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WEBINAR

Israel after the elections: What's next for US-Israel relations?

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INTRODUCTION

HADY AMR
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings

PANEL

MODERATOR: BEN SAMUELS
U.S. Bureau Chief, Haaretz

ILAN GOLDENBERG
Senior Vice President and Chief Policy Officer, J Street

JOEL RAYBURN
Senior Fellow, Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East, Hudson Institute

SHIBLEY TELHAMI
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings
Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development and Director, Critical Issues Poll, University of Maryland

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AMR: Good morning and welcome to this event with Brookings Institution. My name is Hady Amr. I am a nonresident senior fellow working on Israel-Palestine and the Middle East at Brookings. And welcome to this one-hour event titled Israel After the Elections: What's Next For US-Israel Relations?

This is an extraordinary moment in US history as it relates to the Middle East, and for that, we have some extraordinary panelists. It's a historical moment, not because of the US elections writ large, but the fact that also candidates who were passionate advocates for Palestinian rights won up and down the ballot.

And for this extraordinary moment, we have some extraordinary panelists. Ilan-- alphabetically-- Ilan Goldenberg, Joel Rayburn, Shibley Telhami, all are exceptional in their own right and have a unique government policy, academic, and advocacy experiences. We are having this conversation just at the right time, and for someone like me who spent decades advocating for a new US policy for equal rights and freedoms for Israelis and Palestinians alike, we're now seeing that discussion make it to the mainstream.

And so, with that I'll just, one, a couple of programming notes. This conversation will be available live. This is live streamed and will be available when the event concludes on the website. And if you have questions, you can feel free to send in your questions via email to events@brookings.edu.

And finally, I wanna turn the conversation over to Ben - the moderation over to Ben Samuels. He is the US bureau chief for Haaretz. He began this role in July after holding various roles in Haaretz for the past dozen years. And Ben, over to you

SAMUELS: Thank you very much, Hady, and good morning everyone.

I am Ben Samuels, Haaretz's US bureau chief in Washington. I am taking this role after spending the past six or so years as our Washington correspondent, and we, as an organization, are really building out our presence in America, where we want to report on America with the same vigor that we report on Israel for.

So this week was the perfect example of all of that, where we had reporters across the country asking voters where Israel and the war in Iran fit alongside the price of gas and groceries. Israelis voted last week. Americans voted Tuesday. Democrats control Congress in January, and Israeli parties are currently trying to form a government.

So what can voters in each country now expect their leaders to do differently? And as Hady mentioned, we'll take your questions at around 10:45, and you can email those to events@brookings.edu. But first, I'd like to welcome our esteemed - excuse me- I'd like to welcome our esteemed panelists where they can each say a little bit about themselves and their work and help us try to make sense of the madness that we are currently undergoing.

So, Ilan Goldenberg, we'll start with you, and then we'll go to Joel Rayburn, and then Shibley Telhami. So Ilan, why don't you kick us off?

GOLDENBERG: Sure. So Ilan Goldenberg, I am J Street's chief policy officer and senior vice president. I mean, Ben, you want me to start into any analysis at this point about what happened, or just a minute or two on what...

SAMUELS: Yeah, just a minute or two on you, yeah.

GOLDENBERG: Yeah, just look, somebody who spent most of my career in foreign policy and national security issues, working in Democratic administrations. Worked on Iran from 2012 to-- '09 to 2012 at the Pentagon as the Iran team chief. That's where I got to know Joel Rayburn. Also spent time working for Secretary of State John Kerry last time he led, you know, major Israeli-Palestinian negotiation efforts. Really the last time anybody led a kind of effort at final status negotiations in 2013 and '14.

And then was working at the White House on October 7th for Kamala Harris as her Middle East advisor in the months afterwards. And also related to this, ended up, not something I ever expected to do as a foreign policy nerd, but as as her, the director of national Jewish outreach on her 2024 campaign, where I experienced this issue from a political perspective. And that's, really what took me to J Street in the aftermath, is really, the main conclusion from that experience, which was while there are very loud voices who are both kind of in the support Israel no matter what, support Bibi Netanyahu camp, and folks who are, you know, very, you know, who are basically protesting about genocide on October 8th, 2023, overwhelming majority of American voters, and I think American politicians, are not in those two places.

And at J Street, my work really is about elevating both politically and policy-wise that, that way where you can try to center freedom and security and prosperity for all Israelis and Palestinians.

SAMUELS: Thank you, Ilan, and later on in the Zoom, you will give us some sneak peek data on exactly what you found with exit polling, specifically with the Jewish vote later on.

Joel, thank you so much for joining us today. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your background?

RAYBURN: Sure. Good to be with you all. I'm a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in the Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East. I was a military officer for 26 years. My last assignment was at the White House in the National Security Council staff 2017, 2018. After that, I was a special envoy for Syria in the State Department within Secretary Mike Pompeo from 2018 to 2020. Most of 2021 I spent on the Hill as an advisor to Senator Bill Hagerty from Tennessee. And at the end of 2023 and through 2024, I volunteered as an advisor on the Trump campaign and then the Trump transition. And then since then I've been you know, watching the world spin around.

SAMUELS: Well, it's great to be with you, and looking forward to your observations on exactly how crazy that world spinning around has been. Shibley Telhami, we go to you next.

TELHAMI: Thank you. I'm Shibley Telhami. I'm the Anwar Sadat professor of peace and development at the University of Maryland and nonresident senior fellow at Brookings.

