

United States: ‘American society will have to divest from Israel before our leaders do’

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In Ohio and around the U.S., pro-Palestine activists alienated by the presidential race are redoubling their efforts in local elections.

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In Ohio, a state that has voted for Donald Trump in the last two U.S. presidential elections, a staunchly pro-Palestinian congressional candidate may seem unlikely and unviable. Even more so in a district whose current Republican congressman [told an interviewer](#) last October that Gaza should be “eviscerated” and “turned into a parking lot.” Yet former Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich is seeking a return to Washington in the November election — this time as an independent, and a vocal critic of the unconditional support Israel receives under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

As the Mayor of Cleveland, Ohio’s second most populous city, in the late 1970s, Kucinich was a [frequent customer](#) at Tony’s Diner on 117th Street. The west Cleveland landmark closed in 1997, but the intersection where it once stood is still home to a Middle Eastern supermarket, which now faces a shawarma stand. A few blocks down Lorain Avenue are a Yemeni restaurant and a bakery selling two kinds of knafeh, the phyllo-topped sweet cheese pastry made famous in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus.



Uncommitted delegates Meryem Maameri and Asma Mohammed, both of Minnesota, lock arms as they enter the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Aug. 22, 2024. (Lorie Shaull/Wikimedia Commons)

Kucinich’s popularity in this neighborhood — now home to a [sizeable Palestinian-American community](#) — helped propel his political career, which included eight terms in Congress and two presidential runs. His track record included opposing the U.S. invasion of Iraq, speaking out against Israel’s [December 2008-January 2009 assault](#) on Gaza, and leading a delegation to the besieged

territory just after the bombing stopped. Since October 7, he has been an [outspoken](#) critic of what he calls Israel’s “genocidal fury against the people of Gaza in the name of wiping out Hamas.”

Earlier this month, Kucinich earned the [endorsement](#) of Ohio’s largest-circulation newspaper, the Plain Dealer. Although it’s unclear whether the endorsement will sway voters, campaigns like Kucinich’s hint at an emerging trend across the United States, where unqualified support for Israel has long been considered a political litmus test for local, state, and Congressional candidates. In a year when the pro-Israel lobby has already spent more than [\\$100 million](#) to oust critics of Israel’s assault on Gaza, Kucinich’s rise points to a willingness by so-called down-ballot candidates — ones that are not running for the White House — to challenge the major parties’ stances on Israel.



Former Congressman Dennis Kucinich speaking at the 2013 International Students for Liberty Conference in Washington, D.C. (Gage Skidmore/Wikimedia Commons)

After the Uncommitted Movement

If there was any question where Democrats stood, it was put to rest during the party’s convention in Chicago last month, when organizers denied a speaking spot to Georgia State House Representative Ruwa Rumman. A Palestinian American, Rumman was one of [36 delegates](#) representing the more than half-a-million Democratic voters who cast “uncommitted” ballots in the party’s primary earlier this year rather than support President Joe Biden. The protest vote [aimed to pressure](#) the Biden administration into changing course on Gaza, but it was just one of many indications that the Democratic party was out of step with its base.

In an interview published just two days before the convention, the city’s mayor, Brandon Johnson, [called](#) Israel’s war on Gaza “genocidal” — a far cry from anything Harris or her designees were willing to say. To observers of the Palestinian rights movement, though, Johnson’s take wasn’t surprising. As early as March 2023, well before Israel killed more than 40,000 Palestinians in Gaza, a [Pew poll](#) showed that, for the first time, more Democrats sympathize with Palestinians than with Israelis. By May 2024, a majority of Democrats, Republicans, and independents supported a permanent ceasefire, according to a Data for Progress and [Zeteo poll](#).

The organized labor movement, too, has thrown its weight behind calls to end Israel’s onslaught. On the last day of the DNC, the United Auto Workers, which has endorsed Harris, [warned](#) that, if it wanted to win the election, “the Democratic Party must allow a Palestinian-American speaker to be heard.”

