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INTERPARTY POLARISATION ON THE ISRAEL/PALESTINE CONFLICT IN U.S. CONGRESS, 2008-2023

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Since its independence in 1948, Israel has been locked in a bitter and violent conflict with Palestine, which has made the Middle East at large a volatile and unstable region. Israel's closest ally, the United States, has had no choice but to get involved in the conflict. And while the nature of this American involvement has changed several times over the years, one constant has always remained: an unwavering support for Israel, its needs and its interests. This support has traditionally been bipartisan, with Democrats and Republicans setting aside their ideological differences.

However, recent studies by Cavari (2021, 2022) and Rynhold (2023) indicate that the U.S.-Israel relationship has increasingly become the subject of polarisation, where both parties have gradually developed directly opposed views and found less common ground. Both scholars see the Trump presidency as an important turning point, with his hard pro-Israel approach and unprecedented policies, such as the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem or the proposition of a peace plan that allowed all Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Moreover, on the Democratic side, the rise of several young and progressive politicians resulted in

an increasingly critical stance towards Israel and the American unconditional support.

The nature of the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, however, would suggest a decrease in polarisation: contrary to earlier outbreaks of violence, Israel was caught by surprise, with Hamas members crossing the border into Israel this time, and the highest number of Israeli casualties since the 1973 conflict. Indeed, the first reaction in the U.S. was one of united sympathy and support towards the Israeli people. Both President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken travelled to Israel to convey the U.S.'s unwavering support to Israel (Harb, 2024).

This study aims to uncover whether polarisation on this issue has indeed increased over the years, with a particular focus on the post-Trump period and the 2023 conflict. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question: **“To what degree have partisan positions on the Israel/Palestine conflict caused polarisation between Congress Democrats and Republicans between 2008 and 2023?”** To this end, qualitative content analysis is used to examine and compare the arguments of U.S. Congress members during the floor debates of the first four weeks after the

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major flare-ups of the conflict (in 2008/09, 2014, 2021 and 2023).

This study starts with a section that details the methodology and data selection. The following three sections present the findings of the qualitative content analysis. Finally, the last section of this study transposes these analyses into general conclusions on the views of U.S. Congress on Israel/Palestine and how these views have changed over the last fifteen years.

Methodology and data selection

In order to answer the research question mentioned earlier, this study employs a two-step process. As a first step, it analyses which partisan positions have been prevalent in congressional debates on Israel/Palestine. This will reveal which topics were relevant during each period discussed in this study (2008-2023). A second step then analyses how these positions have been a cause for polarisation between Democrats and Republicans. Whereas the first step deals with Democrats and Republican positions in a 'vacuum', this second step puts them in relation to each other. It is only when the two parties gradually develop more directly opposed views, that polarisation is present.

In order to establish and analyse these partisan views, this study uses qualitative content analysis to analyse congressional floor debates. U.S. Congress is an excellent place to study polarisation, because floor debates facilitate inter-party discussion, since every member is allowed to propose resolutions. This means that, in principle at least, all opinions can be expressed, ranging from very widespread beliefs to more dissident opinions (Lee, 2009). For this study, the selected data include all congressional floor debates in a four-week period after the start of the last four outbreaks of large-scale violence in the Israel/Palestine conflict: 2008/09, 2014, 2021 and 2023.

In 2008, Israel broke a six-month ceasefire by killing six Hamas soldiers, to which Hamas responded with rocket attacks. In return, Israel launched a ground operation in Gaza, which ended with a ceasefire after three weeks. By

2014, unrest sparked again when Hamas members kidnapped three Israeli children. When Israeli settlers kidnapped a Palestinian child shortly after, Hamas once again responded with rocket fire. The Israeli army then entered Gaza, until a ceasefire was negotiated six weeks later. A period of relative calm was interrupted in 2021, when Israel evicted six Palestinian families in East Jerusalem and stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque to end the ensuing protests. This resulted in renewed Hamas rocket fire and Israeli airstrikes, until a ceasefire was negotiated two weeks later. The latest outbreak in 2023 was started by a surprise attack by Hamas on October 7, which prompted a large-scale Israeli military response in Gaza (Harms, 2017; Westfall et al., 2023).

Analysing the first four weeks of these four conflicts is enough to look beyond the initial indignation that always follows after an eruption of violence, while on the other hand, it is short enough to reveal what role Congress thinks the U.S. should play in ending the conflict. During the four-week period used for this study, all Congress sessions that covered Israel/Palestine were selected via the *Congressional Record* and used for analysis. Sessions that either did not cover the conflict at all or discussed Israel on points irrelevant to this study were discarded. As a result, the content analysis in this study is based on 76 Congress sessions (37 House sessions and 39 Senate sessions), containing 648 testimonies (271 Democratic and 377 Republican).

Given the complexity and the number of actors involved in the Israel/Palestine conflict, these arguments are analysed using a dual coding scheme (see figure 1). The first coding scheme codes the content of an argument, sorted into three main categories: international relations, the legitimacy of the actors, and the use of violence. In turn, these categories are further divided into subcategories. Together, these (sub)categories thematically cover the whole debate on Israel/Palestine across three important dimensions: space, time and approach (realist/liberalist). The second coding scheme then codes the sentiment of an argument. While two arguments might cover the same topic, the sentiment can be totally

different. Both coding schemes together form an ‘actor-by-stance matrix’, where the political affiliation of Congress members is positioned vis-à-vis their position on certain topics. In total, this study has coded around 8,900 arguments.