The past several decades I've been researching and writing on American policy, especially toward the Middle East, American foreign policy international relations of the Middle East, especially Israel-Palestine and doing a lot of public opinion polls in the United States, but also in the past in the Middle East, including Arab states and Israel.

I've also over the years advised both Republican and Democratic administrations related to the Middle East.

SAMUELS: Thank you very much for joining us, Shibley. I'm really excited for you to tell us about what your really extensive polling, really singular polling has really... What can it really tell us about where Americans are today.

So, Ilan, let's start with you. And just to illustrate just how crazy this news cycle is moving, in the time that these questions were finalized about 30 minutes ago to now, you know, things are changing on the ground. So, the Joint List, the largest Arab party, endorsed Gadi Eisenkot to form the next government. So how do you weigh the chances of a minority government or a majority government led by Gadi Eisenkot versus a unity government or another election?

GOLDENBERG: So, look, as you said, Ben, I think there's three scenarios for how all this plays out in the Israeli elections. For folks who aren't, you know, who aren't as familiar, the bottom line is, you know, you had these 120 seats in the Knesset in the election last week. 67 went to parties that oppose Netanyahu. 53 went to Netanyahu, that and his allies. That's a pretty dramatic drop.

But of those 67, 19 are these Arab parties, Ra'am and Joint List which, you know, it's unclear if the Jewish parties will sit with them. It's unclear if they, it's, you know, there's a, if they want to sit in, sit inside the government or outside. I think there's actually differences there between Ra'am and Jewish List. One of wh- Ra'am, I think, would be willing to sit in a government. Joint List, I think, would much prefer to be outside. You know, and look, there's a lot of reasons for this. There's a history. There's good old-fashioned racism in Israeli society.

There's also really fundamental policy differences. If you sit in a government and you have to approve security for settlers or financing for the IDF's operations in Gaza, there's, you know, parts that, you know, those are really hard votes and challenging things and could collapse a government.

So, I think at this point, Ben, I'd probably say there's two scenarios that are much more likely than the third one.

I think one is Ra'am in the government with the opposition, with Gadi Eisenkot-led opposition Joint List on the outside. I think that's the best case scenario. By the way, there's been polling of the opposition, Jewish opposition voters, and pretty strong support, I think the number I saw was, like, 60 to 25 or something like that, if you look across all the parties in the Jewish opposition, for, "If you have this choice, go in with the Arab parties, this is what we want. We wanna change from Netanyahu." So that feels like a very likely possibility.

And look, it would not change everything. I think there's a lot of government, Israeli government policies that would not change, but it would send a fundamentally different message about Israel's future and finally get to a point where Israeli kind of opposition and liberals realize we can't do this on our own. Right? We will always be the minority on our own, but if we unify and join with the Arab parties, we are the overwhelming majority, and that's the only way we're gonna achieve political power and take Israel in the direction we want. So I think it could be hugely positive and consequential, but very hard.

The other scenario I see as much less likely is national unity, some government with Netanyahu and Eisenkot and some combination of ultra-Orthodox. The reason I see that less likely is, first, the opposition's voters don't want that. There's a lot of distrust in Netanyahu, but Netanyahu wouldn't really want that. He wouldn't wanna be in a situation where he's prime minister and he's dependent on a bunch of parties and people who don't like him and could walk away from him in a minute and throw him in, in, in... he wouldn't have control. At his moment of weakness is when they could push for a new election, which to me says the second most likely scenario is new elections. And or the second very likely scenario.

That might actually be the most likely scenario, is new elections. You know, the, where nobody's able to form a government, really by the end of December, we would know that. There's a whole process. We don't have to get into all the machinations, but it's basically, around the end of December, in which case there'd be a unity government for a while or a caretaker government, sorry, not a unity government, for a while under Netanyahu, but probably maybe with a new speaker of the Knesset.

That, the reason that might seem like the most likely outcome, except I think voters would really punish the opposition for that. I'm interested to hear what Shibley thinks would happen with Arab turnout in another election like that. They might come out again as strong. But people like Eisenkot and Lieberman and Bennett might really be punished for not figuring out how to form a government, and then Bibi's in a stronger position. And so, even if they're uncomfortable working with the Arab parties, they might be pushed into it because all the alternatives are worse.

SAMUELS: You know, Shibley, taking the lens to America and looking at Israel, you know, most Americans in your polling have said that the makeup of Israel's next government wouldn't change how they see the country. So suppose Gadi Eizenkot does manage to become prime minister, what do you think he would actually have to do for Americans to reconsider their position?

TELHAMI: First of all I think you have to-- The starting point is understanding where Americans are on Israel. Sure, you know, the, the poll that we just did before the election has been confirmed by the exit polling, which is that basically people see the Israel-US relation more as a liability than an asset, which is really remarkable historically.

And that is even compared to Saudi Arabia, which they see as more of an asset than a liability. And certainly, it is the case in comparison to Britain or Canada, which they see overwhelmingly or majority of Americans see as, as assets. So, but I think what has happened in US American relationship is that a large number of the public majority now see Israel really more as a villain.

And it is something that is anchored. It's a paradigmatic shift. It's not just a public opinion shift. It is something that is now entrenched, and it's, I don't think it's something that just happened with Gaza or just happened with the Iran war. As I've been saying, it's been in my polling over the past two decades.

