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# Jews, Muslims, and the Democrats

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THE 2006 midterm elections confirmed once again a truism of American politics: American Jews remain overwhelmingly devoted to the Democratic party. According to exit polling, the tilt this year was, if anything, even more pronounced than it has been in the past. Some 88 percent of Jewish votes went to Democratic candidates, while a mere 12 percent went to the GOP.

Along with this lopsided outcome, a historical extreme, comes the news that the number of Jewish representatives in Congress has itself reached an all-time high. Although Jews represent a marginal sliver—a mere 2 percent—of the U.S. population, they now hold 13 seats in the U.S. Senate, all but two of them—Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and Norm Coleman of Minnesota—Democratic. (Bernard Sanders of Vermont, elected as an independent, has pledged to vote with the Democratic caucus.) In the House of Representatives, Jews, all but one of them Democrats, now occupy 30 seats.

Party affiliation aside, this surely denotes a high-water mark of Jewish political representation, just as Joseph Lieberman's presence on Al Gore's presidential ticket set a previous mark in 2000. But party affiliation cannot be placed to one side. For the paradoxical and disturbing fact is that even as Jewish voters remain unwaveringly loyal to the Democrats, and even as Jewish representation in na-

tional office, almost entirely Democratic in color, has risen to an all-time high, the Democratic party itself is becoming demonstrably less hospitable to Jewish interests. Indeed, on at least one matter of central concern—the safety and security of the state of Israel—the party and the American Jewish community may be heading toward a slow-motion collision.

This development is not exactly of recent vintage—its historical roots can be traced as far back as the late 1960's—but it has taken on an increasingly stark aspect as the party has progressively succumbed to the influence of its own left wing and to blind hatred of George W. Bush. And recently a new element has entered as well, symbolized by the election this past November of Keith Ellison, the first-ever Muslim member of the House of Representatives, on Minnesota's Democratic Farmer-Labor (DFL) ticket. Ellison's story is unique, but also a symptom of larger trends.

"Louis Farrakhan's First Congressman" is how the *Weekly Standard* titled an election-eve profile of Ellison. In the late 1980's, while still a law student, Ellison had indeed been an activist in the Nation of Islam, Farrakhan's black-Muslim cult. Writing under the pseudonyms of Keith Hakim, Keith X. Ellison, and Keith Ellison Muhammad, he called for the establishment of an independent black republic in the American South and defended the unadorned anti-Semitic pronouncements of Farrakhan and his organization. Long after com-

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pleting law school, moreover, Ellison continued to work with the Nation of Islam, joining with more prominent black leaders, including the Reverend Jesse Jackson and the Reverend Al Sharpton, to help organize the 1995 Million Man March.

Ellison was carrying other baggage as well. Critics, particularly his Republican opponent, were quick to raise questions about his ties to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an organization that has been linked to radical Islamists and anti-Semites of various stripes.

But attempts to derail his candidacy on these grounds failed. Under fire during the campaign for his associations with the Nation of Islam, Ellison wrote a letter to the Minnesota Jewish community-relations council in which he admitted that as a young man he "did not adequately scrutinize the positions and statements" of the Nation of Islam, acknowledged that they "were and are anti-Semitic," and declared that "I should have come to that conclusion earlier than I did." On the strength of this and similar statements he proceeded to win endorsements from the *American Jewish World*, a "progressive" local paper, and the even more "progressive" Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, the latter of which dismissed criticism of his links to CAIR as "a smear campaign."<sup>1</sup>

Both the ease with which Ellison was able to glide through this controversy and the remarkable lack of discomfort his candidacy appeared to cause among his fellow Democrats point to the larger significance of his election. For the simple fact is that in certain respects he is not alone: the past decade or so has seen the formation of a group of 40 to 50 Democratic Congressmen who, in varying degrees of intensity, have felt free to express an uninhibited hostility toward the Jewish state.

A coarse index of this group's membership was on display last May when Hamas, the Islamic fundamentalist terror organization pledged to Israel's destruction, won elections in Gaza and the West Bank and assumed control of the Palestinian Authority. In response, Congress took up the Palestinian Anti-Terror Act of 2006—legislation aimed at denying U.S. financial aid to the Palestinian Authority unless and until the President could certify that terror groups were not among its recipients, that the new Palestinian regime recognized Israel's right to exist, and that it remained committed to agreements with Israel signed by its predecessors. The bill passed the Senate unanimously. In the House, a similar but slightly tougher version also passed handily—but not without drawing 37 nay votes and 9 votes of "present" only. Of the 46 rep-

resentatives either actively opposing the bill or unwilling to vote for it, 41 were Democrats.

