

Ritchie Torres: Pro-Israel ‘Progressive’ in Congress

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Ritchie Torres was elected this November to the House of Representatives from the 15th Congressional District, in the South Bronx. All the stories about him focus on his racial make-up (black and Latino), and on his “sexual orientation” (homosexual), as it is demurely called, which together provide the label affixed to Torres. He will be, we read and hear endlessly, the “first openly gay black” member of Congress. Sometimes, in a variant, he will be described as “along with Mondaire Jones one of the two openly gay black members of Congress.”

That’s not what is most interesting about Torres, however. It is something else about him that makes him unique and valuable: he is a self-described “progressive,” a word that

makes one very nervous, but also firmly pro-Israel, which makes him an odd man out with such “progressives” as the socialist Bernie Sanders, and the four members of “the Squad” – the ferociously anti-Israel and pro-Muslim Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, the less ferociously anti-Israel Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Ayanna Presley, not nearly as reflexively anti-Israel as the other three. The story of Ritchie Torres is [JewishInsider.com](https://www.jewishinsider.com):

Pushback: When Torres visited Israel in 2015 [the first of several visits], far-left activists held a protest outside City Hall. “At the time I was instinctively pro-Israel – because it has democratic values and institutions – but I had no deep knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, no deep knowledge of intersectionality, or of BDS. But when I announced that I was going on a delegation to Israel, I became a target of vitriolic protest,” he recalled. “I had activists from Jewish Voice for Peace accusing me of pinkwashing, accusing me of aiding and abetting apartheid. I even remember coming across an activist with a shirt that read ‘queers for Palestine.’ I remember telling the activist, ‘Does the opposite exist, are there Palestinians for queers?’ It was partly a joke but partly a serious observation. I found it utterly baffling that you had LGBT activists doing the bidding of Hamas, which is a terrorist organization that executes LGBT people. And then I came to realize that the reason is intersectionality, that the BDS movement uses intersectionality to penetrate a whole host of self-proclaimed progressive movements.”

On 2020 candidates expressing support for conditioning aid to Israel: “Support for Israel’s security should remain unconditional. Israel is more than a transactional ally. Israel is a friend, and the notion of threatening a friend with the loss of funding for its security needs strikes me as absurd. In what sense does that honor the very nature of friendship?” Torres further emphasized that while

constructive criticism of the Israeli government's policies is fair game, "rhetoric about conditioning aid to Israel strikes me as a dog whistle for the pro-BDS wing of the progressive movement."

Face of the party: Torres also pushed back against Republican attempts to use Israel as a political football and paint legislators like Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN) as the face of the Democratic party. "I'm both progressive and pro-Israel," he stated. "The notion that you cannot be both progressive and pro-Israel is a vicious lie, because I am the embodiment of a pro-Israel progressive. I am from the Bronx, I'm Afro-Latino, I'm Puerto Rican, I'm a millennial – but I'm also pro-Israel."

Command of the hour: "Support for Israel is built on a bedrock of bipartisanship, and that support has never been as threatened existentially as it is now. No matter where you stand ideologically on the spectrum, I think all of us who support Israel should recognize that there needs to be pro-Israel voices in both the Democratic and the Republican parties, in both the progressive and the conservative movements. And so I am deeply committed to not only sustaining but strengthening American support for Israel and strengthening the American-Israeli relationship."

Torres is clearly articulate and heartfelt in his support for Israel, was deeply affected by what he saw on his two visits to Israel, including experiencing what life is like for families living in Sderot, under constant threat of missiles launched from Gaza, understands that an end to bipartisan support in Congress for Israel would be dangerous for the Jewish state, and refuses to concede to the anti-Israel Squad its claim of being "the new face of the Democratic Party." He offers himself as an example of a "pro-Israel progressive," upsetting the accepted notion that all "progressives" – a highly tendentious word, which carries an automatic and

undeserved hint of approval – must perforce be anti-Israel, just like Senators Sanders and Warren, and the much-hyped members of the Squad, whose attitudes and tactics are so disturbing, and whose influence in the Democratic Party needs to be diminished.

Ritchie Torres will prove to be a formidable foe of the Squad as he demonstrates, in his very being, that one can be a so-called “progressive” while remaining as stoutly pro-Israel as anyone could wish. His arrival in Congress can only be salutary and bracing, in helping to clear the air of the noxious anti-Israel fumes spewing from the Squad.

First published in