I've been seeing the incremental build-up and wondering when the dam was gonna break. And I think the dam finally broke. It certainly broke on Gaza where you have a large number of people who saw it as genocide, including a majority of Democrats who just won. And you have, in addition to that a sense that we're responsible, that is, unlike Sudan, let's say,

where they see as a remote foreign policy issue, they saw a hand, an American hand in a way that troubled them in more ways than one.

And then you have the accelerant, which is the Iran war, which was very unpopular in our public opinion polls before the war was started. Only twenty-one percent of Americans, including minority Republicans favored the war. So it comes in at a, a very dark time.

And in our polling, as in other polling, as now we see in the election exit polling, people tied Israel to the Iran war. And that tie-in to the Iran war essentially then connected the dots from Israel, the Iran war, pocketbook issues. That has become deeply ingrained.

I think the dam has already broken among Democrats. The question now is Whether it's gonna break you know, among Republicans. And what we've seen in the exit polling, people basically pointing a finger at the US-Israeli relationship. The fact that you have a vice president of the United States, of an administration that is arguably the most pro-Israel administration in the history of the relationship, would come the day after the election and say, "We're gonna have to change the relationship," is something extraordinary. The dam hasn't yet broken among Republicans, in my opinion, but the question is whether this tsunami that just hit America isn't just a tsunami that hit America, it also hit the Israeli-US relationship. And whether the, the Republican dam will hold or not is an open question.

Now, with regard to the government specifically in the polling that we did, yes, the majority of people said a government without Netanyahu would not change their opinion on Israel. And that of course is confirmed also by the Pew poll that was held a few months ago, where negative views of Israel itself as a state are as bad as they are of Netanyahu. They're bad of both. So people differentiate the two, but the opinion of Israel itself now is really negative, regardless of Netanyahu.

So the question is, can a new government without Netanyahu and without Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, because those are the two that are identified with ethnic cleansing in particular that people see underway. Can they change? In my opinion, the challenge for Israel is much bigger than that. They'll be swimming against the tide, even without Netanyahu. People are gonna be looking far more than... They're gonna be looking way beyond the change of personality, and I have some ideas on where that might go. Perhaps I could leave them till later.

SAMUELS: Great. Thank you, Shibley.

Joel, I wanna really kind of take out one part of Shibley's findings and really drill in, you know, what lessons will Republicans draw from all this. So Vice President JD Vance wrote yesterday, "The reason we lost is the war." He also said voters want a change in the relationship with Israel, and that was very notably endorsed by Donald Trump Jr. What lesson do you expect the president himself to draw from what happened on Tuesday?

RAYBURN: Well, I don't think the president will draw those conclusions. And the exit polling does not match up. I don't think the vice president's analysis is correct. And I think that'll become evident. The, the numbers don't support it. In the exit polling, which is fairly comprehensive, you know, the ones done in a pool. Among the Republican voters that were polled, that consented to poll in, in those polls, I'm looking at the numbers. 61.4% thought that US support for Israel was about right. 16.3% thought US support for Israel is not strong enough. 22.3% of Republican voters thought that US support for Israel is too strong. So

that's barely one-fifth of the Republican voters that showed up on Tuesday. I think we also have to consider, I mean, there are some number of Republican voters who didn't show up on Tuesday.

That was the fundamental problem. So the 2024 electorate, we can't know, but I suspect that these numbers in support of Israel would be even higher. So there is no dam that is close to breaking on the Republican side. There is a small minority and the of those who showed up to the polls on Tuesday, and then who consented to the exit polling, which Republicans tend not to do, who cited who believe that US support for Israel is too strong.

That would be very thin reed on which for for the vice president's analysis to rest. So I don't think that will play out. I don't think there will be... There's not a significant groundswell for a change on the Republican side in the US-Israel relationship. So I think it would be a mistake to overread to overread Tuesday's results in that respect.

And that's with that's with, we're on three years now of a lot of media you know, the, the media narrative of genocide and so on. These are the numbers at the end of that. And with sort of a worldwide media narrative that would shake the US-Israel or cause skepticism on the US-Israel relationship, these are the numbers at the end of that. So I think this is pretty immovable on the side of the, the Republican part of the electorate. So I don't think there's gonna be... There's not pressure on the Republican side that's compelling for the president to change his relationship.

Also, I- listen, just zooming back from the, zooming back from the situation, from like the developments of this week or even the developments of the last few months with the Israeli elections and so on we're in a context... and before I dive into that, I'm sorry I'm sounding a little disjointed. The exit polls also, the exit polls also indicated that among the voters in the, in the exit polling, foreign policy was the, their top - oh, the top concern of only 4% of those who voted. This is not a foreign policy election.

So I think the president's instinct - when the president was asked about it yesterday about, "Well, what about Vice President Vance's remarks about the, the Iran war?" The, the president I, I think saw what the numbers indicate, which is that to the extent that the Iran war was a factor on Tuesday, it was the associated increase in fuel prices and the effect that they had on cost of living cost of living for voters, working class, middle class and so on, not the foreign policy aspect of it. So it would be a mistake to overread, to overread even those numbers.

And let's take a loo- I mean, what is the House district... what is the House midterm election in which foreign policy has been a main issue in living memory? I can think of only one, the 2006. I think you can kind of... and I suspect if we went back and looked at the exit polling numbers from 2006, they probably would be more mild than what I'm gonna say, is that the, the Iraq War as an issue, it was clearly a major issue, probably the major issue in 2006. But I can't think of any other midterm election where foreign policy was the driving, was the driving factor.

