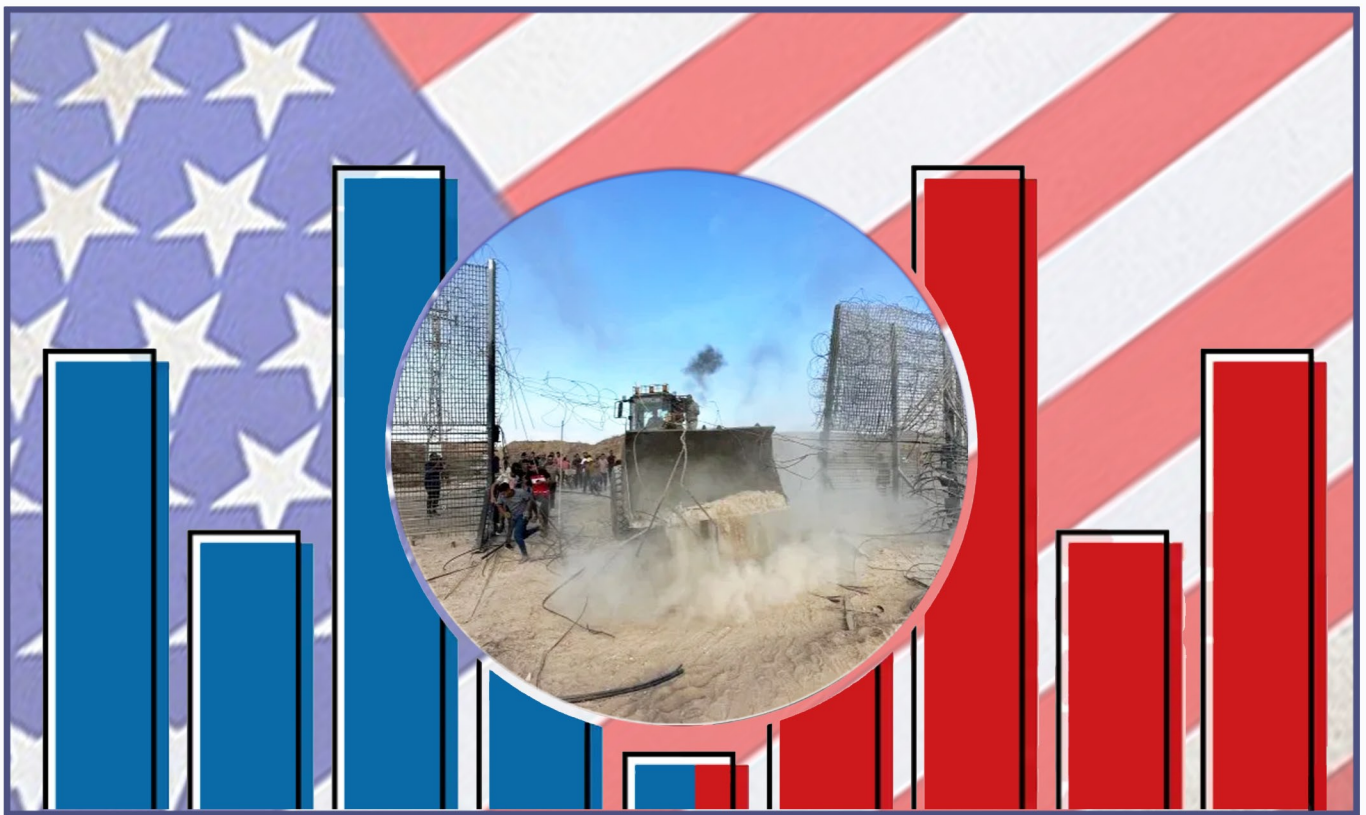




Academic Paper

The Significance of Foreign Affairs in the U.S. Presidential Election: Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as an Example



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The Significance of Foreign Affairs in the U.S. Presidential Election:

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as an Example

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

The quadrennial US presidential elections captivate global attention, underscoring the significant influence of the US in international affairs. However, the pivotal question that warrants careful consideration is the extent to which foreign affairs—ranging from international conflicts and the global economy to shifts in global opinion, relations with major powers, stances of international organizations, and adherence to international law, etc—affect the decisions of US voters when selecting their president.



