Opinion

News



An Israeli flag on Mount of Olives flies near the city of Jerusalem Feb. 13. (CNS photo/Jim Hollander, EPA)

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The results of a recent Pew Research Center poll have revealed some unexpected findings when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely a widening partisan divide on the question of whether Americans sympathize more with Israelis or Palestinians on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a partisan divide that is the widest at any point since 1978.

Support for Israel in the broad sense, or as a strategic asset, remains very strong, with the percentage of Republicans, since 2001, sympathizing more with Israel than the Palestinians increasing 29 percentage points, from 50 percent to 79 percent. It is with Democrats and Independents, however, that the drop in sympathy for Israel has been precipitous.

Among Democrats in general, only 27 percent said they sympathized more with Israel, reflecting a dramatic drop in sympathy for Israel of 11 points among Democrats since 2001, from 38 percent to 27 percent.

Some other numbers worth examining can be found when support among Democrats is broken down. While moderate and conservative Democrats continue to sympathize more with Israel (35 percent) than the Palestinians (17 percent), that number has dropped 18 points since 2016, from 53 percent to its current 35 percent. The share of liberal Democrats who sympathize more with Israel than the Palestinians has also declined 14 points since 2016, from 33 percent to 19 percent.

Pro-Israeli leaders and groups have picked up on the danger of sympathy and support for Israel becoming one more point of sharp partisan divide in the increasing, partisan polarization under President Trump, both in Congress and among the American public.

Nowhere have the alarm bells begun to ring louder on this issue than at the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, where there has been a growing recognition that navigating through the shoals of an ever more polarized political landscape is the new challenge for an organization that has always prioritized bipartisanship.

AIPAC's leadership recognizes that the pendulum of American politics swings both ways, and that Israel, as an issue, would suffer from being kicked around as a political football. It could well end up becoming one as politically divisive and as politicized as abortion or gun control.

The Trump presidency has only made this navigation more perilous. On the one hand, Trump has delivered on policies on AIPAC's agenda, such as moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem; pushing Congress to scrap or toughen up the Iran nuclear deal; cutting funds to the Palestinians; and speaking out forcefully against U.N. members who diverge from the U.S. on its Israel policy.

On the other hand, much of the American Jewish community recoils from Trump for his perceived bigotries and stances on issues such as immigration, minority and women's rights, and funding for social safety programs. His approval ratings among Jewish voters remain low — 26 percent according to Gallup in January 2018, 10 points below the national average. And this number was after Trump had announced the U.S. embassy's move to Jerusalem.

The unintended consequence for AIPAC of Trump's unabashed support has been the alienation of some Jewish Democrats who once felt at home with the lobby group. A former AIPAC board member described it this way: "I feel the right has taken over the organization and there is no respect for other opinions … It's not a place for me anymore."

This feeling among Democrats that the Republican right wing is exerting increasing influence over AIPAC has been exacerbated by Trump, but precedes his presidency. The sharp and public differences between the Democratic Obama administration and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government over Iran policy and settlements drove some Democrats away from support for Israel.

AIPAC regularly took Israel's side over the Obama administration in those disputes, leaving many in the Jewish American community very uncomfortable. This siding with a foreign country, Israel, over an American administration has proven to be a short-sighted policy that has contributed to the flight of Jewish Democrats and has also resulted in their vocal opposition to many Israeli policies.

Another important factor is that in recent years younger Americans, and especially younger minority Americans, have come to look at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a human rights issue. This makes them sensitive to the hardships faced by Palestinians living under Israeli occupation and to certain Israeli practices like home demolitions. These groups form a larger proportion of the voting public than they have in the past, and a growing proportion of the Democratic Party's core constituency.

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The increasing partisan divide over Israel-Palestine has caused some Israeli politicians and many on the American right to argue that Israel and its supporters should write off the Democratic party and its leaders. This "cut off your nose to spite your face" approach misses the point. The decline in support among progressives and Democrats has little to do with any ideological opposition to Israel in and of itself.

Rather, increasing sympathy for the Palestinians is the direct result of the actions of Israel's most right-wing government to date, actions that include expansionism and creeping annexation in the West Bank; rejection of a fair and just two-state solution; harsh treatment of the Palestinians; and Israeli prime minister Netanyahu's cozying up to President Trump.

Dismissing or ignoring the concerns of a large and growing segment of the American public will prove costly in the future and will alienate longtime Democratic allies across the political aisle. When the next crisis inevitably occurs, especially if the Democrats are back in power, Israeli and Jewish-American leaders who encouraged writing off the Democrats will rue the day they did.

Combine the above factors of partisanship regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; a liberal, Democratic, Jewish, American community feeling increasingly alienated by the Republican right wing agenda's dominating major pro-Israel lobby groups; and a younger, a multi-ethnic electorate increasingly sensitive to, and vocally critical of, the Israeli occupation and its treatment of the Palestinians, and you have a critical mass that could potentially be a future game changer in U.S. policy towards Israel-Palestine, especially when the next Democratic administration comes to power.

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