



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

# Uninspiring US election campaign leaves the Middle East with outsized weight



It's not too early to deliver a judgement on this year's US presidential campaign, which has now almost run its course. From an international vantage point, it has looked uninspiring and unedifying to say the least and horrifying at its worst, of which there was a lot.

Unless there's some hitherto undetected groundswell that will deliver a sweeping victory to one side or the other on November 5th, it still looks as though the cliché that it will all come down to a handful of voters in a slew of swing, or **battleground**, states, will hold true.

It's a fool's business to make any predictions, even so close to the elections. Yet, some clear warning signs for vice-president Kamala Harris can be seen out there, some having to do with the ongoing violence in the Middle East.

It looks likely that both misogyny and racism play a significant role in this year's vote. Without victim-blaming, Harris has not been the extraordinary, once in a lifetime, Obama-like, candidate able to marginalise these prejudices by bringing others aboard in sufficient numbers.

Thus far, her attempts to distinguish herself from President Joe Biden on two crucial issues, the economy and Gaza, have been unconvincing, if not insipid.

## Special interest groups in the swing states

Because of her failure to set out a clear and appealing vision on overarching issues, such as the economy, that speak to a wider swathe of the electorate, she's more dependent on 'special interest' groups in the swing states.

In this election this includes those who pay closer attention to what's happening in the Middle East.

Very often, that is taken to mean Arab-

American or Muslim voters but there is a much wider gamut of people concerned about the carnage in Gaza and the rest of the region, with many young, progressive, humanitarian, pacifist voters and others also having grave doubts about the US administration's course in the Middle East.

Their usually overwhelming allegiance to the Democratic candidate, can be sorely tested and even a small swing away from Harris, compared to Biden four years ago, can play into the hands of Donald Trump.

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To complicate things, there are also countervailing forces in the same field, Jewish voters and some others who are more sympathetic to Israel, who'd usually be solidly Democrat but who for a variety of reasons could lose faith in Harris.

Plus, a segment of middle-ground voters who are put off by progressive support for things such as pro-Palestinian demonstrations, are pushed to the right.

## The effects of the violence in the Middle East

As in other aspects of the campaign, Harris has not been able to pull off the delicate balancing act, or offer an inspired alternative **narrative**, needed to resolve this issue. She cannot break free from the Biden administration's record, nor define herself sufficiently on her own terms.

The effects of the current violence in the Middle East, comparable possibly to the Vietnam War in its day, or apartheid South Africa in terms of progressive mobilisation, have been seen in several European elections, albeit nowhere as potentially decisive as in the

US.

In the UK, pro-Palestinian independents won an unprecedented five seats, in the process dismissing Labour stalwart Jonathan Ashworth who had been in line for a cabinet post.

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who had been dismissed by his own party, held on as an independent on a platform that was among other things pro-Palestine.

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Additionally, the progressive Green Party bucked the European trend of ecological electoral shrinkage and quadrupled its representation to an unprecedented four seats.

There can be little doubt that many of those who found it unpalatable to vote for Labour, partly because of Gaza, opted for the Greens.

These defections had little impact on Labour's landslide victory, which, indeed, had been anticipated. The prospect of an overwhelming win might have allowed some voters to feel they could afford to choose an alternative to Labour.

## A statistical dead heat

This American election rests, however, by all appearances, on a knife's edge. The same effect as in the UK, in swing states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona or Pennsylvania, could nix Harris's chances.

Take Michigan, where one of the latest polls (Suffolk University/USA Today) shows Harris and Trump virtually tied, with the latter up 0.7 percent, well within the margin of error.

But then look at the 2.4 percent of the vote that two progressive candidates, to the left of

Harris certainly on Palestine, are expected to garner.

The Green Party's Jill Stein and independent candidate Cornel West might object to the 'spoiler' label but it's hard to see them as not potentially spoiling the election for Harris.

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Robert F. Kennedy Jr. who is still on the ballot in Michigan but has withdrawn from the race, also received 1.4 percent support but it's unclear whether this mostly comes at the expense of Trump or Harris.

It can be taken as quite astounding that this late in the race for the White House, two such different candidates as Harris and Trump are still in a statistical dead heat.

What's even more astonishing to many, is the willingness of some pro-Palestine progressives and others to vote in such a way as to benefit Trump, even if that's not the intention.

It would be blatantly unfair to blame those voters for a potential Trump victory. That responsibility lies squarely with the larger electorate. Yet, they are the ones who could make the difference in some of the closely-fought swing states.

## A costly mistake

The Washington, D.C. based Middle East Institute in a recent analysis in fact played down the importance of the Middle East in the current US election cycle, saying: "It may seem surprising that the Middle East is not playing a bigger role in America's main political choices this election."

Yet, the analysis also concedes that, "The

various voices — pro-Palestinian, pro-Israel — have an ability to impact the outcomes in America’s electoral college system in ways that are difficult to predict.”

the issue adequately ahead of time, might prove a costly mistake.



*The various voices — pro-Palestinian, pro-Israel — have an ability to impact the outcomes in America’s electoral college system in ways that are difficult to predict - Middle East Institute*

While that might turn out to be something of an understatement, the real value of the analysis lies in its point-by-point comparison of the positions of Trump and Harris on the main issues currently in play in the Middle East.

From this, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that any voter who is even in the slightest interested in avoiding a US Middle East policy even less compatible with progressive values, should do everything to make sure Trump doesn’t get elected again.

As if needed, another red flag is the cosy relationship that Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have with Trump, of which the latter has boasted. This in contrast with the, at least verbally, antagonistic relationship Netanyahu seems to be having with Biden.

It’s hard to see what Harris could do at this late stage to safeguard more of the progressive and pro-Palestine vote without alienating other important blocs, not only for her own election but also for crucial House and Senate races.

If the Middle East turns out to be decisive in the swing states, it’s been heralded amply ahead of the elections. Harris not addressing