Ultimately, the party refused. In a Sept. 19 [statement](#), the Uncommitted National Movement said Harris had made it “impossible” to endorse her. “For months, we have urged Vice President Harris to shift her Gaza policy so we could mobilize voters in key states to save lives and our democracy,” the statement said. “The DNC and Vice President Harris’s campaign fumbled even a small gesture to unite our party ahead of November by rejecting the simple request for a Palestinian-American speaker.”



An uncommitted delegate wears the Democratic Majority for Palestine button at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Aug. 22, 2024. (Lorie Shaull/Wikimedia Commons)

The Harris campaign acknowledged, in [statement](#) issued after the DNC, that a “small minority of voters” will determine the outcome of the presidential election. With the latest [polls](#) showing Americans evenly split between Harris and Trump — even after a Sept. 10 debate that most observers agree Harris won — it’s clear that Democrats’ messaging is not winning over undecided voters. That’s despite staking out a hardline position on immigration, meant to appeal to conservatives who may be on the fence about a second Trump term.

But despite these razor-thin margins, and widespread support among Democratic voters for an immediate and permanent ceasefire, Democrats have yet to shift their position on Gaza. That may be because AIPAC’s spending spree this election has already taken down two popular Congressional Democrats, Cori Bush of Missouri and Jamaal Bowman of New York, both of whom lost primary races to challengers from their own party. But taken together, the Bush and Bowman losses represent what Palestinian analyst Yousef Munayyer has [called](#) a “pyrrhic victory” for AIPAC. Beyond the amount of money it took to help defeat the two — more than [\\$8 million](#) in the Bush race alone — AIPAC has failed to oust other candidates, such as Dave Min of California or [Summer Lee](#) of Pennsylvania.

Denied an audience at the convention, some supporters of Palestinian rights are now backing away from politics altogether. Following the DNC, the group Muslim Women for Harris-Walz [disbanded](#), saying that it could not “in good conscience” continue its work in light of the campaign’s refusal to allow a Palestinian American speaker. But others, says Eman Abdelhadi, an assistant professor and sociologist at the University of Chicago, see exclusion and alienation from presidential politics as an incentive to redouble their efforts in local races.

Although she acknowledges that “Harris’s commitment to the genocide and her rightward shift generally” are leaving some voters disillusioned with the electoral process, Abdelhadi adds that local elections have also become “extremely important for building ground-up pressure.”



Eman Abdelhadi. (Courtesy)

Part of what makes local elections more appealing to activists is that, unlike the presidential race, winners are chosen by a straightforward tally of popular votes — not the electoral college — so down-ballot candidates must appeal to a broader cross-section of voters in their districts. To ensure their voices and priorities are heard, Arab-American groups are organizing nationwide polls;

[Nothing About Us, Without Us](#), a recent effort led by a coalition of Arab-American organizations, aims “to document and collect the diverse opinions of Arab-American communities” and use the results “to influence policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels.”

For Abdelhadi, such grassroots initiatives are key to sustaining the progress Palestine advocates have made in the past year. “Honestly, the silver lining to [Harris] doubling down is that we can focus our energies where we are likely to build long-term power — on the local and grassroots scale,” she says.

“We have done a great job of mobilizing this year, and now we need to shift to organizing,” Abdelhadi adds. “Many of us are thinking about how to build power from the ground up, through workplace organizing, boycott campaigns, local elections, and, of course, continued pressure in the streets. American society will have to divest from Israel before our leaders do.”

From Jerusalem to Cleveland

One key to understanding this shift toward local organizing is to see how it is playing out in cities like Cleveland, where Palestine advocates don’t have the same proximity to national politics as larger organizations in Washington, DC or New York City. What they lack in access, though, these activists make up for in their deep local roots and networks.

Of the 11 candidates vying to represent northern Ohio in the U.S. Congress, only three showed up at an Aug. 28 candidate town hall co-sponsored by the Arab American Voter Project, the state chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and the Arab Americans of Cleveland Young Professionals Network. Although Kucinich was not able to attend, he sent Palestinian-American Khalid Bahhur to speak in his place as a campaign surrogate.



