

Uncommitted delegates bring Gaza-war message to Democratic National Convention in Chicago

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Delegates from the 'uncommitted' movement will be at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, this coming week [Alex Brandon/The Associated Press]

Chicago, August 17 (RHC)-- It started as a last-minute effort in February: Organizers in Michigan hoped to use the state's Democratic primary to send a message to President Joe Biden to end his support for Israel's war in Gaza.

Six months later, Biden is no longer the Democratic presidential candidate. But Washington's "ironclad" support for the genocidal war continues. And so has the "uncommitted" movement, the protest effort born in Michigan.

Initially, the aim was to encourage primary voters across the country to cast their "uncommitted" ballots in protest of the war. But now that the primary season is over, the "uncommitted movement" has set its sights on a new platform: the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, which begins on Monday, August 19.

This coming week, 30 delegates from eight states, representing some 700,000 voters who cast "uncommitted" ballots, will be heading to the convention in Chicago. Though they have been denied an official platform to speak at the proceedings, they hope their presence will still send a strong message.

"We're the first delegation ever to be representing Palestinian human rights. And I think that that's really important. We're a small but mighty group," said Asma Mohammed, who organized for the "uncommitted" movement in advance of Minnesota's primary.

Mohammed acknowledged the "uncommitted" delegates will be a minority at the convention. Still, she emphasized the voter base they represent could be decisive in November's general election.

"There's 30 of us, and there's over 4,000 delegates nationally. So we're less than 1 percent of the delegates," she told Al Jazeera.

"But inside the convention hall, we will be representing the Palestinians that were massacred, representing the almost million voters nationwide who said that they want a ceasefire right now and that they want an arms embargo."

The group had requested for Dr Tanya Haj-Hassan, a pediatric intensive care physician who has worked in Gaza, to speak at the convention. Their appeal was denied, Mohammed said.

Still, the delegates, under the banner of the Uncommitted National Movement, will hold a program of events on the sidelines of the convention. There, they will meet with various caucuses and seek to rally other delegates pledged to Kamala Harris, the new Democratic nominee for president.

The Uncommitted National Movement has already used its position to protest against the continuing bloodshed in Gaza, where more than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed.

Earlier this month, Harris was formally designated the Democratic nominee through a virtual roll call — an online vote in which all delegates could take part.

Instead of voting for Harris, the "uncommitted" delegates nominated victims from Gaza. Mohammed was among the delegates who participated in the protest.

"I submitted my vote for Reem Badwan, a three-year-old who was murdered in an Israeli air strike in Gaza," Mohammed said. "And I made clear my vote [in the general election] was contingent on a ceasefire and an arms embargo."

Ahmad Awad, an "uncommitted" delegate from New Jersey, said the effort was a "symbolic way to highlight the many victims of the war". The 29-year-old lawyer nominated Abdul Rahman Manhal, a 14-year-old killed in Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp in November.

“The districts that I’m representing as an ‘uncommitted’ delegate encompasses Paterson and Clifton, New Jersey, which are home to a large Palestinian American community. It’s basically little Ramallah,” Awad said, drawing an analogy to the West Bank city.

Awad explained that his participation in the “uncommitted” movement stems from a family history of fighting and surviving human rights abuses.

“Fighting for human rights is something that’s really ingrained in my DNA,” he told Al Jazeera.

“On my father’s side, both of my grandparents were born in Palestine prior to 1948. My mother’s side is Polish. My grandfather is a survivor of Nazi slave labour camps.”

‘Resolute is the best word’

In Harris’s abrupt entrance into the presidential race, activists have seen a potential opening for a course change in US policy towards Israel. Harris became the Democratic nominee after Biden withdrew from the race on July 21, amid concerns about his age and capacity to lead.

Whereas Biden has advanced a policy of “bear-hug diplomacy” towards Israel, some observers believe Harris has signalled her intention to take a tougher stance.

Shortly after entering the presidential race, Harris pledged to denounce the suffering of Palestinian civilians. “I will not be silent,” she said, shortly after meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In a brief exchange with two “uncommitted” leaders — Layla Elabed and Abbas Alawieh — at a campaign stop in Detroit this month, she also said she would speak with the group.