Interestingly, Arab political discourse often attributes a greater significance to international affairs in predicting electoral outcomes and assessing presidential policies during election years. This observation underscores a crucial factor for those intending to navigate relations with the United States. It also emphasizes the imperative to recognize disparities in the importance accorded to foreign affairs by Democrats and Republicans, a distinction we'll delve into shortly. Additionally, it's essential to acknowledge the constitutional constraints that shape a president's conduct in foreign affairs, a subject that US political literature typically approaches from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective, attributed to Alexander Hamilton, places the president as the primary architect of foreign policy. Conversely, the Madisonian perspective, associated with James Madison, bestows the ultimate authority over foreign policy decisions upon Congress.²

In this study, our aim is to explore the significance of foreign affairs in determining the outcome of the US presidential election, with a specific focus on its relevance to Operation al-Aqsa Flood phenomenon.



First: Indicators Used in U.S. Presidential Election Prediction Models:³

When examining numerous models aimed at predicting the outcomes of US presidential elections (such as the Ray Fair model, the Lichtman model, the Abramowitz and Campbell/ Wink model, as well as those proposed by Christopher Wlezien and Robert Erikson, Michael Lewis-Beck and Charles Tien, among others),⁴ a notable consensus emerges regarding the pivotal indicators influencing US voter preferences. Across “all” these models, a consistent pattern emerges in identifying the primary determinants of the US electorate’s orientation.

Predominantly, the paramount variable shaping voter behavior in presidential elections is found to be the internal economic climate (encompassing various facets, including income levels, tax policies, price stability, inflation rates, and socio-economic disparities, etc).⁵ Interestingly, Voters tend not to give significant weight to the economic climate just before elections. Instead, they concentrate on their future expectations regarding the economy. This tendency may reflect the prevailing pragmatism ingrained in US culture, where the value of an idea is judged by its practical benefits.⁶ This pragmatism takes precedence in the US value system over issues like human rights, justice and freedom, which are often emphasized in US foreign policy propaganda.



The distinction between theories of international relations (understanding the overarching trends in the behavior of various entities within the international system such as states, sub-state actors, and supra-state organizations) and theories of foreign policy (the basis for making practical decisions for a specific state), is a matter deserving attention. This is particularly notable in US literature, which emphasizes that the focus of foreign policy analysis should be on primacy of “practices” rather than “words.” In other words, the analysis of US foreign policy should prioritize “practice” over “rhetoric.”⁷ Thus, in the context of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, it entails examining not merely the US president’s statements but rather his actions.

- ✓ 1. Studies conducted from 2010 to early 2024 have revealed that the weight of external affairs in determining the voting trends of US voters ranged from 1% to 10%. Notably, there's a discernible trend indicating a gradual increase in the significance of this variable. This rise can be attributed to the growing convergence of external and internal factors spurred by globalization mechanisms. However, despite this trend, external affairs have yet to claim the predominant position in influencing voter behavior.⁸ Instead, it consistently ranks lower in importance compared to various internal



topics such as the economic situation, crime, environmental concerns, civil rights, government administration, abortion and racism, etc. It's crucial to acknowledge that over the past two decades, the weight of external affairs in voter decision-making has steadily increased, a fact affirmed by US diplomats.⁹ Particularly noteworthy is the impact of events like Operation al-Aqsa Flood, which have inserted themselves



into US societal discourse, influencing the political orientations of the two major parties. This phenomenon underscores the role of technology in “globalizing news and its ramifications,” effectively transforming international events into domestic concerns to a greater extent than previously observed. Furthermore, it reflects the deepening organic interdependence between nations in the international community.