And the last time the Republicans suffered this kind of defeat in 1974 in a midterm, it was Watergate. So when, you know, voting for House district representatives, voting for senators, this is largely, it's almost never done on the basis of foreign policy. So this is a domestic economic result.

Well, I'll stop there, but I mean, there, there are a lot of implications to be drawn from that for for US policy.

TELHAMI: If I may, Ben, just on this issue because I think, just with engaging what Joel said, I think certainly it's true that, polls don't show a major decline in Republican support for Israel even before this, meaning that in general Republicans still largely support, although some decline. But there is quite a bit of decline among young Republicans. We've polled on that, and I'm not the only one, and it's significant decline. And significant anger over Gaza among young Republicans and even young Evangelicals. So it isn't certainly true that there's no shift, but it's obviously true that still there is support.

I actually happen to think that support is anchored still in Donald Trump personally rather than as some people think it's Evangelical support. We can discuss that. But I do think that a, you know, the foreign policy issue, this assumption that only 4%, I haven't seen this number, 4%, I don't know where that comes from.

But basically, it's not a direct relation. It's an indirect relationship. In the polling prior to the US midterm election we found that a majority of people said the Israeli-American relationship is gonna impact the vote. They didn't say the same thing about the Saudi-Israel- US relationship. They didn't say the same thing about the, the British-American relationship. They didn't say the same thing about the Canadian-US relationship. They also connect the dots between the Iran war and the economy.

There's no question in the discourse that is a direct collection when you say it's the economy. Yes, but what do they blame it on? That's the question, and they blame it on the Iran war. What do they blame on the Iran war? Majority say Israel influence, both Republicans and Democrats, Israel influenced the US decision to go to war in Iran. It's an unpopular war. So yes, there is of course a relationship. And the majority said the Iran war is gonna impact their decision. Exit polls show that it did.

So, I don't know what is this theoretical foreign policy when in fact people are... as when they make decisions, they're making linkages in their minds. Yes, if it didn't have any economic consequence, probably wouldn't matter as much, but they do see a direct consequence in ways that they've never seen a direct consequence, and so therefore it matters a lot.

SAMUELS: So Ilan, I want to turn to you to talk about the Jewish vote specifically. So obviously there are lots of interactions between all of this, whether it's Republicans voting on Iran or not voting on Iran. Your J Street's exit poll, you revealed yesterday that seventy-two percent of Jewish voters backed Democrats, even though there were all of these prognostications that the Jewish vote would trend Republican like never before.

So when you ask people what drove their vote, where did Israel rank? And looking back on the campaign, what did everyone reporting on the, quote-unquote, Jewish vote miss out on?

GOLDENBERG: Yeah. Well, maybe I'll start, Ben, with... And by the way I'll just, let's also associate my comments with Shibley's, especially about this question about the connection between Iran and economics. Yes, it's about economics, but it's... But people see that, that the Iran war changed, has caused prices to go up. Not just the Iran war. It's also tariffs, it's also corruption, it's also... There's a whole series, and overall inflation. There's a whole series of elements, but the Iran war was an element of it.

Well, in terms of the campaign, I think what people are missing, and maybe I'll start with first more broadly about Israel, and then about the Jewish vote. You know, there's this whole, there is this over-focus on either a small number of races where folks kinda went all the way into anti-Zionist territory and very sharp criticism of Israel that I think did in some of those cases drive down, and in specific instances you had less Jews voting for those candidates than would otherwise. I think you can see that in Michigan, for example.

You know, at the same time you also had... But what's also true is you have all this reporting on, you know, on AIPAC, and on messages that focus on absolute support for Israel, and that was also a small group of Democratic candidates. But the overwhelming majority of candidates who won on Tuesday were in neither of those two camps.

I point you to folks like Jon Ossoff, and Roy Cooper, and Troy Jackson, and the list goes shockingly on to people like Annie Andrews in South Carolina. You know, Adam Hamilton in Kansas. All those folks were frankly J Street endorsees. They were all pushing a message, including in very red areas of the country, that were, you know, "We still wanna have a relationship with Israel, but that support can't be unconditional. You know, we have to, you know, we wanna focus also on Palestinian freedom and security and prosperity," right? And so the end of blank checks, but not walking away altogether into places like arms embargoes. And that's a more nuanced message. Maybe it's a little less, more complicated for the media to report, but that's the overwhelming majority of incoming Democrats.

And people who are gonna be sitting in the House and in the Senate are gonna be in those positions, not in some, not just a small number of folks in pretty far left blue. It, or, you know, folks who are still a minority who are kinda advocating the old way of unconditional support.

And that leads me to the Jewish vote, which was consistent and has been consistent, right? Around 70%, and it was again, you know, and Jews are about some of the most reliable, you know, voters inside the Democratic Party, period, and that doesn't seem to have changed. Our pollster Jim Gerstein likes to say, "The biggest problem with Jewish voters for Democrats is there aren't enough of them," you know, because of how reliable they are.

Now, what we are seeing in the polling is the issues that matter most to Jews are still the same issues that matter most to the general population, democracy and affordability were one and two by far. Israel and antisemitism are rising as an issue. But they're definitely second tier.

