



קבוצת ראות
Reut Group

JANUARY 25 - FEBRUARY 20, 2021

TREND DETECTOR NO. 10: BIDEN'S FIRST MONTH



TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'



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SUMMARY

The period between January 25 and February 20, 2021, which represents most of the Biden presidency's first month, has hewn largely to conventional Democratic positioning towards Israeli and Jewish agendas. However, it is worth noting several developments during these weeks that may indicate areas of vulnerabilities:

- While the administration has taken predictable positions vis-à-vis the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, clearly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not as central to the current administration. Iran presents an early friction point between Israel and the administration, Broadly, the [perception](#) that 'the road to Washington runs through Jerusalem' may erode over time.
- While Jewish communal organizations largely embraced Biden's picks for key administration positions, some discontent has surfaced regarding the potential for filling second tiers of foreign policy positions with individuals who are perceived as challengers of Israeli and Jewish agendas.
- Against this backdrop, political polarization in both the U.S. and in Israel undermine the robustness of bi-partisan U.S. support for Israel and may accelerate a process in which support is increasingly expressed through cooperation where political or national interests and values converge, and condemnation where they don't.
- Despite current relative progressive-moderate cooperation the next election cycle may open progressive influence avenues, which will challenge the administration's foreign policy on Israel and Israel-related issues.
- Moreover, on key priorities, Israel and Jewish communities do not share a common threat assessment. Within the Jewish community, a neutrality on Iran comes in stark contrast to an Israeli sense of urgency on this issue. Likewise, whereas many pro-Israel groups seems to be more concerned by the intersection between anti-Semitism and left-wing agendas, most Jewish communal organizations are focused on fighting right-wing anti-Semitism.
- Moreover, Jewish organizations' Israel positions continues to be a wedge issue. Jewish communal association with Israel is framed by progressive groups as undermining the authenticity of Jewish engagement on social justice agendas. Thus, despite the Biden administration announcement of embracing the IHRA definition for anti-Semitism, Jewish communal division around this definition continues to surface. In this climate, the credibility of ideologically driven Jewish activist organizations grows, and several such organizations serve as a reference for national political figures seeking guidance from Jewish constituents.

Finally, serious conversations continue to arise around the critical theories underlying identity political-driven organization, and addressing a potential conceptual mismatch that arises when skin color and economic-based concepts used to categorize societal groups meet the Jewish experience.

INTRODUCTION

This product summarizes developments that affect the positioning of Jewish and pro-Israel communities within the U.S. progressive left. Spanning a nearly month-long period, January 25 –

February 20, and relying solely on open-source information, the document covers events and highlights ‘weak signals’ with potential for developing significance.

This product is part of the ‘Grand Pivot of the Pro-Israel Network Project,’ for which the Reut Group received a grant the Genesis Prize as part of “Speak Out for Israel,” a global initiative in honor of 2019 Laureate Robert Kraft to combat anti-Semitism and efforts to delegitimize Israel, both of which are on the rise again in confluence with the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

MAPPING: JEWISH AND PRO-ISRAEL POSITIONING ON THE LEFT

While the foundations of the U.S.-Israel relationship remain evidently robust in this nearly month-long period, the main phenomenon to monitor for potential growth is a creeping mainstream acceptance of daylight peeking through cracks in long-standing pillars of U.S. support for Israel.

THE ADMINISTRATION

Thus far, distant but supportive continuity – In substance, the administration has thus far taken predictable positions, for example: Secretary of State Blinken [expressed](#) support for Israel’s controlling the Golan Heights (while casting doubts on the legality of the Trump administration’s decision to recognize Israeli sovereignty over it); the State Department [rejected](#) the ICC decision claiming jurisdiction in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza; and UN Ambassador-designate Linda Thomas-Greenfield [spoke](#) against BDS in front of Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Iran presents an early friction point between Israel and the administration, with Netanyahu [reportedly](#) encouraging the IDF chief of staff to weigh in publicly against Biden’s desire to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal in January, and the Israeli government [raising](#) stark concerns about the administration’s recent [announcement](#) of its readiness to reenter talks and its intent to lift Trump-era sanctions and travel restrictions on Iranian diplomats.

A signal of declining centrality? The White House [responded](#) to the [commentary](#) and questions about the perceived delay in his outreach by stating that Netanyahu would be the first leader in the region that Biden would call. Indeed, when the call ultimately took place on February 17, Biden had yet to contact any other regional leader – first covering every other major region. As [Michael Kopolow](#) writes, “If there has been an abiding theme to President Biden’s Israel policy so far, it has been that, for good or bad, the road to Washington does not run through Jerusalem,” in stark contrast to Israel’s centrality within Trump administration foreign policy.