- ✓ 2. The decision of the US voter is shaped by a cumulative perception of the candidates, rather than being solely influenced by the circumstances of the moment of the election. In essence, it's the overarching impression of the candidate that serves as the foundation for the voter's choice, rather than the debates and advertising prevalent during the election period. Quantitative studies indicate that these factors only exerted a marginal impact on the choices made by US voters among the presidential contenders.¹⁰
- ✓ 3. Relying on opinion polls to determine the winner does not reliably predict the outcome. Examining this trend from the 1948 presidential election onwards, and comparing the polls against actual election results, reveals a margin of accuracy ranging from 58% to 60%.¹¹
- ✓ 4. Since 1832, independent candidates have had a minimal impact on influencing election results. Across the 13 presidential elections in which an independent candidate participated, their average share of the vote has been 18.5%. It's important to note that independents draw votes from both major parties, thereby limiting their impact on the final outcome. This year's presidential race also features independent candidates, with Robert F. Kennedy Jr. standing out as a prominent figure, particularly due to his strong pro-Israel stance.¹²



Robert F. Kennedy Jr.



- ✓ 5. Campaigning may serve to narrow the gap between competitors, yet it typically does not alter the outcome. In other words, while it may not cause the front-runner to lose their lead, it does tend to diminish the margin between them and their closest rival.¹³
- ✓ 6. Quantitative data reveals that out of 22 presidents who sought a second term, 10 were unsuccessful—comprising 7 Republicans and 3 Democrats—while 12 succeeded, with 6 from each party.¹⁴ Therefore, President Biden’s chances of winning stand at 55%, based on this pattern.
- ✓ 7. The electoral college has been a topic of extensive debate within the framework of presidential elections. Unlike direct popular vote, the U.S. president is elected by the electoral college. Throughout 58 rounds of presidential elections in US history, 5 presidents have secured victory through the electoral college despite not clinching the popular vote. This translates to a probability of the electoral college altering results standing at 8.6%.¹⁵
- ✓ 8. One notable observation in the US presidential elections is the gradual reduction in the quantitative disparity of electoral votes between candidates since World War II. This trend has been evident from 1945 to 2020, as illustrated in Table 1.¹⁶

Table 1: Narrowing the Gap Between Contenders in US Presidential Elections from 1945 to 2020

First ten presidential elections post-WW II	Winner won by more than 9% points	Winner won by more than 15% points
	6 times	4
Subsequent nine presidential elections	Winner won by 5% points	Winner won by more than 5% points
	3	1 ¹⁷

Note: Winning presidents are not counted.

The diminishing gap between the winning and losing candidates underscores the significance of even minor shifts in public opinion, potentially altering election outcomes significantly. This trend magnifies the influence of smaller societal segments, emphasizing the significance of events like Operation al-Aqsa Flood, which had notable impacts on specific groups within the US society, as we’ll delve into further.



Second: The Lichtman/ Borok Model for Predicting Presidential Elections:¹⁸

The model developed by US history professor Allan Lichtman and Russian geophysicist Vladimir Keilis-Borok in 1982 stands out as a leading framework in futuristic analysis of US presidential elections. Since its inception, this model has accurately predicted the outcomes of nine presidential elections from 1984 onwards. However, it faltered once, nearly splitting its success rate in half. This instance occurred when it correctly forecasted the popular vote outcome but failed to account for the nuances of the electoral college system. Notably, this was evident in the contentious race between Al Gore and George H.W. Bush, where Gore won the popular vote but lost the electoral college vote, a pattern repeated in the 2016 election when Trump clinched the electoral college victory despite Hillary Clinton's lead in the popular vote, a scenario foreseen by the Lichtman model.¹⁹



Donald Trump

The model consists of 13 indicators or Keys, which are statements that favor the reelection of the incumbent party. When five or fewer statements are false, the incumbent party wins. When six or more are false, the challenging party wins. These indicators are:²⁰

- ✓ 1. After the midterm elections, the incumbent party holds more seats in the U.S. House of Representatives than it did after the previous midterm elections.
- ✓ 2. There is no serious contest for the incumbent-party nomination.
- ✓ 3. The incumbent-party candidate is the sitting president.
- ✓ 4. There is no significant third-party or independent campaign.
- ✓ 5. The economy is not in recession during the election campaign.
- ✓ 6. Real per-capita economic growth during the term equals or exceeds mean growth during the previous two terms.
- ✓ 7. The incumbent administration effects major changes in national policy.
- ✓ 8. There is no sustained social unrest during the term.
- ✓ 9. The incumbent administration is untainted by major scandal.



