



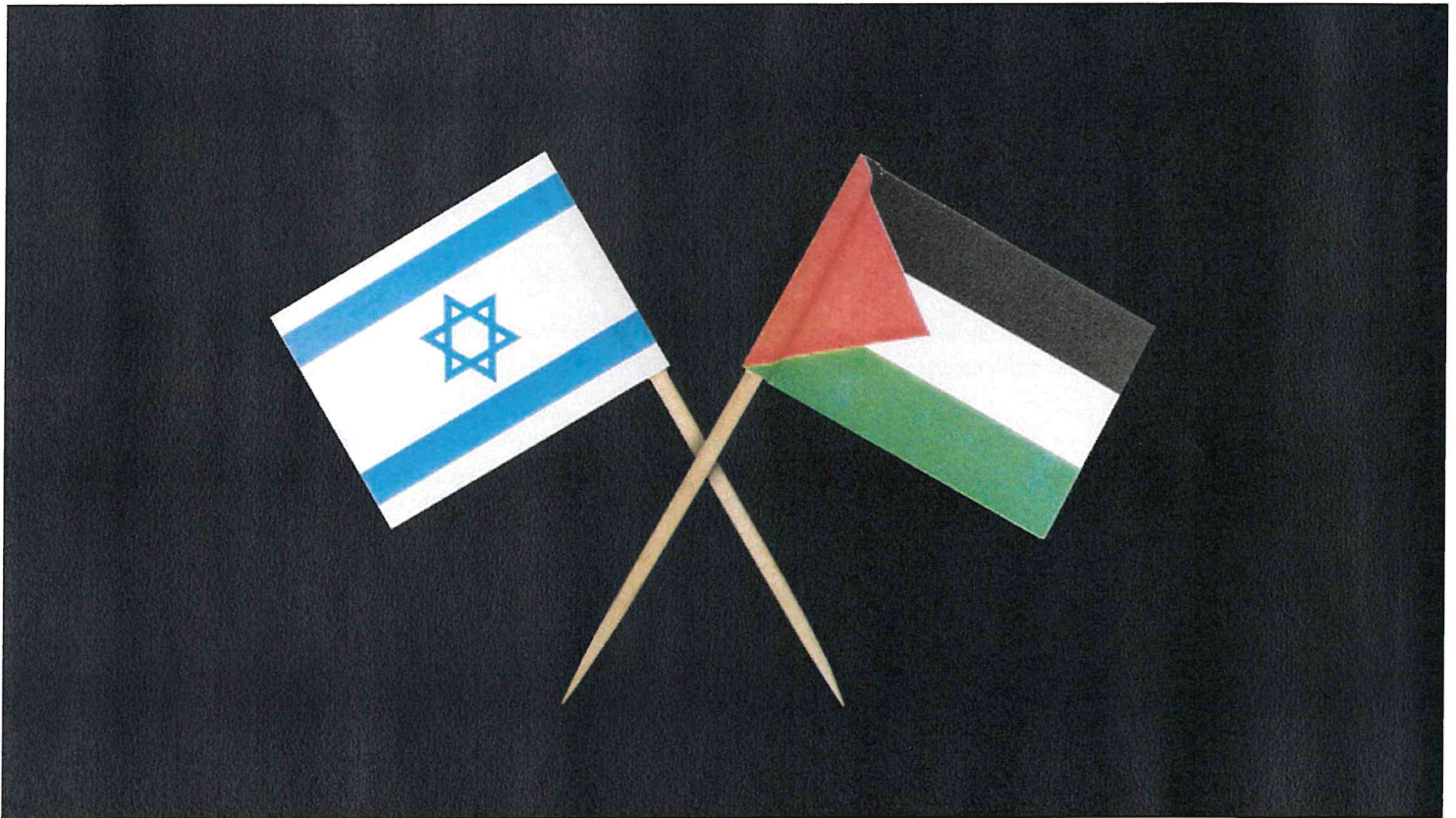
WRITING WORTH READING. IDEAS WORTH SHARING. A GIFT WORTH GIVING.

GLOBAL

A New Word Is Defining the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Washington

Close observers of U.S. policy say the subtle shift reflects a progressive push to focus on human rights.

By Yasmeen Serhan



The Atlantic / Getty

MAY 21, 2021

SHARE ▼

In a conflict where words matter (so much so that even using the word *conflict* invites disagreement), it's notable when the words used begin to change. And when it comes to discussing Israel and Palestine in the United States, the words have changed. The first, most obvious shift has come from Congress, where more and more

(predominantly progressive) voices have criticized Israel's human-rights abuses, as well as the U.S. government's role in sustaining a status quo that human-rights groups and other high-profile leaders, including South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, have likened to apartheid. Staunch defenders of Israel within the Democratic Party now offer criticism of the scale of the country's military response in Gaza (which caused extensive damage, and at least 230 deaths) or, just as strikingly, say nothing at all.

But a subtle, and perhaps more revealing, shift has come from the White House itself. In an address announcing yesterday's cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, President Joe Biden said, "Palestinians and Israelis equally deserve to live safely and securely and to enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity, and democracy." A readout from a call between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Israeli counterpart echoed those words almost verbatim, as did remarks by White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki.

