloyal to Israel... Only weak people would say anything other than that.”³¹ Buttigieg made no public statements in response to these comments.³²

At the same May 2019 meeting mentioned above, speaking to a room of Jewish establishment leaders, Buttigieg said, “[W]hen I talk about fighting hate and white nationalism, that shouldn’t be a Democratic position... It should be a universal American position. One reason I raise it is to challenge people on the other side of the aisle to be just as full-throated in rejecting it as the people on our side.”³³ He also criticized the antisemitism of the Trump administration without getting into specifics.

“It’s pretty rich to see a White House that has welcomed in people who I think are nakedly anti-Semitic,” Buttigieg said, without naming anyone in particular. “The White House has made excuses for people who walked in the streets chanting, ‘Jews will not replace us.’”³⁴

In this meeting with Democratic pro-Israel activists, Buttigieg also negatively alluded to Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib: “While not mentioning Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN) by name, Buttigieg said that while criticizing Israel’s policies, we should “never allow that vocabulary to define any of both parties or let these stereotypes reverberate antisemitic language.”³⁵

Buttigieg has acknowledged the difference between support for Israel and opposition to antisemitism. In an interview after his AJC trip in May 2018, he said: “The Republican complex of attitudes on Israel is complicated too. Because the evangelical embrace of the Israeli right is maybe not the same thing as an authentic commitment to the well-being of the Israeli people or the Jewish people. I don’t know that either party’s got it right. I know that the current administration is certainly aligning itself with the Israeli right and making some sweeping gestures that may well move public opinion to some extent. But I’m not so sure they’re serious or committed to peace. The thing you take away more than anything is that that’s what everybody wants—especially those in the region.”³⁶

*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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