

Opinion **US presidential election 2024**

'Gaza' is the word Democrats dare not whisper in Chicago

Silence is the wisest option for Kamala Harris on a divisive election issue that is harming the global image of the US

EDWARD LUCE



A pro-Palestinian protester is led away by a police officer after clashes near the Israeli consulate in Chicago on Wednesday © Eduardo Munoz/Reuters

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

If there was a Democratic taboo in Chicago, Gaza would be it: *Don't mention the war*. Stray dissenters have had Palestinian flags taken away; a hijab-wearing protester was drowned out by chants of “We love Joe” and hit with a Biden placard after interrupting the president’s speech; permitted demonstrations are quarantined some distance away. Even to raise America’s most controversial foreign policy issue is to tempt fate.

Yet silence is Kamala Harris’s wisest option. As Biden’s vice-president, Harris cannot break openly with her boss. The last time this dilemma arose was in 1968 when Hubert Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson’s number two and the Democratic nominee, agonised on whether to call for a halt to the carpet bombing of North Vietnam. Prevarication helped cost Humphrey the election.

The Harris equivalent would be to threaten an arms embargo unless Israel agrees to a ceasefire. Such a stance would undercut Biden, who last week waved through yet another \$20bn arms package for Israel. Even if Biden encouraged Harris to play bad cop to his good on Israel, silence would still be her best campaign stance.

[A clear stand either way](#) would cost Harris support. Championing the status quo would further alienate progressives, including the 100,000 who chose “uncommitted”

over Biden in the Michigan primary earlier this year. Harris's White House hopes depend on winning swing states such as Michigan, which could hinge on a few thousand votes.

But threatening to use America's leverage over Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, could blow up in Harris's face. She already alienated some Jewish-American voters when she opted against Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania's governor, as her running mate. Her choice was almost certainly motivated by Shapiro's White House ambitions. No president wants a number two who is impatient for the future. Her pick, [Tim Walz](#), is supposedly free of aspirations to the top spot.

Either way, Harris has been dogged by rumours that she omitted Shapiro because of his apparently stronger pro-Israeli leanings, or even because he is Jewish. Shapiro dismissed Donald Trump's claim that Harris omitted him because he was Jewish. "Trump is the least credible person when it comes to hate and bigotry and certainly antisemitism," he said. Pennsylvania has a large Jewish population. The state is also critical to Harris's ability to win.

The downside to Harris saying nothing is that each side has scope to imagine the worst of her. As Democrats celebrate the vibes around their new standard-bearer, [America's global reputation](#) is suffering untold damage. Visual tours of Gaza are redolent of Warsaw 1945 or Grozny 1999. No one surveying the levelled territory could believe that Israel has practised anything like precision bombing. "Indiscriminate" is not quite right. Israel's razing of Gaza looks more like a deliberate policy to teach Palestinians a collective lesson, chiefly with American weapons.

That Biden is being celebrated as a great president in Chicago is partly a function of Democratic guilt. The party forced him to quit with uncharacteristic ruthlessness. Praising him on the way out is one way to salve its conscience. Yet the encomia for Biden risk straying into hyperbole. His poor record on the Middle East dates back to before the Hamas slaughter on October 7 last year.

He failed to redeem his promise to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal. Trump pulled America out in 2018. Biden's hyper-caution was motivated by fear of the pro-Netanyahu Israeli lobby, which always saw the Iran deal as appeasement. That set the template for his response to October 7. Every time Netanyahu has called Biden's bluff, he has caved. A Martian observing the relationship between the US and Israel might conclude that Israel was calling the shots. On the few occasions that Biden has hinted he might use America's power to restrain Israel, he has felt obliged to climb down.

Biden is once again this week trying to push Netanyahu into a ceasefire. [His effort](#)

Biden is once again this week trying to push Netanyahu into a ceasefire. [His effort looks](#) as forlorn as previous ones. With luck, Harris will get through the next 10 weeks without a wider Middle East war. If she defeats Trump in November, we will find out what she really thinks. She has hinted thickly that she is far more upset than Biden about the human toll in Gaza.

The one question on which Harris should speak out is the fate of Palestinians if Trump won. He has no interest in their plight. Nor should it be a mystery where antisemitism is most menacing in America. The anti-Zionist left may chant infantile slogans about freeing Palestine “from the river to the sea”. But as Chicago shows, they are barely inside the Democratic tent. Trump, meanwhile, has dined with Holocaust deniers at Mar a Lago. This is not complicated.

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