

 DATA FOR *PROGRESS*

ISRAEL/PALESTINE
IN THE 2020
DEMOCRATIC
PRIMARY:
BERNIE SANDERS

OVERVIEW

Bernie Sanders is the US senator from Vermont who challenged Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary; he is also a self-described democratic socialist and the only Jewish candidate in the top tier of the Democratic primary race. Sanders has personal connections to Israel, including family who live there¹ and a months-long stint volunteering on a kibbutz in the 1960s.² He has made progressive foreign-policy stances—including leading on US opposition to the Saudi-led war in Yemen—a key part of his campaign, building on a history of taking critical stances toward Israel. Sanders has stated his willingness to consider using US aid to Israel as leverage to change the policies of the Israeli government.

FRAMING OF THE ISSUE

Sanders has made a progressive, anti-authoritarian foreign policy a key component of his 2020 campaign. He has invested in progressive advisers, most prominently Matt Duss.³ Duss and Faiz Shakir, Sanders's 2020 campaign manager, worked together at *ThinkProgress* during the Obama administration, and both faced harsh criticism from establishment pro-Israel groups over their criticism of Israel.⁴

On Israel and Palestine, Sanders emphasizes “bringing people together” and having “an even-handed approach,” something he describes as not “particularly radical.”⁵ He declares support for Israel’s right to exist and claims a “pro-Israel” position, but he does so in the context of arguing that the US should be equitable and account for Palestinian concerns. “I am 100 percent pro-Israel... Israel has every right to exist, and to exist in peace and security and not be subjected to terrorist attacks. But the United States needs to deal with not just Israel, but with the Palestinian people as well.”⁶

In August 2019, at Trump’s urging, Netanyahu banned two US Congresswomen who are Muslim women of color from entering Israel. The day the ban was announced, Sanders tweeted: “It is disgusting that a bigot like Trump is attacking [Rashida Tlaib] and [Ilhan Omar] in this way. Opposing Netanyahu’s policies is not ‘hating the Jewish people.’ We must stand together against those who promote hatred and racism in Israel, Palestine, the U.S. and everywhere.”⁷

In July 2019, Sanders posed for a photo with activists from the Jewish progressive group IfNotNow, holding a sign that read: “Jews Against the Occupation.”^{8*}

In a July 2019 interview with the *Pod Save America* podcast, Sanders linked his position on Israel/Palestine to his positions on Saudi Arabia and Iran: “What we need to do is not say we’re 100 percent pro-Israel or 100 percent pro–Saudi Arabia... I, as president of the United States, would like to sit down in a room with the leadership of Saudi Arabia, with the leadership of Iran, with the leadership of the Palestinians, with the leadership of Israel, and hammer out some damn agreements which will try to end the conflicts that exist there, forever.”⁹

Sanders's 2020 campaign-launch event in March 2019 featured black American activist Shaun King, who likened Sanders's stance on apartheid in South Africa to his opposition to the "apartheid-like" conditions for Palestinians.¹⁰ The campaign shared video of King's speech on social media.¹¹ Sanders's campaign has also produced and shared content that features Palestinian voices speaking for themselves.¹²

ON THE CURRENT ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP

Sanders harshly criticizes the current Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority while emphasizing the experiences of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians. He has described Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as part of "a growing worldwide movement toward authoritarianism, oligarchy, and kleptocracy"¹³ and called the Israeli government "right-wing" and "racist."¹⁴ He also said in March of 2019 that he hoped Netanyahu would lose in the April 2019 Israeli elections.¹⁵

Although he has harsher words for Netanyahu, Sanders described Palestinian leadership as "corrupt in many cases, and certainly not effective" in April 2019.¹⁶ Notably, he describes the situation in Gaza as an economic and humanitarian crisis rather than blaming Hamas for the Palestinian population's suffering. In the same interview, "[Sanders] was worried about the situation in Gaza, where youth unemployment is greater than sixty per cent, and yet the borders are closed. (If you have sixty per cent of the kids who don't have jobs, and they can't leave the country, what do you think is going to happen next year and the year after that?)"¹⁷

SETTLEMENTS

Sanders has referred to Israeli settlements in the West Bank as an obstacle to peace. In April 2018, he said: "It looks to me, not only of the events of today but just the actions of Israel over the last several years, plus the Trump administration repudiating the concept of a two-state solution, the growth of settlements, the kind of violence we saw today, what is going to happen in the future, when you have 2 million people in Gaza living in absolute desperation, 60 percent unemployment, what is going to be the future?"¹⁸

