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BULLETIN

U.S. Citizens Split on Approach to Israel's War Against Hamas

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U.S. President Joe Biden's initial unconditional support for Israel in its war against Hamas, along with the increase in Palestinian casualties, has caused a split in the Democratic Party's electorate and among its politicians. In turn, the administration's subsequent condemnation of Israel's authorities and pressure to change its policies have fuelled criticism of the president by Republicans vying for the support of independent voters. Dissatisfaction among the Arab minority, some American Jews, as well as young left-wing voters and Black Americans sympathetic to Democratic Party policies, weakens their motivation to vote for Biden in the elections. It cannot be ruled out that this will determine the outcome.

In response to the [Hamas terrorist operation on 7 October last year](#) and the Israeli government's declaration of war against the organisation, [the United States gave Israel significant political, military, intelligence, and diplomatic support](#). However, in the months that followed, a rift grew between the Biden administration and the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over rising civilian casualties and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. U.S. authorities pressured Israel to facilitate the flow of humanitarian supplies in the Strip. In March, the American armed forces began airdropping aid and [Biden announced the construction of a temporary port on the Gaza coast](#) (completed in May). However, even the deaths of seven World Central Kitchen volunteers (including Jacob Flickinger, who held dual U.S. and Canadian citizenship, and a Pole, Damian Soból) in April, an attack that reverberated throughout Washington, did not significantly change the U.S. approach to Israel, including key military support. The initial unconditional support and the Biden administration's subsequent inconsistency towards Israel on the tens of thousands of civilian casualties triggered widespread reactions from the American public.

Arab Minority Opposition. Biden's support for Israel has led to a split among Americans of Arab descent. However, this community is relatively small, at about 3.5 million people (1% of the population). The largest number of them live in

California (about 320,000 are residents, 0.8% of the state's population), while the largest concentration is in Michigan (about 211,000, 2.1%), one of the politically "undecided" states (a so-called swing state). In an October 2023 survey conducted for the Arab American Institute (AAI), support among this group for Biden has declined from 59% in 2020 to 17%. In the long term, the position of the Arab community in the U.S. has strengthened. [Congress' approval of an aid package for Israel](#), among others, also contributed to this. A survey for AAI in May showed an increase in those dissatisfied with Biden's approach to the Gaza war, from 67% in October to 88%. The Democratic Party's Ilhan Omar, who was born in Somalia, and Rashida Tlaib, the Detroit-born daughter of Palestinian immigrants, are the exponents of the Arab minority's opposition in Congress. Along with other [progressives](#), they are resisting Biden's approach and calling for greater respect for Palestinian rights, including recognition of statehood.

Reaction of American Jews. The American Jewish community of about 7.5 million people (2.4% of the population) is divided. They have traditionally been supporters of the Democrats: in 2020, 70% voted for Biden. The build-up of dominance of the right in Israel and the unconditional support for Israel by more extreme Republicans and Evangelicals have caused a split among Americans of Jewish descent. Their centre-right lobbying groups favour the current government in Israel and

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mostly support Biden's policies, while progressive-left groups criticise Netanyahu and lobby for a more assertive U.S. policy toward Israel. These divisions are also apparent among other groups, including people in business and the entertainment industry. Nearly 90% of American Jews say they believe there is no contradiction in criticism of the authorities in Israel and a "pro-Israel" stance. The war in Gaza has spawned a schism between younger and older Jews. While half of American Jews aged 18-34 approve of Israel's handling of the war against Hamas, as much as 42% find it unacceptable. Some of them may not vote in the upcoming elections.