Foreign policy appointment politics – Overwhelmingly Jewish and pro-Israel communities have embraced Bidens picks for key administration positions, with some exceptions, notably Biden’s [appointment](#) of Robert Malley as Iran envoy. The broader approach to inclusion of diverse voices [evident](#) across Biden’s foreign policy appointment board, which is reflected in the administrations [crafting](#) of its Iran team, to include diplomats and experts representing a range of view creates space and access for non-mainstream views.

An influential “second-tier” of policy making could more significantly reflect progressive wing demands for representation in foreign policy decision making, exemplified in the ‘second-tier strategy’ that a coalition of left-leaning groups is [advancing](#) including by submitting names to the administration for appointment to

national security and foreign policy positions. A leading name featured in the list is Matt Duss, a current senior foreign policy advisor to Bernie Sanders and outspoken critic of U.S. policy towards Israel. His upcoming appointment has been rumored and vigorously debated (see Peter Beinart's defense of Duss against Jewish hostility [here](#), and the appointment's framing as "Biden's first test on Israel [here](#) and [here](#)). Notably, the Malley appointment was also framed as a test, which the Biden administration passed, of its willingness to buck the pro-Israel line (see, for example this [The Intercept](#) article that quotes Peter Beinart on the subject and [this](#) CodePink campaign to fight against the 'pro-war hawks' working against the Malley appointment). Moreover, the fight over Malley tied into a broader [debate](#) that progressives seek to usher in about the nature of U.S. engagement with rivals such as Iran, with progressives favoring diplomacy and condemning tactics, including targeted assassinations, that seize on real or threatened violence.

Additional appointments that have met with some controversy [include](#) Palestinian-American Reema Dodin as Deputy White House Legislative Director, Maher Bitar as senior director for intelligence on the National Security Council, and Hady Amr in a senior State Department position on Israeli-Palestinian affairs.

A renewed human rights agenda – Biden has set forth his [intent](#) to re-position the U.S. as a global leader and force for democracy and human rights, a focus that could align with progressive pushes, such as [this](#) J Street-issued recommendation to the Biden administration regarding house demolitions, to highlight Israeli actions towards Palestinians as human rights abuses. (Last year, more than 60 Democratic members of Congress [asked](#) the Trump administration to determine whether Israel had violated the Arms Export Control Act by using U.S. military equipment during such demolitions.) A progressive [concept](#) of an 'inclusive foreign policy' that "centers on human rights, justice and peace as the pillars of America's engagement in the world" can serve an agenda of framing U.S. engagement with Israel more centrally in the context of Israel's performance on human rights. See relatedly Ilhan Omar [condoning](#) referring Israel and senior Israel officers to the ICC.

Partisan bi-partisan support? A climate of political polarization and the depletion of the middle exacerbates a dynamic in which support for Israel is increasingly expressed in terms of support for whomever represented the aligned political ideology there. As the leadiner party in Israel lurches to the right, as exemplified by Likud surplus vote-sharing [agreement](#) with Otzma Yehudit, even pro-Israel Democratic organizations have [condemned](#) the alliance led by Israel's prime minister.

A buzz of commentary surrounding the length of time it took for Biden to call Bibi led to [speculation](#) that a motive for the seeming delay was a reluctance on the part of the U.S. administration to signal support for the prime minister prior to Israeli elections. (The [U.S. Secretary of State](#) and [National Security Advisor](#) were among key officials that had already spoken to their Israeli counterparts prior to the call that took [place](#) on month after Biden took office.)

The Big U.S.-Palestinian Re-Engagement – The Biden administration's embrace of the Palestinian Authority represents a sea-change as compared to the Trump administration's relationship with the Palestinians, with the Biden administration [moving](#) quickly to restore aid, reiterate the administration's support for a two-state solution, and [make](#) more official contacts with Palestinian officials in its first two weeks than the Trump administration did in its final three years.

THE DEMS

For now, relative progressive-moderate unity – an “early [honeymoon](#) from the political vise of a progressive wing that spent months preparing to squeeze the new administration.” Moreover, signs that major progressive campaigns, notably “defund the policy,” have [lost](#) some mainstream political momentum and weakened progressive leverage.

However, the next election cycle may open progressive influence avenues, such as [‘primarying’](#) moderate Democratic incumbents, and deploying pressure tactics such as [anti-Zionist litmus tests](#) for obtaining endorsements, such as from DSA for a city council position in [this](#) local race (for context on DSA, see its recent [event](#) on BDS and ‘Palestine Solidarity’ featuring Omar Barghouti and Marc Lamont Hill).