- ✓ 10. The incumbent administration suffers no major failure in foreign or military affairs.
- ✓ 11. The incumbent administration achieves a major success in foreign or military affairs.
- ✓ 12. The incumbent-party candidate is charismatic or a national hero.
- ✓ 13. The challenging-party candidate is not charismatic or a national hero.

Upon closer examination of the model's indicators, it becomes apparent that the 13 indicators are categorized as follows:

- ✓ • 5 indicators pertain to state institutions
- ✓ • 2 economic indicators
- ✓ • 2 social indicators
- ✓ • 2 foreign policy indicators
- ✓ • 2 indicators encompass individual characteristics, although the model doesn't accord debates between candidates significant importance in determining outcomes; rather, it emphasizes the overall qualifications of the candidate.

The preceding data suggests that the proportion of external variables amounts to 2 out of 13, or 15.3%. It's important to acknowledge the varying severity of external crises across different periods. The nature and impact of external crises on internal affairs necessitate discernment between the severity and gravity of international crises or external affairs, on one hand, and their repercussions on domestic affairs, on the other hand. While a crisis may be severe in one location, its impact on internal affairs may be limited. For instance, the influence of the Arab-Israeli conflicts in 1967 and 1973 on the US oil market far exceeded their impact during Operation al-Aqsa Flood period.



Although the Lichtman model suggests that Biden is likely to win the election this year, some factors may affect the outcome, such as age (although the difference between the two candidates is not large (78 years for Trump and 82 for Biden): Age (although the difference between the two candidates is not large (78 years for Trump and 82 for Biden),



then the accusation that he suffers from poor memory, in addition to the failure to curb immigration, 38% believe that the economic situation in the Biden administration is good, compared to 65% who say that Trump's period was better, etc. But all of these factors are local, not external.

The observation that deserves reflection here is that the evaluation of economic “experts” of the Biden period is positive, unlike the evaluation of the US public opinion according to surveys, and we believe that the matter is related to how economic performance is evaluated, as most economists focus on the total economic growth, unemployment, inflation, etc. of macroeconomic topics, while society looks at microeconomic topics along with other social issues such as abortion, racism, crime, individual gun sales, etc.

While the Lichtman model suggests that Biden is likely to win the election this year, various factors could influence the outcome. One such factor is age, although the difference between the two candidates is not significant (78 years for Trump and 82 for Biden). Additionally, accusations of poor memory and failure to curb immigration may impact voter perceptions. Surveys indicate that only 38% believe the economy under the Biden administration is good, compared to 65% of Americans who remember the economy under former President Donald Trump as being good, etc.²¹ However, these factors are predominantly local rather than external.

An observation worth contemplating is the disparity between the positive evaluation of the Biden era by economic “experts” and the less favorable perception among the US public. This discrepancy may stem from differing criteria used to evaluate economic performance. While economists often focus on macroeconomic indicators such as total economic growth, unemployment, and inflation, society also considers microeconomic issues and social concerns such as abortion, racism, crime and individual gun sales, etc.²²

Third: Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the US Presidential Elections:

Regarding Operation al-Aqsa Flood, 26% of Americans have been following the news of the war on Gaza Strip (GS) extremely or very closely, while 37% have been following news somewhat closely, and 36% have followed the news not too or not at all closely.²³ Despite the current GS war witnessing the highest daily civilian casualty rates in the history of warfare²⁴ and numerous international humanitarian organizations issuing successive statements about the dire humanitarian conditions in GS.²⁵ Also despite the average weekly number of demonstrations concerning the GS war reaching 639 (602 in favor of Palestinians and 37 in favor of Israel).²⁶