The three following sections present the analysis of this coding process. The sections largely follow the same outline as the three main categories of the content-based coding scheme. The first section corresponds to the codes on international

relations, and discusses the relationship between Israel and the U.S. in the international alliance system. The following section then discusses how these views carry over into the U.S. approach to the Israel/Palestine conflict. This section corresponds with the codes on legitimacy and sovereignty. A final section corresponds with the codes on violence, and discusses the instances where the Israel/Palestine conflict moves above the threshold of war: the last four large-scale outbreaks of violence in the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Content			
<u>International relations</u>	<u>Legitimacy</u>	<u>Violence</u>	
<i>Alliances</i>	<i>State/sovereignty</i>	<i>Use of military force</i>	
Friend	Right to exist	Casus belli	
Ally	Recognition	Proportionality	
Allied to other	Territory	<i>Conduct of hostilities</i>	
<i>U.S. Partisanship</i>	<i>International law</i>	Civilian casualties	
Partisan	Occupation	Terrorism	
Bipartisan	Blockading	Proportionality	
Reproach other party	Annexation	<i>U.S. Support</i>	
<u>Other</u>	Apartheid	General	
	Genocide	Financial	
	<i>Internal politics</i>	Humanitarian	
	Form of government	Military	
	Quality of government	Diplomatic	
	<i>Religious arguments</i>	Conditionality	
	Freedom of religion	<i>Willingness for peace</i>	
	<i>Historical arguments</i>	Ceasefire	
	Past attacks	Lasting peace	
	Past support		
Sentiment			
<u>Israel</u>	<u>Palestine</u>	<u>Hamas</u>	<u>Neutral/other</u>
Pro	Pro	Pro	
Contra	Contra	Contra	
Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	

Figure 1. Coding scheme

U.S. Congress on the relationship with Israel

This first section discusses how Congress members see the broader relationship with their long-standing ally Israel. It first describes how often Republicans and Democrats comment on Israel, and how the internal cohesion is for both parties. This then leads to a section about the content of these arguments, and the influence of criticism towards Israel on bipartisan cooperation. A final section details why Congress members argue the

U.S. should support Israel, based on what they see as the foundations of the relationship.

Comments on Israel per party

A first distinction between Congress Democrats and Republicans can be made when looking at the total number of comments on Israel made per party. During the congressional debates covered in this study, Republicans made around thirty percent more comments on Israel (2,744 vs. 1,975 statements). These Republican interventions are

characterised by a large homogeneity, which means that Republican Congress members will often present a collective Republican position in the floor debates, and compliment each other on their contributions on the topic. In this regard, President Trump has not at all divided the Republican party: his Israel policies, such as the Abraham Accords and the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem, are often praised by his Republican colleagues.

In contrast, Democratic positions on Israel fluctuate more, and do not show the same party unity. Figure 2 demonstrates the number of statements on Israel for each time period. The number of Democratic comments was high in 2008/09 and then continuously declined until 2021. In 2008, Democratic members used the first weeks of the 2008/09 conflict to strengthen their claim that President Bush's Middle East policy had failed, and that Barack Obama would offer a better alternative. In subsequent years, the number of Democratic comments on Israel declined heavily, with President Netanyahu's Republicans-first strategy resulting in a decline in Democratic sympathy for Israel (Rubenzer, 2017; Rynhold, 2020). The most recent conflict in 2023, however, resulted in a very large increase in the number of comments on Israel from both parties. This is not at all surprising, as the unprecedented scale of the Hamas October 7 attack made it a hot issue in congressional debates.

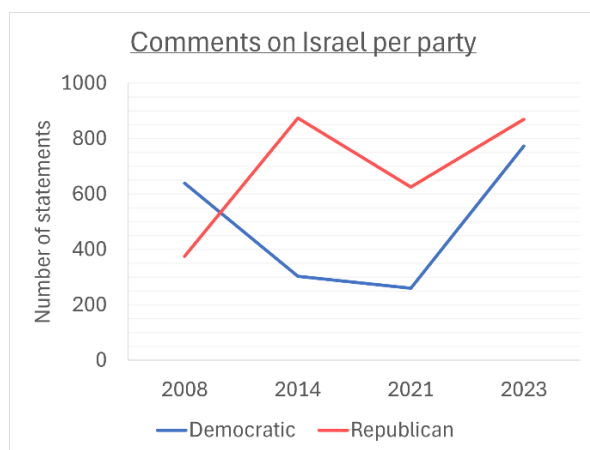


Figure 2. Number of comments on Israel over time, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

Criticism and bipartisanship

A second observation is that the content of these arguments on Israel is substantially more critical on the Democratic side. Figure 3 shows the distribution between positive and negative comments towards Israel per party. During the 2014 conflict, most Democratic Congress members supported Israel's actions and agreed that it could invoke the right to self-defence. During the 2021 conflict, however, Democrats were extremely critical of Israel, with the eviction of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the storming the Al-Aqsa Mosque. After the Hamas October 7 attack in 2023, Democratic criticism towards Israel lessened, but did not disappear. Democratic members mainly argued that the Israeli response was disproportionate and made too many civilian casualties.