On their face, these statements aren't extraordinary. Why wouldn't the United States support freedom, prosperity, and democracy for Israelis and Palestinians alike? For close observers of U.S. policy on this issue, however, one word has stood out in particular.

"All of the sudden, and I mean all the sudden, the word *equal* is appearing in [President Biden's] rhetoric and the rhetoric of the secretary of state," Martin Indyk, a distinguished fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who previously served as the U.S. ambassador to Israel and Barack Obama's special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations from 2013 to 2014, told me. "That's totally new."

Looking back at speeches by former U.S. presidents on this issue, I found few uses of the word (one address, from George W. Bush in 2002, noted that men and women around the globe are "equally entitled to the benefits of democratic government," though he didn't single out Palestinians). While it's hard to know exactly what the Biden administration means by "equal"—the State Department didn't respond to a request for comment—Indyk offered a theory: "It's a reflection, I think, of the pressure that they're under from progressives who are pushing this concept of equal rights as a thing that the United States should now focus on."

Indyk isn't the only person I spoke with who noticed the word *equal* appearing more and more in U.S. language on this issue. Yousef Munayyer, a nonresident fellow at the Arab Center in Washington, D.C., and a close observer of this conflict, told me that while its usage may be vague, *equal* nonetheless signals a shift from focusing on a political solution to focusing on human rights. "What we're starting to see a shift toward is that [the conflict is] not just unsustainable," Munayyer said. "It's also unacceptable. That's the direction that this is going in, and they're trying to find language now to help navigate that shift."

RECOMMENDED READING

Annexation, Apartheid, and Me

HIRSH GOODMAN

How to Shrink the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

MICAH GOODMAN

The Day Israeli-Palestinian Peace Seemed Within Reach

MARTIN INDYK

Although the U.S. has long supported a peaceful settlement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has never explicitly done so on the basis of equality. The two sides, after all, are not wholly equal in U.S. eyes. Israel is a staunch ally and the recipient of nearly \$4 billion in U.S. military aid each year. Palestinians receive \$235 million, though this assistance isn't consistent. Presidents since Harry Truman, who was the first to recognize Israel after its creation in 1948, have stressed the importance of the U.S.-Israel alliance. Support for Palestinian self-determination came later, but the people voicing that support never went far beyond it.

Insofar as Washington talks about the rights of Palestinians, it's almost always couched in the language of statehood—specifically, a state based on Israel's 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Support for a two-state solution with these parameters is long-standing U.S. policy, though that support is hardly as bipartisan as it once was: The Trump administration said it was committed to a two-state solution, but it also worked to undermine it, opting to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and turning a blind eye to settlement expansion—choices that are both seen as decidedly pro-Israel, or at least pro-Israel's right-wing government. And while Democrats continue to support two states in principle, Biden has shown no plans to pursue the framework in practice. Had it not been for this latest wave of violence, it's unlikely that the White House would have felt the need to engage with the issue at all.

Read: No one is coming to help the Palestinians

In Congress, at least, this dynamic has begun to change—particularly among Democrats. Progressives in the party, including Palestinian-American Representative

Rashida Tlaib, have used their platform to advocate for the rights of Palestinians as they relate to discrimination, home demolitions, and the detention of children—issues they see as antithetical not only to U.S. strategic goals in the region, but to the Biden administration’s aim of centering its foreign policy on human rights.

“We have a group of legislators who have come into Congress who are much more engaged in making sure that the United States works to uphold human rights here at home with Black Lives Matter, on tribal issues, on detention issues on our border, and [with] international issues,” Representative Betty McCollum, who is leading efforts to prohibit Israel from using U.S. military aid to violate Palestinian human rights, told me. “They are very engaged in the world in a way that I think some of their predecessors weren’t.”

Members placing more stress on human rights insist that their concern reflects a shifting reality. “What is happening in the United States is a reaction to a very fast, very consequential shift in the ground truth in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza,” Senator Chris Murphy, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Middle East panel, told me.

For advocates of the Palestinian cause, the subtle shift in language from the White House can seem wholly underwhelming or even insufficient. Diplomacy-speak, while often carefully and meticulously crafted, doesn’t translate into immediate policy changes, nor does it necessarily keep up with changing attitudes. Biden remained steadfast, for example, in his support of Israel’s air-strike campaign in Gaza in response to Hamas rocket fire, repeatedly blocking United Nations’ efforts to back a cease-fire despite mounting pressure from much of his own party, and many U.S. allies, to do so.

Shadi Hamid: Don’t take the narrow view of what’s happening in Gaza

Today, more and more U.S. lawmakers believe that the lopsided power dynamic between the Israelis and the Palestinians will sustain the conflict. They also argue that unless the U.S. uses its unique leverage to address these issues, a return of the kind of violence witnessed over the past couple of weeks is inevitable.

Biden and his allies “are going to come under increased pressure to align their words with their actions,” Munayyer said. “They might be able to resist that pressure, but it’s going to grow.”