There is this part of the Jewish population, especially older Jews and Gen X Jews, this is actually interesting as a guy who kinda straddles right on the Gen X fence. Like, Gen X Jews are actually the ones who are experiencing this more than older Jews even. And for them there's a lot more anxiety around Israel and antisemitism. It's not moving their vote except in cases where they think it's basically a threshold issue. It's not moving their vote for these kind of voters except in, like Jon Ossoff voted for all the, you know, bills to block specific arms sales to Israel, individual arms sales to Israel, going back to the first one. There was all kinds of news about how that was gonna cause huge problems for him with the American Jewish community. He won by 19 points in Georgia, right? I mean, it's, that's not the issue.

But you did see, for example, some drop, I think, in Jewish support for Abdul El-Sayed. But again, you still also have these young people, so I'll just leave you with this one number. Zohran Mamdani, in our poll of national American Jews is plus five, and Bibi Netanyahu among American Jews is minus 50, which tells you where the majority of American Jews are on this spectrum.

SAMUELS: Thanks, Ilan. And a quick reminder that we'll get to audience questions in about 10 to 15 minutes, and you can send yours to events@brookings.edu.

So Shibley, I wanna stay with voters for a minute, and I really want us to look at Michigan as a sort of microcosm for a lot of these conversations, because in Michigan, Mike Rogers courted Jewish voters over Israel, and also made a lot of unsubstantiated claims trying to tie Abdul El-Sayed to the Muslim Brotherhood, among other sort of flirtations with Islamophobia, let's say. And Abdul El-Sayed went on to become the first Muslim elected to the Senate. So what did that campaign reveal about antisemitism and Islamophobia in American politics, and what evidence do we have about how voters responded?

Shibley, you're on mute.

TELHAMI: This is a very important question because not only in terms of understanding the link to the election in Michigan, but really the mindset in America right now.

So we've been in our polling tracking American public attitudes toward Jews and Muslims. And you know, you can see in the case of Michigan, when you look at people who wanted to attack Abdulrahman El-Sayed they wanted to attack him using the Islamophobic lens. Why? Because among, certainly among Republicans and maybe even broadly, it works.

Why do we know that? Well, in the polling, in the last poll we released, in the 2026 poll we released recently, we've been tracking this for over a decade. Prejudice against Muslim, or you can call it Islamophobia, I don't like these terms, but basically prejudice against Muslims is at the highest level we've ever measured among Republicans. Not so much among Democrats and Independents. Still they have more prejudice, even Democrats have more prejudice toward Muslim than many other groups, but they have a lot less prejudice, and it's mostly with Republicans. This year there was the highest spike we have seen in prejudice toward Muslims.

In fact, one question we ask, "Would you vote for one of the, you know, a presidential candidate of the following faith or race or ethnicity?" And we give them a whole range of issues. Even if you agreed with all their positions, so this is assuming you agree with the candidates' positions, and the biggest opposition by far, and also the highest this year than ever, is toward a Muslim candidate.

So you have essentially among Republicans, again, I repeat, among Republicans. So it works very well among Republicans. There is deep, you know... When you ask in parallel attitudes toward Jews, there are two things that come out. One is that the public perception in general is that attitudes that the occurrence of anti-Semitic acts and anti-Muslim acts in society have increased almost equally, like over 50% say they've increased in the past five years, and that, two, are almost equivalent in terms of observing incidents against Jews and Muslims, and higher than toward any other group, so they come together. But attitudes toward Jews that they express are much, much friendlier than attitudes toward Muslims.

So for example, on the presidential issue, opposition to a Jewish presidential candidate is minimal. In fact, it is comparable to Protestant and Catholic. It's a lot better not only to, than a Muslim candidate and a Hindu candidate and a Buddhist candidate and atheist and an agnostic, but it's also better than towards Mormon, and better to, than toward evangelical Christians. So, so there is an unevenness in this. Democrats tend to have favorable views of both Jews and Muslims.

So I think that's why you saw in Michigan the activation of this card, the Islamophobic card, because it was tested in public opinion polls, show it could work. What we saw is probably it worked with Republicans, but, and as Ilan said, if you're looking among Jewish Americans, you know, 60% supported him anyway. He may have lost a few, for sure, but the number of Jews, as you know, is very small anyway, so that's not gonna impact, have a big impact on the election, those that he lost. The bottom line is that when you have someone like that who is taking... He was unabashed about his position, particularly his criticism of Israel. And at the same time, tens of millions of dollars, tens of millions, the, the most spent on a single primary ever against him, mostly from that direction, activating Islamophobia against him, and he wins. That is, again, a measure of the tsunami that hit America on election day.

SAMUELS: You know, Joel, I wanna take this conversation a little bit to what comes next. And we talked about how we got here-

RAYBURN: Well, can I, can I respond --

SAMUELS: Of course. Sure sure.

RAYBURN: --a little bit? In the same way that Shibley responded to me out of order. I mean, I think what... So there's a conflation here of and Islamophobia? Islamophobia, this is this, the brickbat used against Republicans to try to depict Republicans as, as bigoted going back to the aftermath of 9/11. So I think what Shibley is asserting here is that Republicans are bigoted because of skepticism over a candidate, and the charge against the candidate talking about-

TELHAMI: You're using those words, Joel. I did not use that.

RAYBURN: Shibley, Sh- Shibley, let me speak. I did not use that. Shibley, let me... Shibley, let me speak. I know you didn't use those words. You used proxy words. The, the-

TELHAMI: I said prejudice, not Islamophobia. That's what I measured.

RAYBURN: Shibley, can I speak?