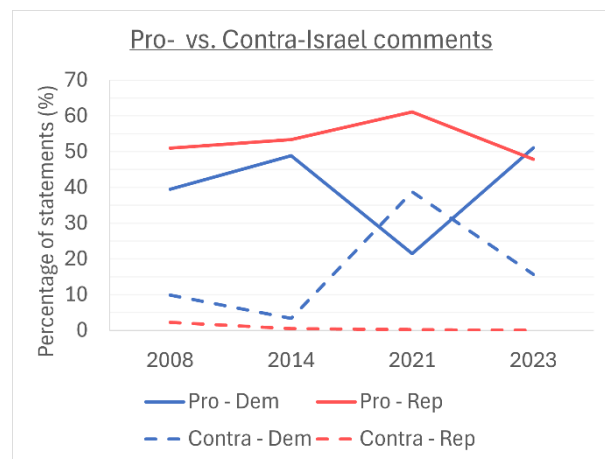


Figure 3. Percentage of critical comments towards Israel, per party, 2008-2023 (relative frequencies)

In addition, these critical Democratic comments have a tangible effect on the working dynamic between the two parties in Congress. In the past, Israel has often been an example of bipartisan cooperation, with bills proposed jointly by members from both parties. Throughout the years, however, Republicans have increasingly voiced their discontent with Congress members that criticise Israel. Most criticism since 2021 is directed at what Republicans call the extreme left, especially with the rise of *The Squad*, a group of progressive Democratic House representatives. In this regard, Republican discourse has increasingly hardened, with critical members often being accused of being antisemitic or pro-Hamas. Because positions

of the Democratic caucus on Israel are more fragmented, however, these Republican comments often do not prevent reaching a majority when bills are voted on.

Democrats, on the other hand, are considerably less critical of Republicans than vice versa. Given Republicans have a more collective discourse, criticism is automatically aimed against the entire party, which complicates cooperation considerably. Instead, Democrats more often accompany critical notes with a plea for more cooperation across the aisle.

Foundations of the 'special relationship'

A final point on the U.S.-Israel relationship is the reason *why* Congress members argue Israel deserves bipartisan support. This is often based on what they see as the foundations of the alliance. It is noticeable that both Democratic and Republican members describe Israel as a strategic ally, rather than as a friend with shared socio-cultural values. In fact, Democrats almost never comment on a shared friendship with Israel. Such a discourse would suggest that Congress members also prefer to use more strategic arguments to argue in favour of supporting Israel.

When looking at the reasoning behind pro-Israel support, however, it becomes apparent that Congress members prefer to use more affective socio-cultural arguments. Figure 4 shows that arguments based on shared values and shared religious history are considerably more popular. This abundance of affective comments can be explained by the fact that, in periods of crisis like these, politicians will resort more often to affective arguments (Hall & Ross, 2015). In such cases, many Congress members resort to othering, with a clash between 'civilised' Israel and the 'barbaric' Middle East. Additionally, Congress members are often hesitant to talk about true strategic interests. They may feel it inappropriate to talk about 'hard' interests at a time when many innocent people die (Hall & Ross, 2015). Therefore, strategic arguments are often hidden behind affective comments. For example, the argument that the U.S. and Israel share democratic values is often a disguised strategic argument. The undertone of

these arguments is that the U.S. must support Israel, not because it shares its values, but because there is no strategic alternative in the Middle East. This consideration has significant repercussions for the way U.S. Congress members approach the Israel/Palestine conflict.

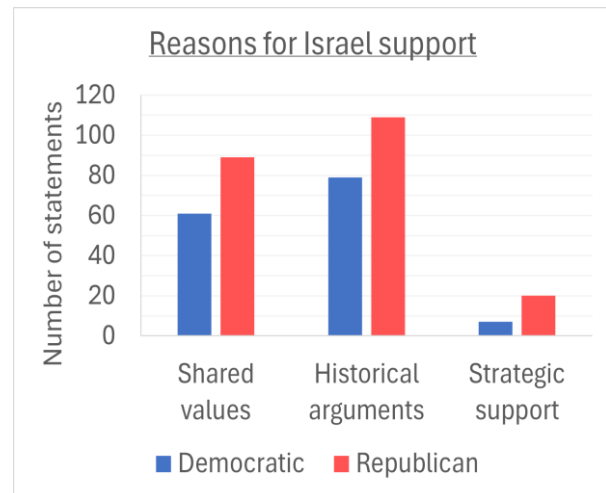


Figure 4. Comments on the reasons for Israel support, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

U.S. Congress on conflict between Israel and Palestine

This second section analyses how congressional views on the relationship with Israel carry over into the approach to the conflict with Palestine. A first section focusses on whether both parties recognise Israel and Palestine as legitimate sovereign states. A following section then delves into how Congress members assess both nation's efforts to recognise each other. A final section then deals with the way members evaluate Israel and Palestine's adherence to international law in their policies below the threshold of war.