Sneak peek of upcoming election cycle dynamics? Moderate v. progressive in special elections – A Queens city council race [pit](#) James Gennaro, “a passionate fighter for Israel” and the ultimate [winner](#), against Bernie Sanders-endorsed Moumita Ahmed, who a State Assemblyman described as having “a history of using antisemitic tropes and anti-Israel rhetoric.” Tellingly, in a debate focused otherwise entirely on local issues, the candidates also [addressed](#) contentious issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In a [race](#) to claim the seat of Ohio Democrat Marcia Fudge, two candidates, Shontel Brown, a strong Israel supporter, and Nina Turner, who supports conditioning aid to Israel and views BDS as a “free speech issue,” have emerged as frontrunners and as symbols of the Democratic Party’s moderate progressive divide.

Early outliers on Israel and Jewish agendas – Addressing IfNotNow, Rep. Andy Levin [said](#) anti-Semitism cannot be confronted unless Palestinian human rights are respected, referring to Rashida Tlaib as his “sister.” Senator Sanders, Warren, and Carper, alone among their fellow senators, [voted](#) to oppose a recent motion to keep the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem permanently.

JEWISH AND PRO-ISRAEL COMMUNITIES

Unshared priorities – A seeming neutrality of Jewish communal voices on the Iran issue (see [here](#)) does not bode well for potential to smoothly resolve the fissure comes in stark contrast to an Israeli sense of urgency on Iran and willingness to create friction with the administration on it. A Jewish communal reluctance to mobilize what former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, [interviewed](#) by Peter Beinart, characterized as the outsized impact of “this incredibly organized pro-Israel community that is very accustomed to having access” does not bode well for potential to smoothly resolve the fissure, or for the strength of the relationship between Israel and Jewish communal organizations.

Whereas Israel seems to be more concerned by the intersection between anti-Semitism and left-wing agendas, U.S. Jews are focused on [fighting](#) right-wing anti-Semitism. Jewish Democratic leaders [prioritize](#) the fight against right-wing anti-Semitism, and [reject](#) attempts to compare the severity of the threats.

IHRA – Even as the Biden administration announced its [embrace](#) of the IHRA definition, reflecting a broader trend echoed in the parallel adoptions by the [Paris City Council](#) and recognition as an international institution by the [German cabinet](#), **Jewish communal division continued to surface**. Much of the Jewish establishment, [led](#) by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, has made federal adoption of the IHRA definition a top priority for the Biden administration. Meanwhile, a competing Progressive Israel Network campaign, which included several Conference members, went against it. IfNotNow and JVP launched campaigns against the definition, the Reform movement announced it had

adopted the IHRA definition but opposes codifying the language in federal law, and Bend the Arc also came out against government use of the definition. Its close association with former President Trump may further [serve](#) to [diminish](#) the definition's palatability on the left.

While controversy generally centers on charges that the definition silences criticism of Israel, recent attention has been drawn to the double-edged sword of codification – Expressed by the definition's author [Ken Stern](#), and elaborated recently [here](#), critics of codification point to the [conflict](#) legalization may come into with freedom of expression, and emphasize that this same freedom of expression is a core value prioritized by liberal and progressive movements critical for coalition building.

The cost of pro-Israel politics to Jewish communal organizations –

- [A thorn in the side of coalition building](#): Jewish Currents has published a couple of articles framing Jewish communal association with Israel as undermining the authenticity of Jewish engagement on justice agendas ([one](#) focuses on “a common nationwide dynamic in which Jewish groups distance themselves from or even thwart Black organizing in solidarity with Palestine,” [another](#) on the ADL's Israel advocacy as undermining its civil rights work). Relatedly, a California State University Northridge professor sparked controversy when she apparently [called](#) the ADL a white supremacist organization (she claimed the statement was taken out of context).
- [A source of internal discord and points of friction](#) that emerge between less supportive communities and their communal organization's Israel positions. This was recently exemplified by a vigorous [debate](#) that a story broken by Axios about a change in the JNF in order to build settlements among American Jews.

An emerging alternative Jewish institutional infrastructure? – In the context of political polarization and strengthening non-establishment actors, the credibility of ideologically driven Jewish activist organizations grows. Its influence can be seen emerging into the mainstream, for example in IfNotNow serving as an organizational platform for a member of Congress to [expound](#) his views on anti-Semitism, and in serving as a reference for political figures seeking guidance from Jewish constituents, such as when a Queens city council candidate [cited](#) the progressive organization The Jewish Vote in that context.

HIGHLIGHT: CORE DYNAMIC, IDENTITY POLITICS

Recent weeks have seen a heightened focus on examining Jewish and pro-Israel positioning in the context of dominant conceptions underlying identity politics (this is also the subject of a soon-to-be-published Reut conceptual framework).

