



PERSPECTIVES

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Democratic Presidential Candidates and US Military Aid to Israel

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,332, October 31, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Three leading Democratic presidential candidates recently threatened to use US military aid to Israel as leverage to force changes in Israeli relations with the Palestinians. Their statements were hypocritical and ignored both the value of military aid to the US military and defense industries and the realities of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The threats should be seen in the wider context of growing antagonism within the Democratic party toward Israel. The next Israeli government will have to address this challenge.

Three of the four leading Democratic presidential candidates recently said they would consider cuts in US military aid as a means to pressure Jerusalem into changing its policy in the West Bank. Two of the three, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, belong to the radical branch of the party. They are battling two other contenders: former VP Joe Biden, who represents the moderate mainstream branch of the party; and Indiana mayor Pete Buttigieg, who ideologically could be placed between the two poles. Warren and Sanders hold radical views about many political, economic, and social issues and are isolationist on US foreign policy.

On October 20, 2019, Warren said at an event in Iowa that military aid to Israel could be conditional on stopping settlement expansion in the West Bank. "Right now, Netanyahu says he is going to take Israel in a direction of increasing settlements. That does not move us toward a two-state solution," she said. "It is the official policy of the United States of America to support a two-state solution, and if Israel is moving in the opposite direction then everything is on the table."

Warren was merely echoing Sanders, who said in June that he would “absolutely” consider dangling cuts to American military aid to Israel in order to lean on Jerusalem. He added, however, that he would not make decisions that render Israel militarily vulnerable. A month later, he said on the podcast *Pod Save America* that Israelis “absolutely have the right to live in peace, independence, and security,” but added that under Netanyahu, Israel had an “an extreme right-wing government with many racist tendencies” and he would consider using American military aid as leverage against it.

Last weekend, at a J Street event in Washington, Sanders said in response to a question about aid to Israel: “\$3.8 billion [a year] is a lot of money, and we cannot give it carte blanche to the Israeli government. If you want military aid, you’re going to have to fundamentally change your relationship [to Gaza].” He added that if elected, he would tell the Israeli government that some of the aid money “should go right now into humanitarian aid in Gaza.”

Buttigieg, a former US naval officer, has said: “I think that the aid is leverage to guide Israel in the right direction...If, for example, there is follow-through on these threats of annexation, I’m committed to ensuring that the US is not footing the bill for that.”

These statements are hypocritical and completely out of touch with the realities of Israeli politics, Palestinian-Israeli relations, and developments in the Middle East. The candidates all understand the nature of US military aid to Israel and deliberately distort it.

To see the hypocrisy and double standards clearly, we need only compare these statements about cutting military aid to Israel and the response to cuts in aid made by President Trump to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA). In September 2019, in a letter to Trump, Sanders and Warren joined 32 democratic Senators in condemning those cuts. Sanders and Warren ignored the Palestinians’ repeated rejection of peace negotiations and peace proposals offered by President Bill Clinton and VP Biden, as well as by Israeli PMs Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert. They also ignored the unrelenting Palestinian campaign of delegitimization against Israel and the monthly payments to terrorists convicted of murdering thousands of Israeli civilians.

Warren and Sanders further ignored UNRWA’s absurd mission, abuses of authority, and corruption. Unlike the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees agency (UNHCR), which helps to settle refugees around the world, UNRWA perpetuates the refugee status of millions of Palestinians. UNRWA’s schools use books that are filled with hatred toward Israel and opposition to any peace process. In Gaza, Hamas uses UNRWA’s schools as cover for the hiding and

launching of missiles. A recent UN report accused UNRWA of corruption, abuses of power, and mismanagement. UNRWA should have been dismantled decades ago and its functions transferred to UNHCR.

Use of the term “aid” in the context of US-Israeli defense relations is itself misleading. The more accurate and appropriate term is “investment.” First, it is all military. Second, most of the funds are reinvested back into the US economy, as Israel is required to spend 76% of the money at American defense manufacturers. Third, US military aid to Israel has historically been viewed as an investment in peace and security. Successive American administrations saw the aid package as key to helping Israel maintain its qualitative military edge over potential threats in the region, especially those emanating from Iran and its proxies Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah. Fourth, in return for aid, Israel provides the US military and defense industries with information about weapons effectiveness, develops innovative military technology like missile defense systems and border surveillance technology, and shares intelligence and battle-proven military doctrines.

Despite serious disagreements between President Barack Obama and PM Netanyahu, in September 2016 they signed a memorandum of understanding committing \$3.8 billion annually for military aid for the next 10 years. Obama and Biden recognized the value of a long-term investment in US-Israeli defense collaboration, which the three Democratic presidential candidates fail to do.

The agreement is for 10 years, but Congress must approve it annually. The threats made by the three candidates should therefore be taken seriously.

It is important to note that the threats didn’t appear in the candidates’ initial statements but rather as responses to questions posed by activists. Buttigieg was responding to a student activist from IfNotNow, an extreme anti-Zionist Jewish group that rejects Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state. The activist had asked the mayor during an election event at the University of Chicago on October 18 whether he “would make aid to Israel contingent upon ending the occupation.” Two days later, another IfNotNow activist asked Warren her position on making aid conditional on stopping settlement expansion.

IfNotNow has adopted a strategy of using Q&A sessions to obtain on-camera statements from leading candidates linking military aid to Israeli policy in the West Bank. The desirable answer is embedded in the question. The candidates, Israel, and US supporters of Israel should be aware of this strategy and be prepared to expose and combat the racist and antisemitic positions of IfNotNow and similar extreme movements such as Jewish Voices for Peace.

It could be that the threats made by the leading Democratic presidential candidates (excluding Biden) were mere campaign maneuvers. They were vague, and they all referred to statements made by Netanyahu during his own election campaign in September 2019 on the possible annexation of land in the West Bank. But election promises in the US are different from those in Israel. Netanyahu is known for failing to implement promises made during election campaigns over the past decade, but he is regularly reelected. In the US, voters take election commitments seriously and punish presidents who fail to implement them. In 1992, for example, the voters punished President George Bush, Sr. for his failure to keep his 1988 campaign promise not to raise taxes. This is why Trump has put so much effort into carrying out his campaign promises, including the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

That Democratic presidential candidates would find it objectionable to push the Palestinians and UNRWA to change their corrupt behavior while at the same time being adamant that military aid to America's closest ally in the Middle East be used as leverage against it is an indication of how prevalent anti-Israel sentiment has become within the Democratic Party. Sanders, Warren, and Buttigieg apparently feel they must voice severe criticism of Israel to satisfy the radical branch of the party.

Even if the Democratic party fails to defeat Trump in 2020, a Democrat will eventually be president, and the Democrats may win control of both the House and the Senate. The anti-Israeli trend in the Democratic party is deep, and it is expanding and intensifying. It is visible not only in the threats of the leading Democratic presidential candidates but in other areas as well. An extremely anti-Israeli group has emerged of four Democratic congresswomen – the "Squad" – made up of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and two Muslim antisemitic representatives, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan. This is a serious problem, and the next Israeli government will have to find effective ways to cope with it.

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