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

Sanders has repeatedly signaled that he regards US aid to Israel as potential leverage to be wielded toward policy change. In a *New Yorker* interview in April 2019, he said he wanted to "pick up from where Jimmy Carter was, what Clinton tried to do, and, with the financial resources that we have of helping or withdrawing support, say, 'You know what? Let's sit down and do our best to figure it out.'"¹⁹ On the *Pod Save America* podcast in July 2019, Sanders said he would "absolutely" consider using US aid to Israel as leverage to change Israel's behavior.²⁰

In August 2019, after Netanyahu announced that US Representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib would be banned from visiting Israel and Palestine, Sanders connected the ban to US aid to Israel. He tweeted "If Israel doesn't want members of the United States Congress to visit their country, maybe they can respectfully decline the billions of dollars that we give to Israel."²¹

In September 2017, he similarly answered "yes" to questioning from *The Intercept* about whether he would consider cutting US aid to Israel, saying: "The U.S. funding plays a very important role, and I would love to see people in the Middle East sit down with the United States government and figure out how U.S. aid can bring people together,

not just result in an arms war in that area. So I think there is extraordinary potential for the United States to help the Palestinian people rebuild Gaza and other areas. At the same time, demand that Israel, in their own interests in a way, work with other countries on environmental issues.”²²

However, he has generally avoided answering questions about conditioning aid to Israel on its treatment of Palestinians in particular.²³

In May 2018, Sanders led the process of writing an open letter, eventually signed by twelve more Senate Democrats, that called on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza by restoring funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the agency that serves Palestinian refugees.²⁴ In a statement, Sanders said: “In light of yesterday’s horrific violence in Gaza, in which more than 50 Palestinians were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded by Israeli snipers, it’s important to understand the desperate situation out of which these protests have arisen. That is why I, along with 12 of my Senate colleagues, have sent a letter to the secretary of state making clear that the United States must play a leading role in addressing the situation.”²⁵

Sanders signed another open letter in September 2018, urging Donald Trump to restore funding to the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA.²⁶

BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT, SANCTIONS (BDS)

Sanders opposes BDS but also opposed the anti-boycott S.1. bill introduced in January 2019, which (among other things) allowed states to penalize BDS supporters. His statement: “While I do not support the BDS movement, we must defend every American’s constitutional right to engage in political activity. It is clear to me that this bill would violate Americans’ First Amendment rights.”²⁷ He described the bill’s introduction during the government shutdown as “absurd.”²⁸

RELATIONSHIPS

J Street PAC endorsed Sanders²⁹ and donated \$5,000 to him in 2018.³⁰

Sanders did not attend AIPAC’s Policy Conference in 2019.³¹ In a tweet, AIPAC specifically criticized Sanders’s characterization of Netanyahu’s government as “racist.”³²

OTHER POLICIES

In May 2019, Sanders said he would consider moving the US embassy out of Jerusalem, undoing Trump’s decision to relocate it, if the move would bring peace.³³ However, asked directly by Axios in July 2019 if he would move the embassy back to Tel Aviv, Sanders did not comment.³⁴

In a speech in October 2018, Sanders condemned the nation-state law by name, and linked it to Trump’s support for Netanyahu: “It’s also hard to imagine that Israel’s Netanyahu government would have taken a number of steps—including passing the recent ‘Nation State law,’ which essentially codifies the second-class status of Israel’s non-Jewish citizens, aggressively undermining the longstanding goal of a two-state solution, and ignoring the economic catastrophe in Gaza—if Netanyahu wasn’t confident that Trump would support him.”³⁵

ANTISEMITISM / WHITE NATIONALISM

Sanders has spoken more about his Jewish identity in the 2020 campaign than he did in 2016. In August 2019, after Trump attacked the more than seventy percent of American Jews who vote for Democrats as “disloyal” to Israel, Sanders responded to these antisemitic comments by saying: “Let me say this to the president: I am a proud Jewish person and I have no concerns about voting Democratic. And in fact, I intend to vote for a Jewish man to become the next president of the United States.”³⁶

Sanders spoke out in support of Rep. Ilhan Omar after she received vicious backlash for her comments about Israel in April 2019. Asked at a town hall on Fox News whether he supported Omar, Sanders responded: “I support a Muslim member of Congress not to be attacked every single day in outrageous, racist remarks.” He continued: “I think that Ilhan has got to do maybe a better job in speaking to the Jewish community. But if your question to me is whether I think she is antisemitic: No, I don’t. I am Jewish. My father’s family was devastated by Hitler... I will do everything in my power, and I hope that every member of Congress will [also] fight not only antisemitism, but racism and anti-Muslim activity so that we create a nondiscriminatory society.”³⁷

At a forum organized by women-of-color voters in April 2019, Sanders was booed when he mentioned marching on Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and campaigning with Jesse Jackson in response to a question about the president’s role in fighting white nationalist terrorism. The rest of his answer was a commitment to using legislation and “the bully pulpit” to fight hate crimes and make anti-discrimination a priority.³⁸

*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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