

U.S. Uncommitted Movement will not endorse Kamala Harris

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Demonstrators rally on the sidelines of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago, Illinois, on 19 August 2024 (Marco Bello/Reuters)

Washington, September 20 (RHC)-- The Uncommitted National Movement, a grassroots effort in the United States that is seeking to pressure the Democratic Party to shift its policy towards Israel amid the Gaza war, says it cannot endorse Kamala Harris for president.

The group said on Thursday that Harris's team had failed to respond to its request for a meeting with representatives and families of Palestinians killed in the Gaza Strip by a September 15 deadline.

The movement has been pushing for Harris, the U.S. vice president and 2024 Democratic presidential candidate, to agree to suspend American weapons transfers to Israel during the war, which has killed more than 41,000 Palestinians since early October.

But with less than 50 days before the election, Harris has repeatedly doused the prospect that she would support conditioning military aid to Israel, extinguishing hopes she would represent a significant pivot from the policies of Democratic President Joe Biden, the group said.

"Our movement cannot endorse the vice president," Abbas Alawieh, one of the Uncommitted National Movement's leaders, said during a virtual news conference on Thursday morning. "At this time, our movement opposes a Donald Trump presidency, whose agenda includes plans to accelerate the killing in Gaza while intensifying the suppression of antiwar organising," Alawieh said.

"And our movement is not recommending a third-party vote in the presidential election, especially as third-party votes in key swing states could help inadvertently deliver a Trump presidency, given our country's broken Electoral College system."

Still, political analysts say the nonendorsement could spell trouble for Harris, who needs to turn out a broad base of Democratic voters in an election that is expected to be decided by a razor-thin margin. It also underscores the alienation of not only Arab and Muslim voters in must-win, battleground states, but also progressive activists with a proven ability to get people to the polls.

Layla Elabed, an uncommitted leader and the sister of Palestinian-American Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, said the group will not leverage its wide network to mobilise voters for Harris even as they continue to advocate for Palestinians and for other down-ballot issues. "An endorsement is a very specific thing," Elabed said during the virtual news conference. "It would mean that we would come out and mobilize thousands of voters."

Thursday's announcement is the latest chapter in a months-long campaign that began in the weeks before the Michigan Democratic primary in February.

Democratic voters were urged to go to the polls and select "uncommitted" on their ballots to send a message to Biden, then the presumptive 2024 Democratic nominee, that they were opposed to his staunch support for Israel during the Gaza war.

The effort spread to other primaries – including in the significant Midwestern states of Minnesota and Wisconsin – with a total of 700,000 voters casting uncommitted ballots during the primary season.

However, it remains impossible to know how many did so in protest against Biden's Israel policy. The turnout spurred the launch of the Uncommitted National Movement, which eventually sent 30 protest delegates to the Democratic National Convention in August.

The movement's leaders had expressed cautious optimism in Harris, who took the mantle of the party after Biden dropped out of the race in July. Her selection of Tim Walz – the governor of Minnesota, who had spoken sympathetically about uncommitted voters – also buoyed that hope.

But the group's request for the Democratic Party to feature a Palestinian American speaker at the convention went unheeded. In outrage, the group staged a sit-in outside the Chicago, Illinois, convention

centre.

Meanwhile, Harris has repeatedly closed the door on conditioning aid to Israel. The US provides its top Middle East ally with \$3.8 billion in military assistance annually, and the Biden administration has greenlit additional support during the Gaza war.

Most recently, during a debate with Trump this month, Harris said she “will always give Israel the ability to defend itself”.

Harris added that she would continue to work for a long-elusive ceasefire in Gaza and a two-state solution “where we can rebuild Gaza, where the Palestinians have security, self-determination and the dignity they so rightly deserve”.

It remains unclear what effects Thursday’s announcement will have on the November election. Recent polls have shown a large percentage of Americans — and Democratic voters in particular — are opposed to continued arms transfers to Israel amid the Gaza war, which has plunged the Palestinian enclave into a humanitarian crisis.

Surveys also have found widespread disenchantment among Arab American voters, a relatively small but significant demographic in key battleground states.

A report released this month by the Council on American-Islamic Relations found support for third-party candidate Jill Stein surpassed support for either Harris or Trump among Muslims in several battleground states.

Arshad Hasan, a progressive Democratic strategist, said that by not engaging with the Uncommitted National Movement, the Harris campaign had failed on both a human and an electoral level.

“This is a group of people who are generally ideologically aligned [with Democrats] and who are energetic, and it doesn’t cost the Harris campaign anything to meet with them and to meet with impacted families, which is what they were asking for,” he told Al Jazeera.

“I’m entirely disappointed in the Harris-Walz campaign,” Hassan said. “And I say this as a supporter.”

Sally Howell, director of the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan in Dearborn, said Democrats were taking a “huge hit” with Arab voters.

The Uncommitted Movement’s nonendorsement could prove particularly damaging for voters “who are not in the progressive camp and were already struggling with the [Democrats]”, she told Al Jazeera.

“This weakens the progressive Arabs in their own community for certain, even as they are appreciated for their courage and outspokenness on this,” she said.

During the at times emotional virtual news conference, Uncommitted National Movement leaders recounted their personal struggles in determining how to cast their votes as they have watched their own families struggle to survive in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Elabed, a Democrat, said with family in the occupied West Bank, “I can’t make the decision to vote for Vice President Harris at the top of the ticket.” “But I also would never vote for someone like Donald Trump,” she said.

Lexis Zeidan, another leader of the movement, said she felt the Harris campaign was “courting people like Dick Cheney” while pushing aside key segments of the Democratic base.



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