Legitimacy and sovereignty

A first important debate when talking about the Israel/Palestine conflict, is both actors' recognition as sovereign states. When analysing the comments on the legitimacy of the state of Israel, it is clear that its 'right to exist' is never questioned. There are 39 arguments that outright confirm the state legitimacy of Israel, divided almost equally among both parties, and there are no comments that claim the opposite. The legitimacy of a Palestinian state, on the other hand, is an area of

polarisation in U.S. Congress. To begin with, there are considerably fewer comments that outright confirm the legitimacy of the Palestinian state (22 Democratic and 4 Republican). However, Congress members can also support the legitimacy of Palestine by calling for a two-state solution, where a Palestinian state would exist next to the Israeli state.

These arguments on Palestine’s ‘right to exist’ are shown in figure 5. During the first weeks of the 2008/09 conflict, there were abundant arguments on the Democratic side that called for a two-state solution. They expressed the feeling that President-elect Barack Obama would be able to find a peaceful and diplomatic solution to the conflict. Six years later, this Democratic hope was severely compromised, and Democratic and Republican comments on this issue balanced each other out. However, Democratic calls for a two-state solution have grown stronger again in recent years. In contrast, the 2023 conflict saw a rising number of comments on the Republican side that argued against the formation of a Palestinian state, because its creation would empower Hamas.

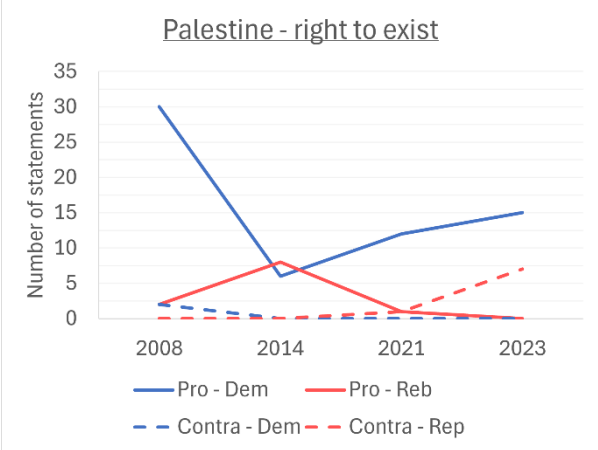


Figure 5. Comments confirming Palestine’s ‘right to exist’, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

Additionally, there is also the question of both states’ territorial sovereignty. Here again, Israel can count on bipartisan recognition of their UN-recognised borders. Republicans bring Israel’s territorial sovereignty up more often though, outnumbering Democratic comments on this topic 2 to 1. The territorial sovereignty of Palestine, on

the other hand, is a more polarising topic. Democrats are quite vocal in their support of Palestine’s UN-recognised borders. However, for every 2 Democratic comments in support of Palestine’s sovereignty, 1 Republican comment states that Palestine does not have territorial rights over the West Bank and/or Gaza and that these territories actually belong to Israel.

Acceptance and recognition

A second distinction between both parties can be made in their opinion on Israel and Palestine’s efforts to recognise each other as sovereign states. Figure 6 demonstrates that, on this topic too, Democrats have grown increasingly critical of Israel, while Republicans have generally been critical of Palestine. Democrats argue that Israel has prevented the creation of a Palestinian state both by annexing Palestinian territory and by denying diplomatic efforts. Republicans, on the other hand, argue that Palestine does not recognise Israel’s ‘right to exist’, and continues to resist the existence of an Israeli state. They argue that Palestinians harbour a deep hate towards Jewish people, maintained through indoctrination and education.

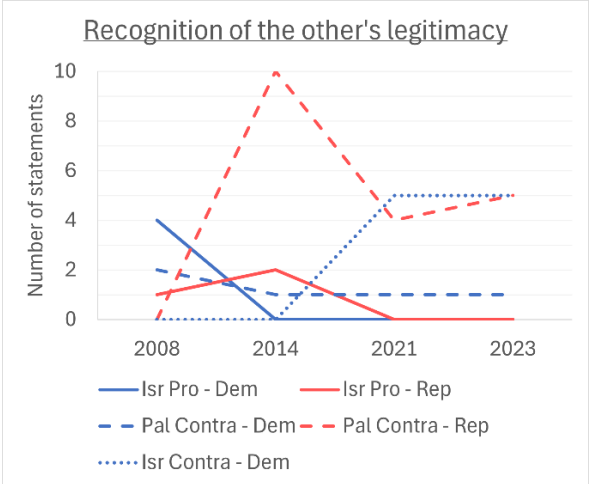


Figure 6. Comments on whether Israel and Palestine recognise each other, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

Next to the recognition of each other’s state legitimacy, there is also the recognition of the other’s religion. Members from both parties are increasingly critical of Palestinians, arguing that they do not accept the Jewish faith and do not wish to

coexist with Jewish people. A argument that also comes back often on this topic is that Palestinians teach antisemitism via schoolbooks. Both parties were most critical of Palestinians on this issue during the 2023 conflict. Several Congress members state that Palestinians supported or celebrated the Hamas October 7 attack and that anti-semitism was the cause. Republicans are generally more supportive than Democrats of the freedom of religion observed in Israel.

However, on these two issues, there is no actor that gets more attention in U.S. Congress than Hamas. It should not come as a surprise that neither party comments positively on these topics, with Republicans slightly more critical of Hamas. The use of arguments against Hamas correlates with the degree to which Congress members think Hamas was to blame for escalating the conflict. During the 2014 conflict, many Republican Congress members adopted quite a reductionist view and pointed at the kidnapping of three Israeli children to demonstrate that Hamas wanted the destruction of Israel. During the 2021 conflict, Democrats were less critical of Hamas because they held Israel more responsible for the escalation of the conflict. The Hamas October 7 attack in 2023, on the other hand, naturally formed the catalyst for an extreme increase in comments by both parties that argued that Hamas wants the destruction of Israel, and does not recognise either their state or their religion.