SAMUELS: And Joel, let's, let Joel speak.

RAYBURN: The the assertion about Abdul El-Sayed was not that he's Muslim, it was instead he's potentially tending toward, which is a different thing. And concern in America, concern everywhere about political Islam and the tendency toward Islam is one that he had trouble answering. When you combine that with his association, his tendency toward democratic socialism, that is what the charge was against him. It didn't have to do with, didn't have to do with bigotry. But it goes but the the rejoinder to those, to, to that skepticism runs straight to bigotry, with Islamophobia as the proxy label for it.

Now, what the, Y- I'm sorry, Ben, then go ahead with your question.

SAMUELS: No, Joel, I mean, I wanna give you the full chance to respond.

I just do wanna say that-

RAYBURN: No, that, that's, that that's that. I've responded.

SAMUELS: Okay, but I do just wanna- Hold on one second, 'cause I just wanna ask Joel, you know, like, Senator Bernie Moreno did say that Abdul El-Sayed wasn't qualified to be in the Senate because he's not a Christian. You know, so, like, there was that sort of attitude. It wasn't just about, you know, national security and democratic socialism concerns. There were specific attacks from senior Republicans across the country that were directly associated with his faith. So I wanna give you the response to fully reply to that as you see fit.

RAYBURN: No, look personally I share the judgment that Abdulrahman Sayed is not qualified to be in the Senate, not because of his religion, but because of his worldview and the policies that he would bring into the Senate, which I think are dangerous to, to US interests. And I think and that is... I mean, we'll see, time will tell. Time will tell in the, time will tell in the Senate.

But go ahead, Ben, you had some other questions that you were going to ask.

SAMUELS: I were, yeah. And I, you know, do appreciate you, you know --

RAYBURN: Oh but let me- Yeah ... but let me just, let me just add I think you're, I think you're gonna find that the mainstream of the Republican Party, that's going to, that's going to be the response to if those are the kind of policies and that's the kind of worldview that is going to be brought into Congress, there's going to be a reaction from there's gonna be a reaction sort of Middle America, the Republican constituency that will play out in future elections. Pendulums will swing this way and that.

SAMUELS: Absolutely. So, you know, bringing the conversation to Iran and what comes next with that. You know, suppose Washington can reach terms with Tehran that Trump considers good enough to end the war, but Israel's government believes that Iran still poses a threat that justifies further strikes. What should Trump do, in your opinion, if Israel does insist that it wants to keep fighting?

RAYBURN: I think it... Look, that... you can't get to that question until unless there's, you can, unless there's a scenario where the Iranian regime actually is capable of making a deal that's acceptable to the United States and it being a sustainable deal. I personally don't believe that kind of world exists.

Having watched this Iranian regime going back to 2005, I don't think they're constructed that way. So, so I honestly... the, the only... the scenario we'd be talking about, I think, would be an unstable deal or an interim deal that the Iranian regime has no intention of of holding to, which is which is essentially what the MoU was. It was why the MoU wasn't wasn't durable. So, so the, I mean, the, that's... I don't think this is a scenario that's actually likely to come up because the deals that the Iranian regime is willing to to strike so far don't last more than a few days or a couple of weeks before they're back to the war.

So, I think that's the way it... This, this issue is not, this issue's not closed. I don't... Frankly I'm very I'm very pessimistic that it, that that this conflict is gonna be resolved through a deal

SAMUELS: And before we take audience questions, Ilan, I just wanna ask you one thing real quick.

Democrats take control in January. What is the first vote on Israel or the Palestinians that you expect to reach the floor? Do you think it will have a majority? Do you think it's gonna pass?

GOLDENBERG: Yeah. I mean, I think probably... Look, Speaker Jeffries was asked this, and well, incoming Speaker Jeffries and what he said was the West Bank Violence Prevention Act.

This is a piece of legislation that basically would re-implement the executive order President Biden signed in his last year in office targeting sanctions on violent settlers extremists, what I think what you'd call Jewish terrorism, is what a lot of Israelis call it at this point, you know, including most the leaders of the opposition and having economic penalties on both those individuals as well as the organizations and institutions that support them. I think that's got... That piece of legislation has 170 members on it already in the House and 45 in the Senate on this current, before we have 60 new members coming in you know, and a whole bunch of senators.

So I think the question is, you know, will President Trump veto something like that? Will it be put into something that's broader legislation like national defen- something that's more must-pass? Or again, like, given what JD Vance just put out there, like, this is an issue where the Trump administration has also been pushing the Israelis pretty hard on settler violence. They might decide in this world that this is something that they're okay with. So we'll have to wait and see. I don't know.

You know, so the one other thing, can I just chime in one thing about this, this debate that, that Shibley and Joel were having? And I wanna say a couple of things here, just that I don't, I haven't seen any evidence that Abdul El-Sayed has any connection or support for political Islam. Like, that part I just don't, I haven't seen. He has very strong views on Israel that I don't necessarily , that I don't necessarily agree with, and I think will lose him some votes on the left. I also think that we're focusing a lot on this one race given all the races that were won in places like South Carolina and Iowa and Texas, which had different messages on this issue and a different approach, and actually I think did better, like James Talarico clearly, for example-

SAMUELS: J Street didn't endorse Abdullah Sayed, correct?