In our analysis of the Lichtman model, we observed that the significance of external indicators comprises approximately 15% in shaping the inclinations of the US electorate. This weight parallels that of external affairs in the other models we previously referenced. Additionally, debates in various US elections—whether primary, legislative or presidential—underscore that Republicans tend to prioritize foreign affairs more than Democrats.²⁷

In a survey examining US public opinion on foreign policy issues and comparing the shifts from 2023 to 2024, findings revealed that domestic economic concerns were prioritized by 76% in 2024 and 75% in 2023. In contrast, while foreign policy issues “collectively” garnered attention from 38% in 2024, compared to 18% in 2023, and while examining international issues individually, the Middle East (specifically the Gaza War) garnered 5% of the attention, surpassing Ukraine by 1%.²⁸ Perhaps this clarifies why The Institute for National Security Studies, drawing from US opinion polls, highlighted the influence of Operation al-Aqsa Flood on various segments, notably within the Democratic Party. Moreover, it underscores a discernible escalation in this influence with the unfolding events in Gaza. Consequently, the Institute urged the Israeli government to “be aware of the implications of its activity within the US domestic arena.”²⁹



On the other hand, it is imperative to analyze the attitudes of the US society towards Operation al-Aqsa Flood. A survey of US public opinion revealed certain shifts in the US society attitudes towards Israel, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: US Public Opinion on Israel and Hamas Following Operation al-Aqsa Flood (December 19)³⁰

	Question		
	Do you think that Hamas are a terrorist organization?%	Do you think that Israel tries to minimize harm to civilians	Do you think that US Should be more supportive or more critical towards Israel
Answer	65 Yes	38 Yes	30 supportive
	9 No	33 No	24 critical
	26 Not sure	29 Not sure	20 balanced 27 Not sure

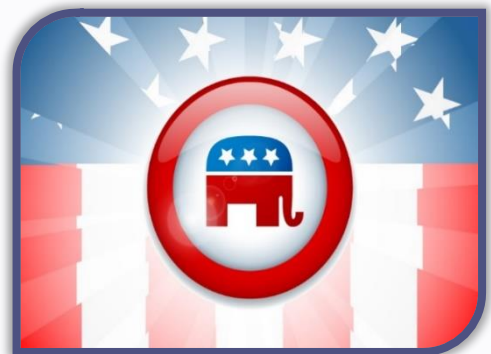


When analyzing US opinion polls regarding attitudes towards Operation al-Aqsa Flood and its impact on the presidential election, the following trends emerged:

- ✓ 1. Societal and partisan attitudes towards Biden's handling of the crisis in Gaza: Notably, comparing attitudes in the US society before and after Operation al-Aqsa Flood reveals that the sympathy for the Israelis fell by 7% and sympathy for the Palestinians increased by 3%.³¹ It's noteworthy that saying that "the Israeli government bears a lot of responsibility" is more than twice as prevalent among Democrats compared to Republicans (50% vs. 21%). Regarding Biden administration's response to the crisis, 35% of young people support it, while 41% oppose it. In terms of party affiliations, Republicans are more likely to disapprove of Biden's handling (51% disapprove vs. 28% approve), whereas the Democratic Party shows more support (44% approve vs. 33% disapprove).³² Interestingly, 30% of Americans, regardless of party affiliation, approve of Biden's handling of the GS war.³³
- ✓ 2. The perspective of US Jews: Interestingly, the viewpoints of Israeli Jews appear to slightly differ from those of their counterparts in the US regarding the candidates. While 44% of Israeli Jews prefer Trump to Biden as next US president, 30% prefer Biden, with 26% remaining undecided.³⁴

The above points to a number of observations:

- ✓ 1. It should be noted that interest in foreign affairs should be understood with some caution. For instance, a survey of US public opinion on foreign affairs reveals that 20% are interested in the topic from a specific perspective: concern about further US engagement in foreign affairs. This inclination towards isolationism is most pronounced among Republicans (45%) and Democrats (33%). Regarding the nature of US intervention, 70% favor multilateralism, which entails participation from other countries. This preference may lead to the US seeking to address the aftermath of Operation al-Aqsa Flood in collaboration with other nations. This sentiment is reinforced by the fact that only 16% of Americans support increasing US troop deployments overseas.³⁵ In other words, Americans see Operation al-Aqsa Flood as an international issue that could draw the US into a large-scale intervention, which they do not want.