But her campaign has not set a date for the meeting, and a Harris campaign adviser doused hopes that she would support a full arms embargo on Israel.

Michael Berg, a 49-year-old uncommitted delegate from Missouri, said there had been some positive signs from Harris, although he had tempered his expectations.

“It’s hard to know where things are going,” said Berg, who named two-year-old Gaza victim Jihad Khaled Abu Amer as his vote during the virtual roll call. “I’m hoping that Vice President Harris is not as dug in on positions as President Biden seems to be.”

Still, Berg explained he and the other “uncommitted” delegates are steadfast in their mission to advocate for a ceasefire at the Democratic National Convention.

“So we are, I guess, resolute is the best word. We are going to the convention because we have a very clear mandate and mission from the people, and we’re going to do what we can.”

‘Standing with my fellow Kentuckians’

In the lead-up to the convention, the “uncommitted” movement has added delegates to its group. Violet Olds, for instance, applied to represent the “uncommitted” segment of voters in Kentucky but was not initially involved in the movement.

Olds, a digital project manager, said that after she was selected by the party to represent uncommitted voters, she was approached by her local Democratic Socialists of America chapter, which connected her to the national protest movement.

“I actually reached out and found ways to communicate with other Kentucky voters to find out why they voted uncommitted and how I can represent their voices at the convention,” the 41-year-old told Al

Jazeera.

“And it all comes down to basically Gaza and Palestine. So I’m standing with my fellow Kentuckians and with Palestinians.”

During the roll call, Olds named Mohammad Bhar, a 24-year-old Palestinian man with Down syndrome who died after being mauled by an Israeli military dog in his home in Shujayea in Gaza.

“I am autistic, and so that means that I represent a whole different class of people than I think the Democratic Party is usually used to representing, and my son is autistic, as well,” Olds said. “So when I heard Mohammad’s story, it really, really, really hit home.”

Others, like Inga Gibson, a delegate from Hawaii, have long been part of the Palestinian solidarity movement. Nearly 30 percent of voters in Hawaii’s Democratic primary cast their ballot for “uncommitted,” the largest proportion of any state. Seven of the island state’s 22 delegates are “uncommitted.”

Gibson attributed the turnout to Hawaii’s “own history of settler colonialism.” “A lot of native Hawaiians within the Palestinian freedom movement have drawn on that parallel,” she explained.

Gibson, a 52-year-old environmental policy consultant, said that the relatively small size of the “uncommitted” delegation does not reflect wider sentiment against US support for Israel.

Polls have repeatedly shown widespread disapproval of Israel’s actions among Democrats. Experts say the support for Israel could disadvantage Democrats in several key battleground states, including Michigan and Pennsylvania.

“I do not feel that our movement, by any means, is in the minority, even if our delegates are, per se, in the minority compared to 4,000 others,” said Gibson. She named Gaza victim Ruba Yasser Nawas, a 22-year-old software engineer, during the roll call vote. “Everything that we are asking for is completely mainstream.”

‘Cannot just make this week a celebration’

June Rose, the sole “uncommitted” delegate from Rhode Island, also said it was incorrect to assume the delegation members come from the fringes of the Democratic Party.

“We are Democratic professionals. I’m the chief of staff of the Providence City Council. I’ve made my career helping to elect Democrats and defeat Republicans who pose incredible risk to the future of our country,” the 29-year-old told Al Jazeera.

“But my relationship with the party will never supersede my relationship with my values, and in this case, my values and my party are in direct conflict.”

Rose named Eileen Abu Odeh, a toddler killed with her family in an Israeli air raid in Gaza, during the roll call. They explained the delegation’s presence at the Democratic National Convention can serve as a gut check for the party, as it prepares to chart a course forward on foreign policy.

“Our party cannot just make this week a celebration, and I think that that’s the tone that many in our party want to take,” Rose said. “But that celebration would be on the graves of innocent children who’ve been slaughtered.”



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