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

A softly gathering intellectual rebellion against some theoretical foundations of identity politics – reflected in recent weeks in, for example, in John McWhorter's [indictment](#) of anti-racist demands in instances in which “racial reckoning becomes racial wrecking ball, even amid a sincere commitment to addressing racism both open and systemic.” Recently also, a decision taken by the San Francisco School Board of Education to rename 44 of the city's currently shuttered schools named after ‘cooperators with white supremacy’ including Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Paul Revere, Robert Louis Stevenson and Dianne Feinstein, attracted national criticism. The “[radical](#) project” was ridiculed for [prioritizing](#) the

renaming task ahead if getting kids back into the schools. And notably, French President Emanuel Macron – alongside prominent French politicians, high-profile intellectuals and journalists – [framed](#) “certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States” and an “out-of-control woke leftism of American campuses and its attendant cancel culture” as an existential threat.

THE INDIGENEITY ISSUE, COLOR, AND JEWISH DIVIDES

In the context of the Jewish community, the issue ushers in a [divide](#) around formulations of a basic question: **Is the organizing logic of identity politics, which is centered on skin color-and economic-based constructs, in seizing the terms of definition of Jewish identity, [accommodative](#) of [anti-Semitism](#)?** Recent weeks have seen a number of approaches to Jewish rejection of the erasure of fundamental aspects of Jewish identity in this context.

The issue is gaining attention. At the same time British comedian David Baddiel is receiving a whirlwind of publicity in the UK for his new [book](#), ‘Jews Don’t Count,’ claiming that **Jews don’t, but should, count as a real minority**; Bari Weiss [echoes](#) an identical charge in an interview with Megyn Kelly.

One cluster of approaches is based on framing Jews as a people, which is misaligned with dominant skin color-based categorization of grouping by inherent trait and thus **defies main assumptions underlying identity politics**. The narrative of Jewish peoplehood supports an emphasis on Jewish indigeneity that is also central to the idea of Zionism (see [here](#) for example).

A related approach of emphasizing Jewish diversity by specifically focusing on Jews of recent MENA heritage to justify legitimate inclusion into minority status is exemplified in the influential role that JIMENA, representing California’s Mizrahi, or Middle Eastern Jewish communities, [played](#) in achieving ESMC reform, and described elsewhere critically in recent weeks [here](#) and [here](#). The ‘minority Jews’ approach has been seen to [undercut](#) principled arguments that the Jewish people do not fall into racial categories, which also do not capture the Jewish lived experience; or that all Jews – including from diverse recent historic points of origin and including both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi – are ethnically Middle Eastern.

STRATEGIC POINTS OF INTEREST

The collateral damage of the ESMC struggle – The battle of the ethnic studies in the California curriculum, which would make ethnic studies courses [rooted](#) in Critical Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement, has become a highly publicized battle. It is often [framed](#) on the progressive left as a clash between authentic minority-led intellectual and activist movements, against parochial Jewish or pro-Israel interests in alignment with parallel right wing-led [efforts](#) challenging critical race theory. As such, an opportunity is lost to more broadly explore or educate on how Jewish identity is threatened to be [pigeonholed](#) within constructs that [ethnic studies](#) and its fields of influence, such as identity politics, propagate.

A dominant categorization of Jews as white lends itself to framing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of white supremacy. This emerged as a dominant theme in progressive framing of [controversy](#) around Israel’s responsibility for Palestinian vaccinations (see most recently [around](#) an SNL skit implying an Israeli ‘Jewish only’ vaccination policy, reinforcing framings of Israel as an ethno-nationalist power, on the basis of demonstrably false assertions). Rashida Tlaib [called](#) it proof that Israel is a ‘racist, apartheid state,’ which Jamaal Bowman [echoed](#) when, referring to Israel’s announcement of its provision of 5,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, he drew a parallel “as a Black man living in American, I know the feeling

of being neglected by my government and society...” (Bowman had [removed](#) a previous tweet criticizing Israel’s vaccine policy.)

A growing investment in allying with Black communities within Jewish leadership reflects a main thrust of countervailing on-the-ground effort. Alongside a steady stream of discourse on Black-Jewish alliance themes in local and national [media](#), notable events included the launch of a Black-Jewish entertainment alliance (covered, for example, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)); the announcement that Shmuley Boteach’s upcoming World Values Network [celebration](#) of the solidarity of Black and Jewish Americans will include among its honorees Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza; and an online panel on anti-Semitism, mostly [covered](#) in Jewish news outlets, featuring Zach Banner and other Black athletes.