Adherence to international law

A final point talked about in U.S. Congress about the Israel/Palestine conflict below the threshold of war is both actors' adherence to international law. When this topic is brought up, the largest share of comments (123 statements) state that Israel violates international law, with a smaller share (35 statements) defending Israel. On the Republican side, all comments (52 statements) argue that Israel does adhere to the principles of international law. On this topic, there are no arguments that speak about Palestine, be it in a positive or a negative sense.

Democratic criticisms towards Israel are divided into four different categories, as shown in figure

7. The first criticism accuses Israel of violating the law of occupation. A small number of members argued that Israel, despite its disengagement from Gaza in 2005, continued to occupy the strip militarily. This number of comments only increased during the following years, with a peak in 2021.

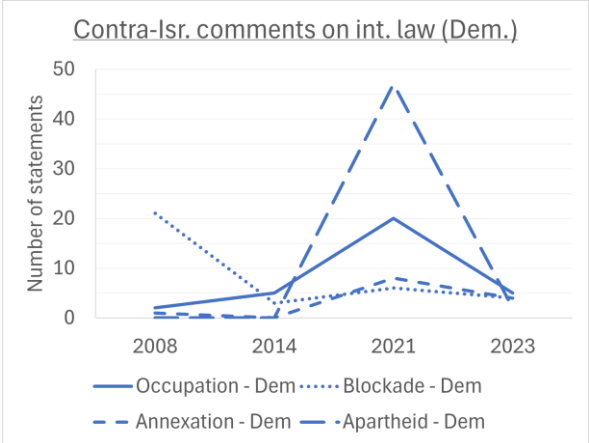


Figure 7. Democratic comments that state Israel violates international law, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

Second, there are Democratic comments that argue that Israel violates international law by blockading Palestine. This comment was most prevalent among Democrats during the 2008/09 conflict. After its disengagement in 2005, Israel constructed a series of fences and control points, which, so argued Democratic Congress members, blocked Palestinians from receiving food, fuel, supplies and other necessities.

Third, some Democratic Congress members argue that Israel violates the law on annexation. These Democratic comments argue that, through its settler politics, Israel is illegally annexing parts of Palestine. During the 2021 conflict, Israeli settler politics played an important role in the lead-up to the conflict. Democrats criticised the Israeli settlers who harassed Palestinian families and the Israeli government for using forced annexations and home demolitions in East Jerusalem.

And fourth, there is the law on apartheid, which Democrats claim is violated by Israel. Democratic arguments that accused Israel of being an apartheid regime were most prevalent during the 2021 conflict. As examples of this apartheid regime, Democratic Congress members cited the

regulation and restriction of/to Islamic places of worship by the Israeli police, the dehumanisation of Palestinians by the construction of separate roads and entrances, the segregation of Palestinians by way of walls, fences and checkpoints, and forced displacement and dispossession by the Israeli government.

Israel’s adherence to international law in situations below the threshold of war is clearly one of the most polarising topics in U.S. Congress. Democrats have become increasingly critical of Israel’s behaviour, while Republicans have always defended Israel on this topic. Republicans argue that these comments misplace the blame for the current situation, or that they are a product of extreme left ideology. This divergence of arguments goes beyond a change in political context, as both sides of the argument have become part of partisan ideology. This indicates that international law is a topic on which partisan positions are increasingly diverging. The 2023 conflict has lowered several Democratic criticisms, but none of the four categories have completely disappeared, indicating that they have become latent issues.

U.S. Congress on war between Israel and Palestine

This third section discusses the instances where the Israel/Palestine conflict moves above the threshold of war: the last four large-scale outbreaks of violence in the Israel/Palestine conflict. It first discusses the arguments about Israel and Palestine’s conduct of hostilities and their adherence to humanitarian law. The next section then analyses how Congress members think the U.S. must support both nations during wartime. A final section discusses the peace process between Israel and Palestine, and how Congress members see the role of the U.S. in this process.

Conduct of hostilities

A first topic discussed when the Israel/Palestine moves above the threshold of war, is the conduct of hostilities of all parties involved. For many Congress members, the focus then shifts from Palestine to Hamas – an organisation that combines multiple roles. As a military movement, it is the

belligerent party on the Palestinian side, but at the same time, Hamas is the elected government in Gaza. The question then arises whether Hamas represents the wishes of the Palestinians by going to war with Israel, or whether Palestinian citizens are the victims of bad government by Hamas. While the opinions on this topic are more fragmented, the innocence of Palestinian citizens is increasingly becoming a polarising topic, with a clear partisan divide in 2023.