GOLDENBERG: No, we did not endorse Abdul El-Sayed. That was partially a mutual decision. We did engage with his campaign, and we did play a role in actually having our leaders engage with him and have a conversation with him. Our endorsement criteria, you know, you need to be able to kind of... Like, he doesn't support Iron Dome funding or any, like, Israel provision of Iron Dome, things like that, that we disagree with. So we weren't gonna endorse, but you know, me personally, and us as an organization, we did strongly believe we wanted him to win. And we helped facilitate conversations between Michigan Jews and our leadership and him to help bridge divides, 'cause we think that's the most constructive things we can do. And we spoke out very strongly together with other Jewish and Muslim organizations on some of the, the attacks on him that I do think crossed the line.

Joel, I'm not saying that you're there. I don't believe that you are there. Like, I want to be very clear about that. This is not a personal view in - but I do think there is a segment of Republican voters who are there. I'm not saying that's all Republican voters. I'm not saying that's the majority of Republican voters. And I don't think that all the attacks on him cross that line. I do think some of the attacks on him cross that line, like what Ben was talking about Bernie Moreno. So, like, that's my, you know, that's my take on it. And I do think it's a general problem in our society, as Shibley talked about, in terms of Islamophobia.

SAMUELS: So now we are going to turn to audience questions. Joel, I would like to start with you. The question is specifically, then I wanna kind of take it and take it a little broader and put it based off the news cycle of the past forty-eight hours. The question is, what are Israel's options if the US no longer sees Israel as an ally, not as an enemy, but as a country whose security is not of great importance to us? I think this question is a friend of mine for a lot of people after Donald Trump kind of shocked the world on election day saying that the memorandum of understanding, the ten-year, three point eight billion dollar annual military aid deal was going to end at the end of the year.

Obviously, a lot is getting lost in the reading of those comments as it currently stands, but I want you to sort of give us your mile high view on what the implications are for the future of the Israel-US security relationship moving forward.

RAYBURN: Look I don't see a big change coming. I mean, there... I know there may be some wishful thinking from people who want it to change but there are, it I don't see it because there's a reality there. There's a geopolitical reality that is not gonna change. I think it's gonna come into even starker contrast, starker relief in, in the future.

Also, I mean, President Trump's comments about the MOU, I mean, there's been a move to sort of, revisit the MOU and the, the technical aspect of the security relationship between the US and Israel for a while. To move it from foreign military financing, which is the US, which is the, the US appropriating money that the Israelis then spend to, to buy US military hardware to foreign military sales, where this is, where the Israelis are an arms buyer from the US defense industry alongside others. And but they're not the recipient of US security aid.

But I don't see the US, the broader US alliance with Israel changing as long as there is as long as there's an adversarial alliance, I mean, coalition, but it looks to me like it behaves like an alliance, of China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Hezbollah, formerly Maduro's Venezuela, formerly Assad's Syria, and some other, you know, proxies for those main four for those main four members, that's going to be the organizing principle of US national security policy. And it's going to be for people who want there to be some... which means that in the Middle East, the organizing principle is going to be US national security vis-à-vis the threat from the Iranian regime and its proxies and allies.

I don't think that's going to change anytime soon. And for, for people who want the organizing principle to be some other aspect in the Middle East, they're going to be fighting an uphill battle, and there's this reality of, there's this reality of the conflict, I think that's gonna dictate regardless of who's in the White House. I mean, it... So anyway, sorry, go ahead.

TELHAMI: May I just add a little bit? I'm not, it's not so much about what the US is likely to do, but we'll see. I mean, obviously that's a, a very debatable issue. But the question, the premise of the question is I know there are a lot of people who think that Israel can go it

alone without the US. You're hearing those voices. "We've got to wean ourselves from the US." And I think that's a flawed thinking, let me tell you why.

Because I think Israel is a wealthy, innovative country and advanced, and in peace it can thrive, undoubtedly without really foreign backing in a big way. I have no doubt about that. But if you are going... You know, if you read Tamir Hayman's article about where he understands Israel is now going, meaning favoring Jewish supremacy over democracy, favoring war as a mechanism of defense and security over, over peace, having ambitions beyond its pre-1967 border, there is no way in the world that Israel can do that without American support, and there is no way in the world that Israel can find a partner that is as willing to provide the kind of aid that Israel needs to maintain that kind of posture other than the United States. It's just, that's just wishful thinking. That's just a smoke screen. And it's just not doable.

Starting with the question that you asked about the Iran, what if Israel continues the Iran war despite American opposition? Israel can't do it. It's as simple as that. And I'm not talking about just getting a political green light. I'm talking about logistically, to be effective. Israel, of course, can hit Iran any time. Talk about effectively deal conventionally with Iran. It simply cannot carry it out without logistical backing from the US on day-to-day basis, not just intelligence, but operationally. So I think those are like, you know, myths that are created in the public debate to throw a smoke screen into it. It's just not possible.

GOLDENBERG: Ben, can I weigh in on this too? Which is just a couple of additional things to say. Look, I agree with Joel that Iran is a major issue and will continue to be a major issue in the region and a challenge for the US. But the idea that it's the entire organizing principle of our approach in the Middle East, I think maybe under a Trump administration, but I don't think that's accurate.

And I would just point to the fact that on October 7th, we had a strategy in the region before October 7th: deescalate everything, you know, still countering the Iranians, and then things blew up that day, and it wasn't because of Iran. The Iranian leadership didn't even know it was about to happen. It was the Palestinians.