Party Positions. Disappointment with Biden's approach is reflected in Congress, even among the president's influential Democratic Party allies associated with the party's centre (such as Sens. Ben Cardin, Chris Coons, and Chris Van Hollen). Among other things, they are opposed to maintaining unconditional military support. Chuck Schumer, the Senate majority leader and highest-ranking American politician of Jewish descent in history, outright called Netanyahu an obstacle to peace and called for elections in Israel. The support of Republicans and their electorate for Israel has not changed since the beginning of the war against Hamas. They staunchly defend its right to defend itself and criticise any attempt by Biden to put pressure on Israel. Relevant in this context are the statements of Donald Trump, who as president was extremely sympathetic to Israel. He has tactically avoided clear statements on the war, saying, for example, that Israel "should finish what it started", although in recent months he has criticised Israel's publication of footage of military operations, which he sees as a loss of information advantage. Some of Trump's advisers take a position identical to the Israeli far right: Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and former ambassador to Israel David Friedman want the expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza and annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories.

Broader Public Reaction. In a March poll conducted by Gallup, only 27% of Americans said they supported Biden's approach to the Gaza crisis. Broken down by party declaration, 47% of Democratic voters, only 21% of independent voters, and 16% of Republicans gave their support. It also showed a deterioration in the American public's ratings of Israel itself. While last November 50% supported the ongoing military action in Gaza and 45% were against it, in March this year support dropped to 36% and the group of opponents expanded to 55%. The low support among independent voters is due to two opposing reasons, part of this group is disillusioned with insufficient pressure on Israel, while the rest are opposed to questioning the alliance with Israel and the transfer of humanitarian aid to Palestine. Particularly important to the outcome of the presidential election, which may be decided by a small number of voters in only several states, are the sympathies of two groups: Black Americans and young voters. According to a Pew Research Center survey, more Black voters support the Palestinian side in the dispute than the Israeli side (as opposed to white voters). Among young voters under 30, more than a third are unequivocally in favour of Palestine compared to 14% in favour of Israel.

Prominent examples of this group's opposition are the student protests that have been ongoing since last December at more than a hundred American colleges and universities. Demonstrators—students as well as faculty, including those of Arab and Jewish descent—are demanding, among other things, an end to investments in companies involved in the war in Gaza, those linked to Israel's arms industry and/or operating in the Palestinian occupied territories. The brutal police response (more than 3,000 people arrested) garnered sympathy for the protesters and led to the expansion of the demonstrations, which have been the largest of their kind since the Vietnam War.

Conclusions and Outlook. The situation in Gaza and the U.S. approach to it will continue to polarise Republicans and Democrats, and will further reinforce divisions within the Democratic Party due to growing discontent among progressives. They may believe that Biden is not heeding their demands. The president's past approach to Israel and lack of prospects for tightening it will make it difficult for him to regain support among the Arab minority. While it is unlikely that these voters will decide to vote for Trump, given his pro-Israel stance, it may weaken their motivation to participate in the November elections, or lead them to support any of the third-party candidates, such as Robert Kennedy Jr., Jill Stein, or Cornel West. A more significant problem for Biden will be the dissatisfaction of the broader leftist electorate, including young and Black voters. In addition, his chances may be lessened by the demobilisation of some American Jews, who usually vote Democratic.

While foreign affairs usually do not significantly influence the U.S. presidential campaign, the approach to the Gaza conflict (as well as support for Ukraine) may become one of the defining issues. Trump and Biden currently have similar support in nationwide polls. If this holds up, a few states and a small percentage of voters there could determine the outcome of the election. The administration's support for Israel is currently the most demotivating factor for important groups of voters, something Republicans will strive to maintain. Trump's vague statements are not indicative of a change in the former president's approach to Israel itself. He wants to discount Biden's criticism inside the Democratic camp. If he ostentatiously stood behind Israel, undecided Democratic-leaning voters would realise that they are closer to Biden on the Gaza conflict, however. In addition, the bipartisan dissatisfaction of independent voters opens up an opportunity for Republicans to fight for that part of the electorate that expects unequivocal and unconditional U.S. support for Israel.

Regardless of the electoral context, a generational and partisan shift in attitudes toward Israel is underway in the U.S. that will weigh on American policy in the Middle East in the future. The younger generation does not see the legitimacy of such strong support for Israel as the older generation, and the loudest group supporting the Israeli authorities is no longer the moderate core of Democrats, but the Christian Republican right.