✓ 2. It's crucial to recognize that US pragmatism, as discussed earlier, governs the level of interest in the Middle East or other regions based on the perceived advantages to the United States from the external matter. Here, the stances of various actors such as human rights organizations, individuals, corporations, pressure groups and political parties, etc. vary. For instance, US public opinion across all spectrums (Republicans, Democrats and independents) leans towards a more adversarial view of China, with this sentiment steadily increasing.³⁶ However, a study by the US Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) reveals that 50% of AmCham members consider China a top three investment priority, with 77% of US companies saying that they have no plan to transfer production or procurement out of China.³⁷ This indicates that US interest in foreign affairs is contingent upon the perceived benefit or harm, rather than an absolute value system. Consequently, interest in Operation al-Aqsa Flood correlates with its repercussions on the network of US interests. If US companies sense a rise in boycotts of their products, experience a decline in Arab arms purchases, or witness effects on the US economy or increased rates of social unrest, etc., the US voter will likely pay relative attention to these factors in assessing the orientations of presidential candidates.



✓ 3. A closer examination of the ramifications of Operation al-Aqsa Flood on the US electorate reveals several significant aspects:

- The escalation of Operation al-Aqsa Flood's aftermath into regional conflicts could necessitate a heightened deployment of US military forces in the area. This potential escalation may pique the interest of US voters, prompting them to pay closer attention to the repercussions of the war.
- The social unrest stemming from protests and counter-protests regarding the Gaza war's repercussions could significantly amplify public interest. Notably, the US ranked second globally in terms of the number of demonstrations against Israel during Operation al-Aqsa Flood. This surge in activism could impact voters and their choices.³⁸ Some US commentators argue that the Gaza war's aftermath serves as a litmus test for the hypothesis that foreign affairs play a marginal role in US presidential elections. Given the gravity of the crisis and the international concerns it has generated, particularly among youth and progressive demographics increasingly critical of pro-Israel policies, the significance of foreign affairs in electoral decision-making may be reassessed. However, the precise magnitude of this segment's influence remains uncertain.³⁹



- Some researchers suggest that the impact of Operation al-Aqsa Flood may extend to segments of US society, particularly among Muslim Americans and Arab Americans.⁴⁰ It's worth noting that these segments showed strong support for Biden in the 2020 election, with approximately 83% favoring him. However, this percentage, while notable, isn't statistically significant given the relatively small size of Muslim voters who constitute only just over 1% of the US population. Consequently, their electoral influence remains relatively low. In contrast, Jewish voters make up just under 2.5% of the US population, also supported Biden in significant numbers, around 75%. This underscores the limited electoral impact of the Muslim vote, even if a majority of it leans towards not electing Biden.⁴¹
- Regarding the potential impact on US strategic interests, some experts argue that the developments stemming from Operation al-Aqsa Flood may not significantly affect key US priorities. These include “maintaining a favorable balance of power in the region, reducing the threat from terrorist organizations to the US homeland and US interests overseas, protecting freedom of navigation and access to oil, and preventing nuclear proliferation.”⁴²

Conclusion

When considering the policies of the Democratic (Biden) or Republican (Trump) candidates, both openly acknowledge the strategic importance of Israel. However, the criterion on which US voters rely to favor either candidate tends to be primarily pragmatic and local. Thus, the position on Israel is not typically a central factor in determining the election winner. Biden's stance on Israel, compared to Trump's, may appear more subtle. This was notably evident in the US vetoing Security Council resolutions three times during crises to prevent ceasefires (on 18/10/2023, 8/12/2023 and 20/2/2024), followed by abstaining from voting on a resolution calling for increased aid on 21/12/2023. Additionally, there were instances of diverting munitions intended for Ukraine to the Israeli army and providing financial support exceeding \$14 billion. Moreover, Biden dispatched some warships to counter attacks from Yemen's Ansar Allah. On the hand, Biden's strategy includes an attempt to garner support from American Muslim voters by facilitating aid delivery to GS through temporary pier or airdrops, despite his veto of the ceasefire. He aims