To be fair, not every Congressman who failed to support the legislation could automatically be counted as unsympathetic to Israel; the State Department had expressed its own reservations about the House version on the grounds that it unduly limited American flexibility. Still, the number of Democrats ready to oppose so straightforward an anti-terror measure was striking, and all the more so in light of the Democrats' long record as the party friendlier to Israel than the Republicans.

WHAT EXPLAINS this turnabout? A full answer would take us on a sojourn through the twists and turns not only of party politics but of the ideological, cultural, and racial disputes of the past decades as they have affected both domestic and foreign policy. But of particular relevance in the present context is the demographic ingredient exemplified by Keith Ellison.

The Muslim population of the United States has been steadily growing. Although the numbers are hotly disputed—the U.S. census does not gather information about religious affiliation—a middle-range estimate tells us there are four to six million Muslims in the country. Not in dispute is that they are one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population, and that with increasing size has come increasing potency within American political life.

Where populations are sufficiently concentrated in America, so too, usually, is political clout. As a rule America's Muslims have settled in major cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and New York—where they are still too sparsely present to exercise significant weight as a bloc. Smaller localities, however, tell a different story. Thus, in Minneapolis-St. Paul, where many émigrés from strife-torn Somalia happen to have gathered, Muslims formed an important building block of Keith Ellison's electoral victory. In places like Dearborn and Detroit, Michigan, where many immigrants from the Arab world have settled, Muslims enjoy a far larger degree of political influence.

But what *are* their politics? On the whole, this swelling population is quite heterogeneous. America's Muslims are not only geographically dispersed but also highly segmented. Most are either immigrants or the children of immigrants from countries in the Middle East or the Asian subcontinent.

<sup>1</sup> After winning his seat, Ellison distanced himself from CAIR, skipping its annual dinner, where he had been scheduled to appear as the keynote speaker, and addressing it only by video. He also pledged to visit Israel at the earliest opportunity.

A rough estimate holds that nearly one million, overwhelmingly black, are, like Ellison, American-born converts to the faith. In contrast to the situation in Europe, America's immigrant Muslims tend to be prosperous, are frequently said to be on the path to integration in American life, and in some respects have shown pronounced traditionalist inclinations.

In 2000, most Muslim-American organizations backed the presidential candidacy of George W. Bush, drawn by his brand of social conservatism as opposed to the free-form liberalism on offer from the Democratic party, with its emphasis on access to abortion and gay rights. Since then, however, their sentiments have changed.

There can be no doubting the seismic political effect of September 11, 2001 on the political orientation of American Muslims. For reasons that are themselves disturbing, the principal American-Islamic and Arab-American organizations almost immediately adopted an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the Bush administration and the war on terrorism. Thus, all of them vehemently denounced the Patriot Act, which, with its presumed racial profiling and targeting of mosques, was perceived to be directed against *them*. The decision to go to war in Iraq, with the American military machine thrust into the heart of the Arab nation, was also universally opposed. Stirring perhaps the most vociferous response was the Bush administration's strong and consistent support—perhaps the strongest and most consistent of any administration since 1948—for the state of Israel as a victim of terror and a democratic ally in the war against terror.

In each of these respects, there was a point of contact between American Muslims and today's Democratic party, with its reflexive antipathy toward the Bush administration's conduct of the war on terror and, especially, its already sizable contingent of voices suspicious of or hostile to Israel. Within that contingent, one particularly active element has been the Congressional Black Caucus, whose membership in recent years has included such reliably radical firebrands as Ron Dellums and Maxine Waters of California, Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, and Earl Hilliard of Alabama. In addition to Keith Ellison, two members of the caucus—Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas and Albert Wynn of Maryland—addressed CAIR's post-election celebratory banquet this past November.

But the Black Caucus is not alone. Other Democrats (joined for this purpose by Republicans like former Congressmen Paul Findley and Pete McCloskey) have been similarly ill-disposed to-

ward Israel and/or American Jews. One thinks of James Moran of Virginia, notorious for asserting that the U.S. would never have gone to war in Iraq but "for the strong support of the Jewish community." (In fact, as opinion polls consistently showed, American Jews overwhelmingly opposed U.S. entry into the war.) In California, one newly elected Democratic Congressman, Gerald McNerney, accepted an endorsement this past fall from the Republican McCloskey, notwithstanding the latter's links to the crackpot Holocaust deniers at the Institute for Historical Review. And so it goes.