Figure 8 shows the arguments pro (Palestinians are innocent) and contra (Palestinians are complicit) on this topic. The argument that Palestinian citizens are failed by Hamas is used to clarify that Palestinians have different ideas or intentions than Hamas. The argument states that Palestinians have the right to a government that provides for them, but instead, Hamas does not care about the Gazans. Whereas the argument is used quite consistently on the Republican side, it is used more frequently by Democrats. The counterargument, which argues that Hamas is the representative of Palestinian thinking, effectively binds Hamas and the citizens of Gaza together. This argument is used more on the Republican side and has seen a steep rise during the 2023 conflict. Republicans argue that Palestinians have had a chance at self-determination, with legislative elections in 2006, and elected Hamas themselves.

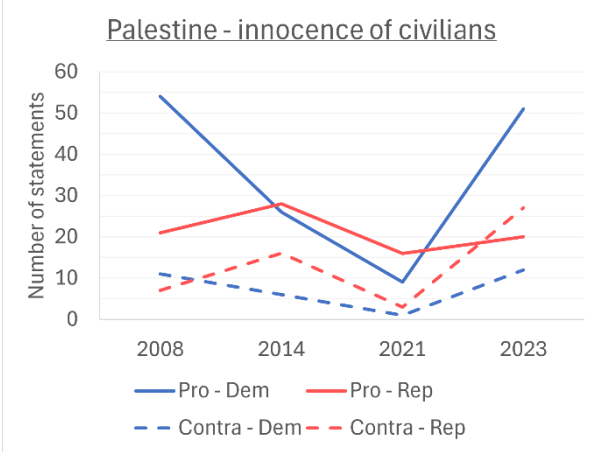


Figure 8. Comments on the innocence of Palestinian civilians, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

With the focus shifted to Hamas and its fight with Israel, the biggest talking point in Congress is whether both parties had a just reason to take up

arms. Generally, Congress members from both parties will argue that Israel’s military action was justified. Among Republicans, the just war argument has always been prevalent, with a clear peak in 2014. During this conflict, members of the Republican Party argued that Israel was entitled to respond militarily in order to stop the Hamas rocket attacks. For Democrats, the just war argument in support of Israeli military action was high in 2008/09 but dropped significantly over time. As argued before, Democrats argued in 2021 that Israel had provoked the conflict, and their subsequent military operations could not be classified as a response to Hamas. There are also a few Democratic comments that argue Israel had no just cause to take up arms against Hamas. Specifically during the 2008/09 conflict, some members argued that Israel waited for an excuse to launch a campaign it had planned months before.

A following talking point on the conduct of hostilities is to what extent both parties are attempting to limit civilian casualties. Figure 9 illustrates that, for Israel, the opinions of both parties differ a great deal. Especially on the Republican side, Congress members frequently commented positively on this topic between 2008/09 and 2014. They argued that the Israeli army did everything in its power to limit civilian casualties by dropping pamphlets over Gaza before doing an air strike in order to warn Palestinian citizens.

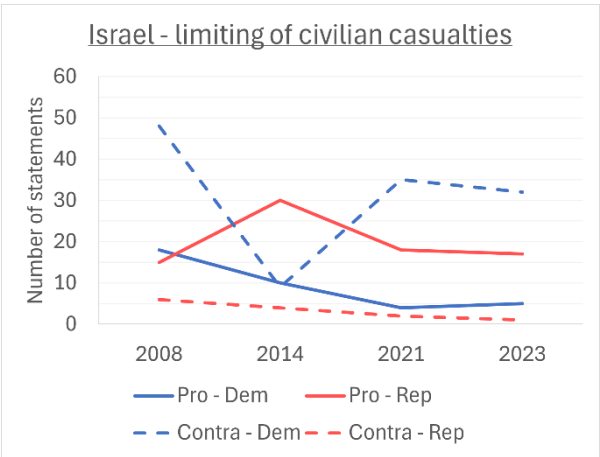


Figure 9. Comments on the limiting of civilian casualties by Israel, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

On the Democratic side, Congress members look a lot more negatively at Israel’s efforts to limit

civilian casualties, making this a clear topic of polarisation. Already during the 2008/09 conflict, Democrats argued that the Israeli military operation in Gaza resulted in too many Palestinian civilian casualties. While Democrats were less critical during the 2014 conflict, the argument resurged during the 2021 conflict. And even during the 2023 conflict, which has softened several of the critical Democratic arguments, this argument has persisted. In this light, Democrats criticise Israel for waging indiscriminate warfare, where the Israeli army does not differentiate between military and civilian targets.

When talking about Hamas’s conduct of hostilities, however, both parties are strongly in agreement. Members from both sides argue that Hamas has to be seen as the aggressor and commits violence against civilians. Talking points that come back often are Hamas’s targeting of civilians with the use of indiscriminate weapons, human shields, and foreign hostages.

Support for Israel and Palestine

A second key issue on this topic, is how Congress members feel the U.S. should support Israel and Palestine in wartime. Israel can count on a multi-faceted aid package, as illustrated in figure 10. The largest share of comments, both by Democrats and Republicans, argue for financial aid to Israel. In the past, it was generally agreed upon that financial aid to Israel comes without conditions. This unconditionality is increasingly criticised by Democrats, who argue that Israel is using the aid to commit human rights violations.

