

Are Democrats Abandoning Israel?

Some Jewish Democrats and community activists are concerned at what they see as fresh signs that the party is distancing itself from Israel.

The latest controversy began when U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) said at a July 22 Town Hall meeting in the Bronx, New York that “Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu does not have a plan for peace.”

However, when asked by to elaborate, Sen. Gillibrand declined to reiterate her criticism of Netanyahu. Her senior adviser, Glen Caplin, said only that Gillibrand is “one of the strongest supporters of Israel in the Senate” and pointed to her backing for military aid to the Jewish state. Caplin also chided Palestinian leaders for promoting “boycotts and unilateral actions at the U.N.” instead of negotiating with Israel.

Meanwhile, some supporters of Israel were surprised when a spokesperson for Rep. Joseph Kennedy III (D-Mass.) announced July 19 that Kennedy was “reviewing” his sponsorship of the Anti-Boycott Act of 2017 (H.R. 1697), being considered in the House, which seeks to punish companies that support the anti-Israel boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement. Another similar bill () is under review in the Senate.

Kennedy’s statement followed a complaint by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that the legislation might impinge on free speech. However, Boston news media reported two days later that Kennedy is still supporting the bill. Currently, Kennedy’s name is still listed alongside 244 other House sponsors of the measure.

Conflict in Massachusetts

Jewish Democrats in Massachusetts were riled by a recent attempt of some party activists to promote a position more critical of Israel. Carol Coakley, a member of the Democratic State Committee and an official of the group "Massachusetts Peace Action," introduced a resolution singling out Israel as the obstacle to peace. At the June 3 state convention, the resolution was ruled out of order because the party ordinarily does not take positions on foreign policy issues.

Coakley told she has found "a significant number" of rank and file Massachusetts Democrats who support her position. However, Rob Leikind, New England regional director of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), who was involved in the effort against the resolution, told that "opposition [to it] seemed strong," and he believes it would have been defeated if it had been put to a full vote. He characterized critics of Israel within the state party as "a vocal fringe."

Steve Grossman, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the Massachusetts Democratic Party, told that while support for Israel within the party remains strong overall, "there has been some increase and growth in voices and segments of the Democratic Party activist base" who are less friendly to Israel.

Grossman, who served as national president of AIPAC in the 1990s, said those elements in the party were galvanized by statements made by former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State John Kerry that "placed an excessive burden" on Israel alone to resolve the Mideast conflict. Grossman said Coakley and her faction have shown little to no interest in "Palestinian incitement to violence and terrorism, such as naming buildings and football fields after terrorists."

Controversy in California

Critics of Israel within the Democratic Party were more

successful at the California Democrats' state convention in April. Party activists Estee Chandler and David Mandel, who are members of the anti-Zionist group Jewish Voice for Peace, succeeded in bringing about the adoption of a resolution accusing Israel of obstructing peace and "adopting anti-democratic measures." The resolution also warned the Trump administration against pursuing a "one-sided policy" in support of Israel.

Matthew Kahn, director of the AJC's San Francisco region, who communicated with party officials to oppose the resolution, said he is "pleased with the overall support for Israel among elected Democratic officials in California," but "contentiousness within the party as it relates to Israeli policies is a concern."

Kahn added, "What began in the party as a difference of opinion regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has morphed into a BDS debate that has the potential to go from anti-Zionist into anti-Semitic territory. We must be vigilant not to let the Democratic Party be influenced by the BDS movement."

Recent polls seem to substantiate Kahn's concerns. An April 2017 survey, by Shibley Telhami and Stella Rouse of the University of Maryland, found 66 percent of Republicans nationwide believe the Trump administration's policy should "lean toward Israel," while only 15 percent of Democrats feel that way. A January 2017 poll by the Pew Research Center found that 74 percent of Republicans sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians, but just 33 percent of Democrats share that sentiment.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said "these developments collectively are a challenge to Jewish Democrats and Jewish organizations, not to rely on past achievements, alliances or party platforms."

Cooper, who has attended both Democratic and Republican national conventions and worked with elected officials from both parties, told “The Jewish community will have to retool and redouble its efforts to maintain the historic bipartisan support for Israel. If we don’t, those with an opposing set of priorities, those who oppose Israel have already shown how effective they are becoming in impacting on our democratic system.” {eoa}

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