US politics

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Hakeem Jeffries' likely elevation set to please US pro-Israel groups

Democrat set to succeed Nancy Pelosi maintains ties to Aipac and others but could be challenged by critics in his own caucus



Hakeem Jeffries on Capitol Hill last week. Critics have said that Jeffries' statements on Israel often read like lobby talking points. Photograph: J Scott Applewhite/AP

Chris McGreal *in New York*

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The progressive New York congressman widely expected to lead the Democrats in the US House of Representatives will be the first person of color to head either party in the chamber. Jeffries' election as House minority leader in the new Congress in January would also see the baton pass to a new generation of Democratic leaders as the speaker, Nancy Pelosi, 82, steps aside.

The change will be a profound one but, for some, it will only go so far.

The prospect of Jeffries heading the Democrats in the House has been greeted with delight by hardline pro-Israel groups increasingly alarmed at a growing dissent in Congress over Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, including large-scale forced removals of Arabs from their homes, which is only likely to intensify as the Israeli far-right gains power.

The former Democratic congressman Robert Wexler told Jewish Insider that "the pro-Israel camp needs someone just like Hakeem to lead us into the future".

"In fact, I would say, if the pro-Israel community wanted to create a Democratic leader for the future, we would create Hakeem Jeffries," he said.

"Hakeem is not just interested in these issues. He's devoted to them. He's respectful of the American Jewish community. He identifies with it. And he's just a really nice guy on top of it."

Others who defend Israeli policies have praised Jeffries in similarly lavish terms. The congressman has been just as effusive in speaking about Israel.

In 2020, Jeffries told a conference of the US's largest and most powerful pro-Israel lobby group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac), that "back home in New York City we consider Jerusalem to be the sixth borough".

"The relationship is anchored in values," he told the meeting.

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Palestinians in Hebron in 1994. Ben-Gvir used to hang a portrait of Goldstein in his living room.

Ben-Gvir, like Benjamin Netanyahu, who is expected to become prime minister again, is opposed to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Jeffries supports "a self-governed and demilitarized Palestinian state".

With Ben-Gvir expected to be appointed public security minister in Netanyahu's new government, while advocating the expulsion of Arabs deemed to be disloyal to the Jewish state, the pressure within the Democratic caucus to ensure that Israel lives up to the democratic values Jeffries praises is only likely to grow.

Jeffries opposed a bill introduced last year by another party member, Betty McCollum, to ensure that the nearly $4bn in annual American military aid to Israel is not used to illegally annex Palestinian land, to demolish Arab homes and forcibly remove Palestinians, or to detain children in Israel's labyrinthian military judicial system.

Earlier this year, 15 Democratic members of Congress urged the Biden administration to intervene over the largest forcible removal of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank by the Israeli military in decades, in what has been called a war crime by Human Rights Watch.

Jeffries told Aipac that aid should continue with "no conditions". He signed a letter drawn up by Democratic Congressman Ted Deutch opposing "reducing funding or adding conditions on security assistance". The letter was signed by more than 300 members of Congress, boosted by an Aipac lobbying campaign.

Pressure has also grown in Congress for a proper accounting by Israel over the killing of the Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in May.

Dylan Williams, the senior vice-president of policy and strategy at the Washington-based campaign group J Street, which describes itself as "pro-Israel and pro-peace", has said the demands for justice for Abu Akleh reflect

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"There's growing momentum to make clear that Israel must be held to the same important standards as all close US allies, and that our steadfast support for Israel's security does not and should not preclude our government from also standing up in defense of human rights and international law in the occupied Palestinian territory."

Jeffries maintains close ties to Aipac and other hardline pro-Israel lobby groups. One of them, Pro-Israel America, was his largest single donor over the past year, giving his campaign more than $213,000. Pro-Israel groups gave him $460,000 in total, second only to donations from the financial industry.

Critics have said that Jeffries' statements on Israel often read like lobby talking points. Earlier this year, the congressman rejected reports by Israeli and international human rights groups that Israel practices a form of apartheid against the Palestinians. He said the claim is "designed to isolate Israel in one of the toughest neighborhoods in the world".

During a visit to Israel and the occupied territories earlier this year, Jeffries confronted the Palestinian prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh for raising the apartheid parallel, in effect telling him how the Palestinians are permitted to describe their own oppression.

However, Jeffries broke with the pro-Israel lobby and many of his Jewish constituents in supporting President Obama's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. Aipac lobbied heavily against it after Israel opposed the agreement, which was intended to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.

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