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U.S.

Ties Between Jews, Democratic Party Face New Pressures

Growing criticism of Israel from party's left flank alienates some liberal Jews



Vice President Mike Pence addresses a gathering of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington. PHOTO: KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

By Ian Lovett and Emily Glazer

Updated March 26, 2019 11:49 a.m. ET

Regina Perlmutter describes her politics as “so left wing you have no idea.”

The 68-year-old has never voted Republican and until recently, planned to support Bernie Sanders for president. But she recently wrote to the Vermont senator to tell him she was withdrawing her support because, she said, he isn't doing enough to oppose anti-Semitism.

“I'm not left wing anymore,” Ms. Perlmutter said after a recent Shabbat service in Los Angeles, “because the left wing has turned against Israel.”

Jewish Americans and the Democratic Party are one of the strongest alliances in U.S. politics. The Pew Research Center found that 79% of Jews backed Democrats for Congress last year, the most lopsided margin of any religious group, while a Gallup poll showed 71% disapproved of President Trump's job performance. Mr. Trump has been accused of, and has denied, using anti-Semitic tropes on Twitter.

So while the vast majority of Democratic elected officials are pro-Israel, and there is no evidence that more Jews are signing up en masse to support Mr. Trump's re-election, growing criticism of Israel on the political left is a rising source of tension going into 2020.

For the first time, several members of Congress, all Democrats, are publicly supporting a movement called BDS, to boycott, divest, and sanction Israel over its treatment of Palestinians. One of them, Rep. Ilhan Omar, this month criticized “people who push for allegiance to a foreign country,” a comment widely viewed as invoking an anti-Semitic trope that American Jews aren't loyal to their home country.

MoveOn, a progressive activist group, called on presidential candidates to boycott this week's annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which is closely allied with the Israeli government. At least six Democratic contenders, including Sens. Sanders, Kamala Harris, and Elizabeth Warren, didn't attend. A spokesman for Ms. Harris cited scheduling. Spokespeople for Mr. Sanders and Ms. Warren didn't respond to requests for comment.

As the country's politics have grown more polarized, opinion on Israel has started to split.

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While those on the right view Israel—which has been led by a conservative prime minister since 2009—more favorably than they did a decade ago, polls show liberals have grown less likely to sympathize with Israel in its conflict with the

Palestinians. Young people—a growing part of the Democratic base—are least likely to sympathize with Israel.

Republicans have sought to take advantage of the discord. Speaking at the Aipac conference on Monday, Vice President Mike Pence said Democrats had been “co-opted by people who promote rank anti-Semitic rhetoric.”

Some Jews on the left say criticism of Israeli policies isn’t anti-Semitic and have taken aim at conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is using photos of himself with Mr. Trump in re-election campaign posters.

But others are now questioning how enthusiastically they should support the party with which they agree on most economic and social issues.

“The Democratic Party is still my home, but for the first time in my life, I think it’s possible that it will not be my home at some point in the future,” said Amanda Berman, a 33-year-old lawyer.

She said criticism of Israel has become a litmus test in many liberal organizations. After a woman was kicked out of a 2017 LGBT march in Chicago for carrying a flag with a Jewish Star of David on it, Ms. Berman founded the Zioness Movement, a group to advocate for progressive Zionists.

She fears what has happened to the Labour Party in the U.K.—which several members of Parliament quit this year, saying the party had become anti-Semitic—could occur with Democrats.

Dov Hikind, a former Democratic state legislator in New York who represented a Brooklyn district with a large Jewish population for more than 30 years, said he believes Democrats could “pay a heavy price in terms of the Jewish community,” especially in swing states with large Jewish populations like Florida.

“I would not call the Democratic Party anti-Israel or anti-Jews, but the party has a problem with Jews and Israel,” Mr. Hikind said.

As the Aipac conference began on Sunday, Rep. Steny Hoyer (D., Md.) suggested that Ms. Omar didn’t represent the views of the party on Israel. He added that he would push for a bipartisan resolution opposing the BDS movement, which is popular on some college campuses.

“When someone accuses American supporters of Israel of dual loyalty, I say: accuse me,” Mr. Hoyer said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) spoke at the conference on Tuesday, said Democrats remained strong allies of Israel. “In our democratic societies, we should honor legitimate debate on how best to honor our values and to advance our priorities without questioning loyalty or patriotism,” Mrs. Pelosi said.

Haim Saban, an Israeli-American billionaire who has been a major donor to the Democratic Party and pro-Israel causes, said he would be “following closely who emerges as we progress

into the primaries, including who goes to the Aipac conference and who ignores it and why.” He said he remains a loyal Democrat and once he decides which presidential candidate to support, he will “go all in.”

Mr. Saban added that Democrats who support the BDS movement—including Ms. Omar—are “supplying the Republicans with ammunition to taint the whole Democratic Party.”

Following Ms. Omar’s most recent comments about Israel, several Jewish Democratic donors in California said they reached out to Mrs. Pelosi’s office and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Some donors have even discussed funding a primary challenger to Ms. Omar in 2020, one of them said.

A spokesman for Ms. Omar said people should “distinguish between criticism of a particular faith and fair critiques of lobbying groups.”

Sharon Brous, a rabbi in Los Angeles, is among those who say progressives should offer fair criticism of the Israeli government, adding that the biggest threat to Jews comes from violent extremists on the right, like the white supremacist who killed 11 people in a Pittsburgh synagogue last year. Still, she said the normalization of anti-Semitism on the left was also a danger.

“The Jewish community perceives itself to be really vulnerable,” Ms. Brous said. “That’s something our friends and allies need to understand.”

Corrections & Amplifications

U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris didn’t attend the AIPAC conference for scheduling reasons, according to a spokesman. Spokespeople for Sens. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren didn’t respond to requests for comment on why they didn’t attend. An earlier version of this article said they boycotted at the request of the activist group MoveOn. Also, Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the House. An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified her as majority leader. (March 27)

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Appeared in the March 27, 2019, print edition as ‘Democrats’ Bond With Jewish Voters Tested.’

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