**N**OR SHOULD one underestimate the degree to which such sentiments, in more respectable or diluted form, have been seeping from the fringes into the center of the Democratic party—or, to put it perhaps more accurately, the degree to which the policies and the attitudes of the party's left wing have increasingly come to define Democratic discourse in general. An emblematic presence here is the financier George Soros, a major figure in Democratic-party politics who in 2004 donated \$15 million to defeat George W. Bush. Soros is also the chief underwriter of the web-based pressure group *moveon.org*, which, in the 2006 political season, poured heavy resources into the effort to dislodge Joseph Lieberman from the U.S. Senate and send an anti-Iraq-war activist named Ned Lamont in his place.

As is well known, this effort scored an early success by wresting the Democratic nomination from Lieberman and gaining it for Lamont. Thereupon, an undeterred Lieberman announced that he would stay in the race as an independent candidate. At this point the Left's anti-Lieberman campaign, already a model of personal vilification, grew still more vicious, as postings on the *moveon.org* website began to refer caustically to the long-serving Connecticut Senator as "the Jew Lieberman," providing yet another alarming clue, if one were needed, to attitudes within a segment of today's American Left.<sup>2</sup>

Since Lieberman's win in November, George Soros has let it be known that he aims to turn his attention to the Israel "problem" in American politics by forming a new lobby that will act as a "progressive" counterweight to the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). The avowed purpose of this organization will be to mobilize support for putting U.S. pressure on Israel to take what Soros

<sup>2</sup> *Moveon.org* ignored privately lodged complaints about these and other anti-Semitic postings and only removed them after they became the subject of public controversy.

regards as necessary steps for "peace." One such step, in his view, is to extend Israeli diplomatic recognition to Hamas, an organization that, for its part, has pledged never to recognize Israel.

In the course of his long career as a philanthropist, the Jewish-born Soros has demonstrated no particular interest in Israel or in Judaism—beyond, that is, occasionally likening Israelis to Nazis and blaming Jews themselves for the contemporary worldwide resurgence of anti-Semitism. His entry into this particular fray at this particular moment is a signal of where at least some influential donors and activists think the Democratic party should be moving. In this, indeed, he would appear to be in perfect accord with a number of figures near the summit of the Democratic establishment, one of whom is former President Jimmy Carter. Long obsessed with the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and hardly discreet about his sympathies, Carter has recently published a book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, that lambastes Israel at every turn as a South Africa-style racist state and the principal obstacle to peace in the Middle East.

A perverse logic is at work in such irrational attitudes, and it is one with counterparts on the other side of the political spectrum as well. There, the Bush administration is maneuvering to deflect complaints from some *conservative* critics that America's closeness to the Jewish state is preventing a general solution to our current dilemmas in the Middle East, and that our relationship with democratic Israel needs to be revised in favor of a new "dialogue" with rogue actors like Syria and the genocidal mullahs in Iran. In an earlier era—in the administration of the first George Bush, for example—proposals of this nature would have been seized upon by Democrats as evidence of Republican indifference to the security of a critical ally. Today, the mainstream of the Democratic party is either silent in the face of such reckless notions, no matter who voices them, or, when vocal, approving.

In late November, Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, would get a dose of the new Democratic disposition. On a visit to the White house, Olmert offered some anodyne comments about the American war effort in Iraq, declaring himself "very much impressed and encouraged by the stability which the great operation of America in Iraq [has] brought to the Middle East." To leading Democrats, still flush with their successful bring-the-troops-home election campaign, this declaration of solidarity with America's war was not to be borne. "I'm shocked," announced Gary Ackerman of New York, a prominent "pro-Israel" Democrat and the

incoming chairman of the International Relations subcommittee on the Middle East. "Most of us here," Ackerman admonished the Israeli leader, "understand that our policy [in Iraq] has been a thorough and total disaster for the United States." Israel, in other words, should get with the Democratic program calling for withdrawal from Iraq, whether or not that program conflicts with Israel's well-founded understanding of its own security needs.

WHICH BRINGS us back to American Muslims. For just at the point where the U.S. interest in a strong Israel diverges from the perceived interests of the Democratic party, there leading Islamic organizations find themselves in tune with the latter. So much is this the case that, in the judgment of the political scientist Peter Skerry, we may now be witnessing the emergence of a new force in American politics. Writing in *Time*, and citing a whole range of such convergent interests, Skerry calls this a "Muslim-liberal coalition" (more accurately it might be called a Muslim/Arab-liberal coalition). If he is right, and if this coalition can be organized to act with any degree of coherence, it could indeed end up, through sheer numbers alone, wielding a disproportionate influence on American politics, to the clear detriment of the interests of American Jews.