to present a humanitarian image by either constructing a pier for aid delivery or highlighting the necessity for the Rafah invasion plan, repeatedly emphasized by Netanyahu, to prioritize “the safety of and support for” civilians there.⁴³ In contrast, Trump declared that Israel must “finish the problem” in its war against resistance.⁴⁴ The extensive nature of the conflict and the US involvement may potentially benefit Biden, given historical trends where most presidents seeking reelection during wartime have succeeded. However, this dynamic remains confined largely within the realm of foreign affairs.⁴⁵

It is evident that there is a significant divide within the Democratic Party regarding the conflict in GS, a divide that appears more pronounced than among the Republicans, who seem to have a more cohesive stance on the issue. The left wing of the Democratic Party, alongside certain Jewish factions like the Jewish Voice for Peace and the IfNotNow movement, represent a formidable force that could potentially impact Biden’s popularity in upcoming elections.⁴⁶

The variable of voter age appears to be a significant dimension, given the evident correlation between age and the level of support for Israel. This correlation was particularly noticeable during Operation al-Aqsa Flood, where older individuals tended to express higher support for Israel, while younger individuals exhibited the opposite trend. This sheds light on the inconsistency among Americans aged 30 and below regarding their alignment with Biden’s positions on the GS war.⁴⁷ Notably, within this demographic, there has been a growing critical stance towards Israel, especially among black Americans—a trend that has quietly developed since the 1967 war. This movement seeks to “draw parallels between the structural violence and oppression of both Blacks in the USA and Palestinians in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.”⁴⁸

Accordingly, Operation al-Aqsa Flood has impacted the attitudes of various segments of society, including Muslims, blacks, Jewish groups, youth, and the left wing of the Democratic Party. Despite this, the margin between the two candidates remains very narrow in the latest polls, with 49% supporting Biden and 47% supporting Trump.⁴⁹ This means that any shift within a small segment could potentially sway the results, particularly among the undecided voters, who make up about 17% of the electorate.⁵⁰ The smaller the difference in polling numbers, the greater the potential influence of niche groups or pressure groups on the outcome of the election.

On the other hand, while certain segments of the US society may have withdrawn support for Biden due to his stance on Israel, Trump’s position on the Ukrainian-Russian conflict might cost him some support among US voters. His opposition to aiding Ukraine, coupled with his praise of Russian President Vladimir Putin, could alienate voters who prioritize standing against Russian aggression.⁵¹ Additionally,



regarding the Jewish vote, neither candidate (Biden nor Trump) supports the continued leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, which may marginally affect the vote of American Jews who align with Netanyahu's policies.⁵²



Benjamin Netanyahu

However, the prevailing circumstances in the US, combined with Trump's personality, may heighten the risk of severe "social unrest" during or after the elections, further exacerbating the country's internal divisions. These conditions are reflected in several indicators, summarized as follows:⁵³

- ✓ 1. Trump's propensity for recklessness and narcissism, particularly in the event of an election loss, a scenario not dismissed by the US Department of Homeland Security.
- ✓ 2. Escalating manifestations of political extremism, polarization, social and cultural tribalism.
- ✓ 3. The widespread ownership of firearms, where the US accounts for roughly 40% of the globe's firearms. There are an estimated 393 million privately held firearms in the US.
- ✓ 4. The proliferation of well-armed militias across the country.
- ✓ 5. Erosion of faith in liberal society.
- ✓ 6. The culture of power, a significant aspect of US societal values.
- ✓ 7. The popular embrace of conspiracy theories among various segments of US society.

The trajectory and consequences of Operation al-Aqsa Flood are still uncertain. However, it is evident that while their direct impact on electoral outcomes may be marginal, they could have more significant repercussions if they confirm the theory of a violent decline in US society, a concept increasingly discussed in political literature.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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