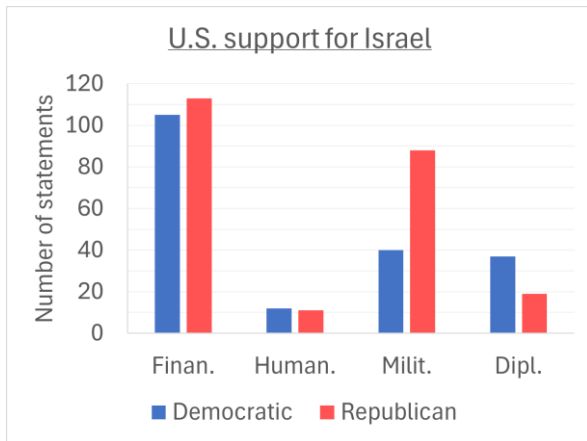


Figure 10. Types of support for Israel, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

Additionally, and intrinsically linked to financial aid, is military and intelligence support. The outright delivery of arms is an argument that is more prevalent on the Republican side, which coincides with a growing disagreement over U.S. military support on the Democratic side. They argue that American weapons are being used with disproportionate force by the Israeli army. The resupply of the Iron Dome, the missile defence system built to deflect Hamas rocket attacks, is a less divisive subject. Support for Israel also entails two other domains: diplomatic and humanitarian aid. The former argues that the U.S. should play a prominent role on the international stage in defending Israel's interests, and the latter proposes to help Israeli civilians impacted by the violence.

In stark contrast to aid to Israel, support for Palestine is almost entirely one-dimensional. The only domain of support that is considered among Congress members is humanitarian aid, in order to help civilians in Gaza. However, this type of aid for Palestine is one of the most polarising topics in Congress. As figure 11 shows, sending humanitarian aid to Gaza is a predominantly Democratic argument, with only a handful of Republican comments in favour. Furthermore, many Republican comments fundamentally disagree with sending such aid. They argue that, because humanitarian aid consists of quite 'volatile' goods, it can easily end up in the hands of Hamas instead of Gazans, which would mean the U.S. would provide support for a declared terrorist organisation.

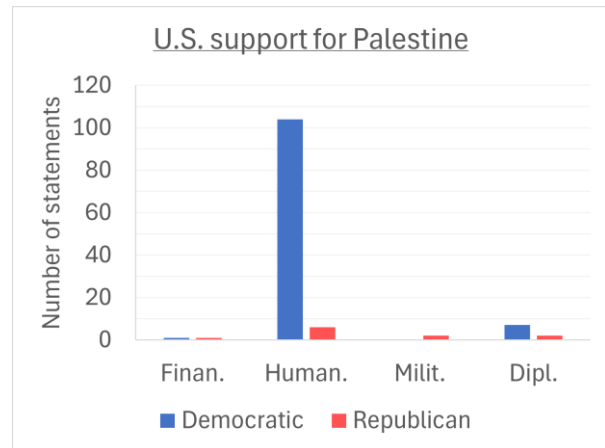


Figure 11. Types of support for Palestine, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

The peace process and America's role

A final talking point, bound together with the periods of violence, is the restart of the peace process between Israel, Palestine and Hamas. Figure 12 shows the view of Congress members on the actors' willingness for peace and whether or not they are trying to bring a peaceful solution to the conflict. Republicans are generally more convinced that Israel is willing to end the conflict. After 2021, many of the positive Republican comments on Israel's role in the peace process referred to the Abraham Accords, which they argued showed that Israel was willing to live peacefully together with its Arab neighbours. During the 2023 conflict, Republicans talked less about the peace process in general, in favour of a military victory over Hamas.

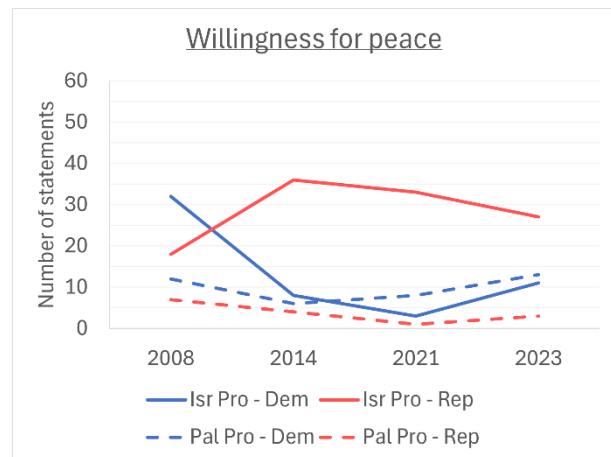


Figure 12. Pro arguments on Israel and Palestine's willingness for peace, per party, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

On the other side of the aisle, Democrats frequently commented positively on Israel's intentions during the 2008/09 conflict, as they saw the 2005 disengagement from Gaza as a move that would also help bring about a peaceful solution. However, these positive comments have declined in number throughout the years. On the other hand, Democrats generally comment positively on the Palestinian willingness for peace. Here again, they argue that Hamas does not represent the ideals of all Palestinians, and that a provocation by Hamas does not mean that not many Palestinians want to live in peace.

When it comes to Hamas's attitude towards the peace process, both parties speak in unison. First of all, Congress members argue that Hamas is unwilling to lay down arms during outbreaks of violence, with 53 Democratic and 56 Republican comments arguing that Hamas violated ceasefire agreements with Israel. Congress members from both sides will also often refer to the Hamas charter, which they see as proof that it is Hamas's end goal to destroy the State of Israel. Especially after the attack on October 7, 2023, many Congress members from both parties accused Hamas of being unwilling to live peacefully and coexist with Israel.