With the Democratic party now in a majority in both houses of Congress, five members of this de-facto Muslim/Arab-liberal coalition, all of whom voted against the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism bill, have already acquired sufficient seniority to rise to committee chairmanships. On the Arab side, Nick Rahall of West Virginia, of Lebanese Christian descent, is chairman of the Arab-American congressional caucus and incoming chairman of the House Resources committee. On the liberal or left-wing side, David Obey of Wisconsin, a frequent critic of U.S. foreign aid to Israel, is the new chairman of the Appropriations committee. (His counterpart, the chairman of the Senate Appropriations committee, is the eighty-nine-year old Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, perhaps the member most single-mindedly unsympathetic to Israel.) John Dingell, from a district that includes Dearborn, Michigan, is now chairman of the Energy and Commerce committee. (During this past summer's Lebanese war, Dingell declared: "I don't take sides for or against Hizballah or for or against Israel.") John Conyers of Detroit, who in unofficial hearings last year hosted a parade of hand-picked witnesses blaming Israel and its "agents of influence" for the

war in Iraq, is the incoming chair of the House Judiciary committee.

These committee chairmen will control key levers of power. Of course, that is not the same thing as wielding a hammerlock on congressional action. A number of new chairmen, including Tom Lantos of California, remain strong advocates of close U.S.-Israeli ties, while some Congressmen who may themselves be unfavorably disposed to Israel represent constituencies whose sentiments run in the other direction. As for the Senate, the Muslim or Arab side of the new coalition so far lacks identifiable representation, and at least some prominent Democrats, including New York's Charles Schumer, have shown themselves willing, if not actually to challenge pro-Arab or pro-Islamist voices among their fellow Democrats, then at least to describe organizations like CAIR accurately.

Matters have thus not yet reached a tipping point. Still, it is worth bearing in mind that in some states where the balance between Republicans and Democrats is close, Muslims are now able to serve as a decisive swing vote. In the critical and close-run Senate race in Virginia, for example, the Republican incumbent George Allen lost by fewer than 10,000 ballots to the Democratic challenger James Webb. Approximately 50,000 Muslim American voters participated in this election; according to one Muslim advocacy group, some 90 percent cast their ballots for Webb.

This is almost certainly an exaggeration. Nevertheless, a significant majority did vote for Webb. American Muslims can thus claim credit not only for sending him to the Senate but for handing over the Senate itself to Democratic control.<sup>3</sup>

MUCH HAS been written and spoken in recent months about the so-called "Israel lobby" in American politics, a movement allegedly made up of influential American Jewish organizations and individuals who cumulatively exercise a "stranglehold" over the U.S. Congress, skewing our foreign policy in directions inimical to the nation's proper aims and interests. As I and others have tried to show, this notion is a pernicious slander, and a lie.<sup>4</sup> The truth is that, for a variety of historical reasons, the degree of influence exercised by

American Jews in the political arena has always been limited; when it comes to Israel in particular, American governments have acted in different ways at different times, but always out of their sense of the American national interest and with the backing of the American people.

At any rate, and thanks in part to the stubbornly lopsided Jewish allegiance to the Democratic party, the influence wielded by the Jewish community has not been increasing but receding, even while the numerical representation of Jews in public office has grown. Not only is the Democratic party of today farther than ever from the Democratic party of Jewish memory, but the steadfast lack of interest shown by American Jews in the Republican party has robbed them of any possibility of being courted by either party as a potentially valuable swing vote. Worst of all is that this reality continues to be denied by Jewish spokesmen who most need to recognize and confront it.

"When it comes to Israel, Democrats and Republicans are pretty much indistinguishable," wrote the executive director of the Israel Policy Forum, a left-wing Jewish advocacy group, in the aftermath of this November's election. "If there are members of Congress who are truly antagonistic toward Israel," he continued, "they keep their views secret." But this is just so much eyewash, designed to soothe political consciences and keep increasingly distasteful facts from view.

Muslim-Americans have become a group avidly sought after by both parties, a group whose numbers are growing and whose group preferences, strongly expressed, are and will continue to be taken into account. In the foreseeable future, it is highly unlikely that American Jews, whose numbers are in any case hardly increasing, can play such a role. They can certainly not do so as long as they remain unthinkingly wedded to a party that is paying them ever less heed.

<sup>3</sup> Thousands of Jewish voters also took part in the Virginia election. They, too, voted overwhelmingly for Webb—but they cannot in any sense be said to have tipped the scale since, as loyal Democratic voters, they were counted in Webb's column from the get-go.

<sup>4</sup> See my article in the November 2006 COMMENTARY, "Dual Loyalty and the 'Israel Lobby.'"