And the idea that it's just Iran, right? Like, that's the only issue and it organizes everything. I mean, I do think that I disagree with those who say until you solve the Israeli-Palestinian, well, that say everything in the Middle East is driven by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It's not. But also those who say, "Oh, you can ignore it and just deal with these other things," that's also just, I think, unrealistic as we learned tragically and horribly on October 7th, and all the knock-on effects that have come from it, and all the destabilizing effects that have come from it. So, you know, I really think that we - that, so I think there's that.

And then the other thing I do think, per Shibley's point, I think a lot of this also depends on Israel and where it goes from here. Part of this is a decision, part of it is American politics and what, where things go in '28, right? But a big part of it is if Bibi Netanyahu is running a government in two years from now with Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, and executing precisely the strategy that Tamir Hayman was describing, which to be clear, I think he's pretty, pretty confident he thinks that's a terrible idea, and he was just objectively describing it, then the US-Israel relationship is not gonna be what it was, period, end stop, right?

If you start to turn things around, if you get a different leadership, if the Arab parties are brought into government where we started this conversation, if you have an Israeli

government that starts to behave constructively in Gaza and move towards the 20-point plan, and actually, you know, that, that cracks down on settler violence, that stops building settlements, that, you know, actually starts to move towards, in a positive direction in all these things, you might have a very different approach.

I don't think we're going back to the days of the past of unconditional support, which is, I think, where we were for a long time. But the question is whether or not we kinda land in a new healthy normal or whether there's a major rupture. And I think frankly, like, that's up to Israel and its behavior.

SAMUELS: Shibley, question for you from the audience. A viewer asks about the gap between American public opinion and elected officials' views on Israel and the Palestinians.

TELHAMI: Where- Yes, and this is... Yeah, go ahead. Sorry.

SAMUELS: No, I was just gonna ask, where do you see that gap most clearly?

TELHAMI: Yeah, and this has really been interesting because that's really gets at the core of the issue, at the core of the issue. That is that, if you looked at it historically, I've been doing polling really for several decades on this, and I've shown that there was an incremental shift among Democrats initially, young Democrats, in being more angry with Israel, and that's been documented, you know, especially after the JCPOA and Netanyahu's opposition to it. We've been documenting incrementally every year all the way through.

But what was... The questions I always asked, will elected officials catch up to Democratic public opinion? It was focused on Democrats. And my answer has always been, from the day I started doing polling, that if the public doesn't rank this issue high in its priorities they can be ignored by politicians. And that's why, in large part they weren't impacting, especially since public opinion obviously isn't the only factor that goes into politics, as we know. And so what happened in the past three years is that the, this issue has become a much more of a priority issue for the public. Gaza brought it back home in big way because I think it, it brought our connection to what was happening there that offended people's sense of values and also interests, because they saw that it was jeopardizing our standing in the world, jeopardizing our relationship with international organizations, the sort of things that Americans wanted to see that were being undermined.

And then right on the tail end of that you have the Iran war, which Americans connected to Israel, and then connected the Iran war to pocketbook issues. So I think now, for the first time, Israel is a domestic American issue. The Israeli-Palestinian issue is a domestic issue. It's a pocketbook issue. It's not just now an issue you know, that people disagree on with their politician. That's why I think people can't ignore it, and that's why, in fact, it has become an asset rather than a liability to embrace the public on this issue, as we have seen in multiple elections so far.

RAYBURN: An asset for whom though? That, that would be my question.

TELHAMI: An asset for the politicians who are running, who are who want to-

RAYBURN: I see ...

TELHAMI: - yeah, who want to, like, cut off aid to Israel, 'cause we see that for example, a majority of Americans want to cut off aid to Israel.

GOLDENBERG: Can I hop in just a little bit? 'Cause Shibley, I mostly agree with you. We've done some deeper focus grouping on this as well, and I wanna like just like underline like one subtlety here, which is I think basically in my view, the issue has kind of become this litmus test issue for Democratic voters. It's not the issue they vote on, but if you sound really unaligned with them, you are saying something that's fundamentally different.

So if you're just kind of using old talking points of unconditional support, you sound like the establishment, you sound like, you know, just support for big money in politics if you're talking like AIPAC. And you lose a piece of kind of, I would say, the far left of the party that you really need in a general election. If you go too hard in the other direction-- I think conditioning aid, I think talking about, you know, our own interests, I think all those things make a ton of sense, and saying we can't support Netanyahu, I think, and going harsher, saying, talking about freedom for Palestinians and the need to like move to a different approach, I think, you know, that works, that middle ground works, right? If you go too hard in the other direction and you're in the position of arms embargoes, for example, and cut off the relationship and BDS, and then you do lose some moderate voters who won't come back to you in a general either, is what we are finding, because they decide that you're kind of part of the woke left.

And so if you can find language in the middle that treads that ground, then the far left is like, "Well, that's not exactly where we wanna be, but it's good enough, and we'll still vote for this person for all their other reasons." And, you know, your kind of moderates will be like, "Well, that's not exactly where we are, but I care more about my gas prices than I do about this." And that's, I think, the subtlety of like the politicians that are doing this the best. At least that's my opinion.

SAMUELS: Unfortunately, that is all the time we have. I could do this all day with the three of you, but alas. Ilan Goldenberg, Joel Rayburn, Shibley Telhami, thank you very much. Hady Amr, Sarah Richman, and the team at Brookings, thank you all very much.

And thank you to everyone who joined us and sent in questions. I'm Ben Samuels, have a good day.