Finally, Congress members also have different views on whether or not the U.S. should play a diplomatic role in the Israel/Palestine peace process. Figure 13 shows that this feeling was very strong on the Democratic side during the 2008/09 conflict. Democrats were dissatisfied with President Bush's Middle East policy and argued that he neglected the American role in the peace process. The disillusion of solving the Israel/Palestine conflict during the Obama presidency through diplomacy resulted in a significant drop in comments in this category in 2014. However, during the last two conflicts, Democratic comments on a possible diplomatic role for the U.S. increased again. This resulted in the argument appearing quite frequently on the Democratic side during the 2023 conflict. On the Republican side, Congress members have used the 2023 conflict to highlight the diplomatic role played by President Trump, through his role at the negotiating table during

the Abraham Accords. However, there is generally less desire among Republicans for the U.S. to play a large diplomatic role in the conflict.

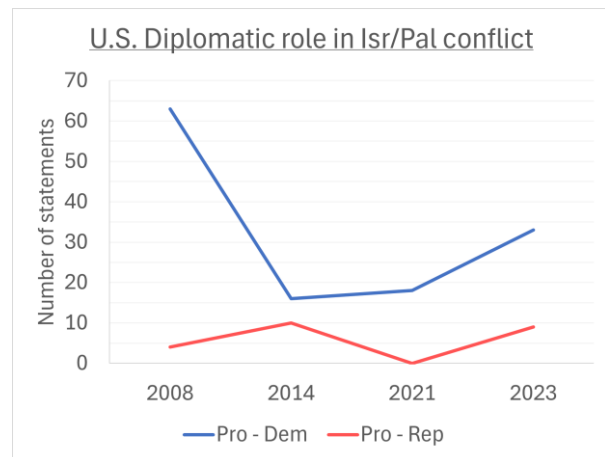


Figure 13. Comments on the U.S.'s diplomatic role in the Israel/Palestine conflict, 2008-2023 (absolute frequencies)

Conclusion

The U.S. alliance with Israel is traditionally described as a beacon of bipartisanship, where Democrats and Republicans set aside party differences and work together. This study has shown that, on several issues, there is as much bipartisanship in 2023 as there was in 2008. Democrats and Republicans strongly agree that Israel is a valuable ally in the Middle East, with shared cultural and religious values. Members from both parties also agree that Israel has the 'right to exist' as a sovereign state, and that Israel has the right to defend its sovereignty and its citizens. Finally, both Democratic and Republican members are critical of Hamas, which they see as the main obstacle towards peace between Israel and Palestine. Additionally, they criticise Hamas for their conduct of hostilities and disregard for human casualties. These arguments are ever-present in the congressional floor debates throughout all four conflicts. They have traditionally resulted in a majoritarian pro-Israel coalition, which has managed to continue the unconditional support for Israel.

However, these areas of agreement cannot hide the fact that, on several issues, party positions have polarised throughout the years. This study has shown that Democratic Congress members often pay more attention to international and

humanitarian law, while Republicans generally use more militaristic arguments. This has resulted in a Democratic attitude that is increasingly critical of Israel, while Republican party members have consistently supported Israeli military action. At the same time, the share of Democrats that openly recognises the Palestinian struggle grows, while many Republican positions on Palestine have hardened throughout the years. Therefore, it is not surprising that both parties disagree on the Palestinian right to self-determination as a sovereign state. Additionally, Democrats are increasingly critical of Israel's adherence to international law, for example, through its blockade or settlement policies. This criticism towards Israel also carries over into its conduct of hostilities, which they see as disproportional. The 2021 conflict saw a clear peak in polarisation: Democrats were more critical than ever on Israel after its actions in East Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. As a consequence, Republicans were never more critical of Democrats, with several comments accusing Democratic members of being antisemitic or pro-Hamas.

The 2023 conflict, on the other hand, was a most-likely case for bipartisan support for Israel. Indeed, during the first four weeks after the Hamas October 7 attack, both parties agreed on several topics. Nevertheless, in the weeks after the attack, all four areas of polarisation came up again. While most Republican Congress members supported Israel's objective to destroy Hamas,

Democratic members feared the Israeli response would be disproportionate. Furthermore, Republicans argued that humanitarian aid to Gaza should be stopped, because they predicted it would help Hamas. Democrats, on the other hand, made humanitarian aid a core issue in their bill proposals. The following months of the conflict, which have not been integrated into this study, have made several of these divisions rise to the forefront of the debate again. President Biden has issued policies towards Israel that, while not unprecedented, are extremely rare. Most emblematic is the pause in military aid towards Israel in May 2024.

It is clear that, ultimately, the 2023 conflict has not brought Democrats and Republicans back together on Israel-related policy. Instead, they have drifted further apart. With a polarised Congress unable to come to bipartisan cooperation, the American Israel policy increasingly lies in the hands of the executive branch. This makes the 2024 presidential elections extremely important for the short-term future of the Israel relationship, as both winners would take it in opposite directions. This study has shown that Republicans seem keen on a military solution to the conflict, where Hamas its capacity to govern Gaza is destroyed once and for all. Democrats, on the other hand, seem to favour a restart of the diplomatic process. Whoever wins the U.S. elections will have a great influence on the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians.

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