

# Israel losing US perception battle as Palestinian sympathy grows

Opinion of legislators and the US public had already begun to shift before the 11-day bombardment of Gaza.



*Supporters of Palestinians rally during at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC*

By Anchal Vohra  
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Last month, as Israel carried out an 11-day bombing campaign on the besieged Gaza Strip and Hamas, the Palestinian group that controls the Strip, fired rockets back, something important was shifting halfway around the world.

For the first time in a long time, Israel seemed to be losing ground in the battle of perception in the United States as lawmakers questioned their government's pro-Israel policies.

“This is not about both sides,” said US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in a speech, “this is about an imbalance of power,” which tilts in favour of Israel largely because of American military and diplomatic support.

“The president has said that Israel has a right to defend itself. But do Palestinians have a right to survive?”

Her colleague, Rashida Tlaib, made an emotive appeal in her address to the US Congress as she recounted the story of a helpless Palestinian mother.

“She said tonight I put the kids to sleep in our bedroom so when we die, we die together. And no one would live to mourn the loss of others,” said Tlaib tearfully. “The statement broke me a little more because my country’s policies and funding would deny this mother’s right to see children live, her own children live, without fear.”

Among the nearly 250 Palestinians killed in Israeli air attacks, 66 were children. The New York Times printed their faces on the front page and various American publications and news networks made more room for young Palestinian voices through the course of the clashes.

### **Black Lives Matter and ‘net sympathy’**

The shift in American perception was perhaps made stark by just how antagonistic the policies of the Trump administration were towards Palestinian demands.

A recent poll revealed that even though the impression of Israel was still positive in the US, sympathy towards the Palestinians has risen over the last two years, a time Americans fought against racial discrimination in their own country.

Gallup’s annual update of Americans’ views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on polling done before the recent violence flared showed that younger adults and liberal Democrats were increasingly leaning towards Palestinians in the intractable conflict.

Even Republicans’ view of the Palestinian Authority improved this year, the survey added.

While 33 percent of liberal Democrats sympathised more with the Israelis, 48 percent sympathised more with the Palestinians, “yielding a net sympathy score of -15 for Israel”, according to the Gallup poll.

Before the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for racial justice two years ago, Liberal Democrats sympathised evenly with Israelis and Palestinians.

“Moderate and conservative Democrats’ views are nearly a mirror image of liberal Democrats’: 48 percent sympathise more with the Israelis and 32 percent with the Palestinians in 2021, yielding +16 net sympathy for Israel,” the survey added.

Long-term net sympathy for Israel has declined among both groups of Democrats, the report concluded.

It said: “the Democrats’ views are now at a tipping point, with their sympathy for the Palestinians roughly matching their sympathy for Israel, while liberal Democrats have fully crossed the threshold and now sympathise more with the Palestinians.”

### **‘Eroded support for Israel’**

Dana al-Kurd, author of *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* and an assistant professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, said the change in perception is more thanks to consistent and effective digital activism by Palestinians than American newsrooms.

She added greater inclusiveness in the Democratic party under Joe Biden as US president certainly played a role.

“Bringing in more people of colour into Congress and institutions of power makes a difference,” said al-Kurd.

“Crucially, also, Black Lives Matter – that really changed the discourse and shifted how people view issues of racism and apartheid. And Palestinians have been very supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement and have made connections with activists and organisers. So that has shifted perception on the Palestinian question.”

“We see Jewish voices for peace, and the emergence of really progressive discussions among Jewish Americans,” she added. “All that has eroded support for Israel.”

Anwar Mhajne, an assistant professor at Stonehill College in Massachusetts and a political scientist specialising in international relations, acknowledged there seemed to be a slight shift in the attitudes of the American press towards the conflict and attributed it to the broader change in US politics.

“The several Democratic members of the House of Representatives who spoke out against the United States military support for Israel and called for the protection of Palestinians’ rights is also an evidence of increased visibility for Palestinian voices and the acknowledgement of Palestinian suffering and experiences of the occupation,” said Mhajne.

“These are important shifts that activists on the ground and abroad are aware of and are trying to utilise to promote their cause.”

### **‘Conducive to re-thinking the issue’**

Others expressed hope the changing opinion in the US might encourage the Biden administration to not only pay attention to the conflict but also play the role the US has historically promised – an honest broker.

Tamara al-Rifai, spokesperson for United Nation’s refugee agency for Palestinians (UNRWA) said in her view the issue of the unresolved conflict, including the plight of Palestinian refugees, received much-needed attention after a long time.

Out of two million people in Gaza, 1.4 million are refugees, noted al-Rifai as she added it was time to take the conversation forward towards a lasting resolution.

“There is an environment conducive to re-thinking the issue of Palestine refugees and the need for equal rights and non-discrimination in the occupied Palestinian territories,” she told Al Jazeera.

“The UNRWA commissioner-general briefed the UN Security Council on Thursday and reiterated that only a genuine political track can bring lasting peace – and not just a fragile ceasefire,” said al-Rifai.

“The US has resumed its strong support to UNRWA this year, which is something we truly welcome, not just as a donor but also as a partner and a UN member state with sufficient weight/gravitas to help tilt the conversation back to one on finding a political solution.”

An American journalist, Emily Wilder, was fired by her employer The Associated Press reportedly for tweets that reflected a bias towards Palestinians.

Wilder refuted the accusation and in a statement said she had been made “victim to the asymmetrical enforcement of rules around objectivity and social media”. She said the AP told her she was sacked for violating the company’s social media policy but did not say which tweets specifically violated that policy.

While support for Palestinians seemed to be rising in the West as more liberals enter government and as Palestinians inside Palestine and across the world use digital platforms to tell their stories, support for Israel has not waned.

There is, however, a renewed momentum in the international community for a two-state solution that seemed to have been taken off the table under Donald Trump.