Khalid Bahhur. (Courtesy)

Born in Jerusalem to parents residing in the West Bank city of Al-Bireh, next to Ramallah, Bahhur emigrated with his family as an infant, first to Venezuela and then to the United States, where they made a home in Cleveland. The steady influx of Palestinians as well as greater employment opportunities had attracted others to Ohio from the West Bank, including the family of Riyadh Mansour, Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations.

Bahhur, now retired, went on to serve as a public official in Cleveland — most recently as its Commissioner of Airports, where he became the first Palestinian to hold that position anywhere in the country. His tenure began prior to the administration of current Mayor Justin Bibb, a Democrat, but it was Bibb who, in April, [refused](#) to sign a Cleveland City Council ceasefire resolution, saying that it did not “adequately reflect” his views.

“The local Palestinian community is still trying to decipher what those views are,” Bahhur tells me.

The legislation, which earned passage in the council after five months of weekly protests and public comment by local activists, called for an end to Israel’s assault and condemned “all forms of hate and discrimination.”

To Bahhur, Bibb’s stance was not surprising given the mayor’s “attitude and lack of empathy” toward the thousands of Palestinians living and working within Cleveland’s boundaries. Cuyahoga County, for which Cleveland is the county seat, has [invested](#) \$16 million in Israel bonds, or about six percent of the roughly \$260 million held by the Ohio treasury. “In Cleveland,” Bahhur explains, “there has been a common theme: if you want to score political points, you vilify the Palestinian community.”

Bahhur is now part of an “Anyone but Bibb” campaign, which hopes to oust the mayor when his current term ends in January of 2026. Although the campaign has yet to pledge its support to a challenger, some of its members, including Bahhur, have been working to re-elect Kucinich to Congress, where he would represent the district that includes part of Cleveland.



Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb greets President Joe Biden at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, July 6, 2022. (The White House)

With no independent candidate left in the presidential race, Bahhur is clear that neither major party represents him in this election. “I am not voting for either candidate,” he says. “I don’t think there is anything that Harris can say that will change my mind.”

‘We can save democracy by saving humanity’

In the face of Democratic party intransigence, dozens of American cities — in Ohio and around the country — have already passed resolutions calling for a ceasefire. Ahmad Jadallah, an Akron, Ohio-based physician who recently returned from a volunteer medical mission in the West Bank and has been urging his city council to recognize Palestinian suffering and its root causes, was part of a group of activists who helped pass one of the country’s first [local ceasefire resolutions](#) after October 7. The resolution also called for Israel to abide by international law and end its illegal occupation.

But beyond passing resolutions, Jadallah says elected representatives need to do more to address their constituents’ concerns. He points to investments by Summit County, where Akron is located, in the Development Corporation for Israel. According to the DCI website, the corporation issues bonds that finance “every sector of Israel’s economy.” To Jadallah and other activists in Akron and nearby Cleveland, these investments, which impose no restrictions on military-related assets, make the state complicit in Israel’s war on Gaza and violations of international law.

“It’s very frustrating when you know your tax dollars are funding the atrocities and occupation,” Jadallah tells me. “Tax dollars that could be used to help friends and family here are being used to destroy the lives of friends and family in Palestine.”

Despite efforts to meet with the city’s mayor and council members over a proposed [Nakba Day](#) commemoration, Jadallah says he and other activists have been “getting the runaround,” with some

elected officials making clear that ending Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza is not a priority, especially during an election year. "They say it's not a local issue because it is happening so far away," Jadallah explains. He says the council's stance is "hypocritical" and points to the city's annual commemoration of the Holocaust, which "occurred a world away" but is "essential to educating citizens about the past while avoiding its repetition."

For Jadallah, ending the slaughter of Palestinian civilians isn't a distraction from the November vote. It's a linchpin issue that could make or break candidates' chances up and down the ballot — from the presidency to state assemblies, school boards, and city councils. "They're telling us, 'save democracy,'" Jadallah says of the Democrats' pitch to voters. "But we say, we can do one better — we can save democracy by saving humanity."

Samer Badawi

P.S.

• +972. September 27, 2024:

<https://www.972mag.com/palestine-movement-us-local-elections/>

• Samer Badawi has been a contributor to +972 Magazine since 2014.

• Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

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