

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

ISRAEL/PALESTINE  
IN THE 2020  
DEMOCRATIC  
PRIMARY:  
**KAMALA HARRIS**

## OVERVIEW

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Kamala Harris has represented California as a Democrat in the Senate since 2017. Prior to that, she was the Attorney General of California from 2011 to 2017, and the District Attorney of San Francisco from 2004 to 2011. On Israel/Palestine, she is closely aligned with AIPAC and has not publicly supported any measures to pressure Benjamin Netanyahu or the Israeli government on settlement expansion or other violations of Palestinian rights.

## FRAMING OF THE ISSUE

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Harris's staff have described her support of Israel and its right to defend itself as being "core to who she is."<sup>1</sup> She has consistently painted Israel as a bipartisan or nonpartisan issue, and has maintained close relationships with AIPAC, speaking twice at their annual policy conference in her three years in the Senate. She speaks about her love of "Israel's founding principles of democracy and rule of law,"<sup>2</sup> while barely mentioning Palestinians. While advocating for a two-state solution and bilateral, direct negotiations as a path to peace, she has not publicly made any demands of Netanyahu.<sup>3</sup>

Harris has framed recent tensions between the Netanyahu government and the Democratic Party in terms of US interests and Trump's threat to the United States's role in the world. Netanyahu, at Trump's behest, banned Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, two US Congresswomen who are Muslim women of color, from visiting Israel in August of 2019. The day the ban was announced, Harris tweeted: "I don't believe any nation should deny entry to elected Members of Congress, period. It's an affront to the United States. Open and engaged foreign relations are critical to advancing U.S. interests. Trump is playing politics as he weakens our global leadership."<sup>4</sup>

A week after the ban announcement in August 2019, Harris spoke to the *Council on Foreign Relations* about foreign policy. Asked if she supports a two-state solution and how she would go about achieving it as President, Harris affirmed her support for a two-state solution and added:

"Unfortunately, while, in the past, the U.S. has been viewed as an honest broker with a strong desire for peace in the region, Trump's actions have inflamed tensions in the region, diminished U.S. credibility and influence, and undermined the prospects for peace. As President, I would start by reaffirming the U.S. commitment to Israel's security and prosperity, while simultaneously working to rebuild the broken relationship between the United States and the Palestinians. Among all of our international partners, the U.S. is uniquely positioned to facilitate negotiations toward peace, but for that to have any chance of success, we have to start by re-engaging in honest, respectful dialog with both sides."<sup>5</sup>

## ON THE CURRENT ISRAELI GOVERNMENT AND PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

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In 2017, Harris met with Netanyahu during her visit to Israel and the West Bank.<sup>6</sup> She had plans to meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on the same trip, but he canceled the meeting<sup>7</sup> because Trump threatened to close the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington, DC.<sup>8</sup>

## SETTLEMENTS

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Harris has said that settlements pose a threat to peace, but she has not supported policy consequences for Israel's settlement-building project. During her 2020 presidential campaign, she has said that unilateral annexation of the West Bank would "be a mistake and would jeopardize the peace process."<sup>9</sup>

However, in speaking to establishment pro-Israel groups, Harris has also signaled her commitment to the status quo on Israel/Palestine. Speaking to the American Jewish Committee in June 2019, Harris touted<sup>10</sup> the fact that the first resolution she co-sponsored in the Senate was S. Res. 6 (2017).<sup>11</sup> This resolution condemned the Obama administration’s decision to abstain from a December 2016 UN resolution calling for an end to Israeli settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territories,<sup>12</sup> effectively allowing the resolution to pass the Security Council in a reversal of previous US policy.<sup>13</sup> The Senate resolution that Harris cosponsored (along with fellow 2020 candidates Michael Bennet, Cory Booker, Kirsten Gillibrand, and Amy Klobuchar, among other senators) called the UN resolution “one-sided” and “rejects... efforts... to further isolate Israel through economic or other boycotts.”<sup>14</sup> The resolution was referred to the Foreign Relations Committee and never brought to a vote, although it had seventy-seven cosponsors in addition to Harris.<sup>15</sup> (In effect, Harris’s first sponsored resolution in the Senate was a condemnation of the Obama administration’s criticisms of Israeli settlement expansion—a condemnation she is campaigning on in 2020.)

During her 2016 Senate campaign, Harris dodged a question about whether she would support legislation declaring settlements illegal, answering instead that no one can impose a solution on Israel and the Palestinians.<sup>16</sup>

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

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In September 2018, Harris was one of thirty-four Democratic senators to sign a letter urging President Trump to restore funding to the PA and UNRWA.<sup>17</sup>

A 2017 letter to the UN Secretary-General, signed by Harris, condemns UNRWA, saying the agency “downplays its role in perpetuating anti-Israel bias.”<sup>18</sup>

## **BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, SANCTIONS (BDS)**

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Harris voted against S.1, the 2019 legislation containing anti-BDS provisions. Her statement: “Senator Harris strongly supports security assistance to strengthen Israel’s ability to defend itself. She has traveled to Israel where she saw the importance of US-Israeli security cooperation firsthand. She opposed S.1 out of concern that it could limit Americans’ First Amendment rights.”<sup>19</sup>

In speaking to the American Jewish Committee in June 2019, Harris referred to the need to “stand up and speak out against it” when any organization “delegitimizes Israel,”<sup>20</sup> language commonly used by BDS opponents who seek to criminalize the movement<sup>21</sup>—including the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and right-wing, pro-Israel organizations like CAMERA.<sup>22,23,24</sup>

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

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### *J Street*

Jewish communal media outlets have noted that Harris does not have a close relationship with J Street.<sup>25</sup> J Street did not endorse her in 2016.<sup>26</sup>

### *AIPAC*

Harris has a close relationship with AIPAC, including personal relationships with AIPAC leaders in California. Though she did not attend the 2019 policy conference, she did meet with AIPAC lobbyists in her office, tweeting, “Great to meet today in my office with California AIPAC leaders to discuss the need for a strong U.S.-Israel alliance, the right of

Israel to defend itself, and my commitment to combat anti-Semitism in our country and around the world.”<sup>27</sup>

In an official address to AIPAC’s Policy Conference in 2017, she mentioned her “dear friends and AIPAC board members, Anita Friedman and Cissie Swig and Amy Friedkin,” and spoke about strengthening U.S.-Israel cooperation in the areas of defense (including full support for the 2016 military aid package), cybersecurity, and water security.<sup>28</sup> The speech’s sole mention of Palestinians came in her call for a two-state solution.<sup>29</sup> In 2018, Harris spoke at an off-the-record AIPAC session with students, giving interview responses that centered on her family’s history in the civil rights movement.<sup>30</sup>

Harris received \$41,058 from pro-Israel donors in 2016.<sup>31</sup>

Halie Sofer, one of Harris’s former foreign policy advisors, is the founder of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, a “pro-Israel” group; Sofer previously served as the head of Jewish outreach for Obama’s 2008 campaign.<sup>32</sup>

## **OTHER POLICIES**

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During her 2020 campaign, Harris has not stated whether or not she would consider moving the US embassy to Israel out of Jerusalem, undoing President Trump’s 2017 unilateral decision to move it into the divided and contested city.<sup>33</sup> She did not release a statement about the embassy move decision when it was announced in 2017<sup>34</sup> or carried out in May 2018.<sup>35</sup>

In April 2017, she signed onto a letter written by Sen. Marco Rubio condemning the UN’s treatment of Israel and commending UN Ambassador Nikki Haley for her calling out of the UN’s “anti-Israel bias.” (Sanders, Warren, Booker, Gillibrand, Klobuchar, and Bennet also signed this letter.)<sup>36</sup>

In November 2017, she did not join ten Democratic senators (including Sanders and Warren) in signing a letter calling on Netanyahu to halt the demolition of the villages of Susiya and Khan al-Ahmar in the West Bank.<sup>37</sup>

Harris criticized Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from the Iran Nuclear Deal in a 2018 statement.<sup>38</sup>

Harris joined all but two Senate Democrats in voting against the confirmation of David Friedman as US Ambassador to Israel in 2017.<sup>39</sup> Friedman is Trump’s former bankruptcy lawyer and a political and financial supporter of Israeli settlements who has “accused President Barack Obama of anti-Semitism and urged Israel to demand loyalty oaths from its Arab citizens.”<sup>40</sup> Harris cited Friedman’s inexperience, his use of Holocaust references against political opponents, and his opposition to a two-state solution as reasons to vote against him.<sup>41</sup>

## **ANTISEMITISM / WHITE NATIONALISM**

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In August 2019, Trump targeted the seventy-nine percent of American Jews who vote for Democrats, saying that “In my opinion, if you vote for a Democrat you’re being very disloyal to Jewish people and you’re being very disloyal to Israel.”<sup>42</sup> Harris embedded video of Trump making the antisemitic comment in a tweet and added: “What is wrong with this guy?”<sup>43</sup>

In 2018, after the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue, Harris condemned “Congress’ inaction” on gun control.<sup>44</sup> After the vicious backlash that Rep. Ilhan Omar received over her comments on Israel, Harris appeared sympathetic to Omar, showing concern that the spotlight put Omar’s life at risk.<sup>45</sup>

Harris prosecuted hate crimes as Attorney General of California, and noted that hate crimes against Jews were the most common religiously motivated hate crimes during her time as AG.<sup>46</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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