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Yang Walks Back Stance on Israel After Ocasio-Cortez Calls It ‘Shameful’

Mr. Yang said his initial statement in support of Israel, which drew criticism from progressives, “failed to acknowledge pain on both sides.”



After initially saying that he was “standing with the people of Israel,” Andrew Yang issued a follow-up statement that said that he had been “overly simplistic.”

By Mihir Zaveri and Liam Stack

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As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict erupted this week, Andrew Yang issued a statement on Monday that in years past might have seemed politically unremarkable, perhaps even expected, from a leading candidate to be New York City’s next mayor.

“I’m standing with the people of Israel who are coming under bombardment attacks, and condemn the Hamas terrorists,” Mr. Yang said. “The people of N.Y.C. will always stand with our brothers and sisters in Israel who face down terrorism and persevere.”

Then came the backlash.

At a campaign stop in Queens, Mr. Yang was confronted about his statement and its failure to mention the Palestinians, including children, who were killed in the airstrikes. Mr. Yang was uninvited from an event hosted by the Astoria Welfare Society to distribute food to families at the end of Ramadan.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a New York Democrat who has condemned the “occupation of Palestine,” called Mr. Yang’s statement “utterly shameful,” noting that it came during Ramadan.

And Mr. Yang acknowledged that volunteers with his own campaign were upset by his statement, prompting him to release a new one on Wednesday admitting that his first was “overly simplistic” and “failed to acknowledge the pain and suffering on both sides.”

“I mourn for every Palestinian life taken before its time as I do for every Israeli,” he said.

Mr. Yang’s clarification reflects the reality that what was once a given in New York City politics — unquestioning support for Israel — has become a much more complicated proposition for Democratic candidates.

New York City has the largest Jewish population in the world outside of Israel. While the mayor has no formal foreign policy powers, the position often affords opportunities to showcase New York’s posture toward Israel.

Mayor Robert F. Wagner in 1957 barred a welcome for a Saudi king he deemed anti-Jewish. Mayor Edward I. Koch zealously expressed support for Israel and had an argument at City Hall with the Austrian foreign minister in 1984 about whether the Palestine Liberation Organization served as the voice of Palestinian people.

But wholehearted, uncritical support for Israel is no longer automatic among officials or candidates.

In recent years, many members of a growing progressive left have criticized the Israeli government for its treatment of Palestinians and are pushing for public acknowledgment of Palestinians’ suffering.

The shift mirrors the way that on a national level, some Democrats have challenged the decades-long norm of blanket support for Israel, while many liberal American Jews have become increasingly vocal about their discomfort with the policies of the Israeli government.

The differing views were apparent among the mayoral contenders.

Among those considered to be more centrist candidates, some maintained a stance similar to that of Mr. Yang’s initial statement. Eric Adams, the Brooklyn borough president and another leading candidate, said on Monday, “Israelis live under the constant threat of terrorism and war, and New York City’s bond with Israel remains unbreakable.”

Asked on Wednesday if he had anything to add to his original statement, Mr. Adams said that “no act of aggression can justify the deaths of innocent children.”

“Never again should religious sites be targeted — whether it be a synagogue or a mosque,” he said.

Raymond J. McGuire, a former Citi executive, interrupted a news conference in Times Square on Monday to make a statement of support for Israel.

“There’s clearly terrorism that has taken place in Jerusalem. Hamas just claimed credit for rocket attacks aimed at Jerusalem,” Mr. McGuire said. “We stand with our brothers and sisters from Israel.”

But others offered more nuanced statements. Dianne Morales, a former nonprofit executive, said on Tuesday that the “world needs leaders who recognize humanity and the dignity of all lives. Whether in N.Y.C., Colombia, Brazil or Israel-Palestine, state violence is wrong. Targeting civilians is wrong. Killing children is wrong.”

Asked on the Brian Lehrer show on WNYC on Wednesday about whether Israelis or Palestinians should bear more of the blame, Kathryn Garcia, a former sanitation commissioner, said it was not appropriate for the mayor “to be doing foreign policy.” But she said she wanted to support the diverse communities in New York City that have ties to the parts of the world embroiled in conflict.

“Clearly the state of Israel needs to exist,” she said. “We have strong partnerships with them. They’re like our fourth largest trading partner with the City of New York. But this escalation of violence is incredibly sad to see.”

In a statement on Wednesday, Shaun Donovan, a former federal housing secretary, criticized Mr. Yang’s remarks, saying that they lacked “responsibility and empathy.”

“Kids are not terrorists, and whatever our differences on this emotionally challenging issue, we should at least display a common humanity,” Mr. Donovan said, referring to the fact that children were among those killed in the conflict.

Scott M. Stringer, the city comptroller and only Jewish candidate in the race, said he condemned recent “horrific acts of terrorism against innocent Israelis” in Jerusalem and said he supported Israel’s right to defend itself from extremist groups.

But Mr. Stringer, one of three candidates consistently characterized as progressive, also urged the Israeli government to stop “wrongful evictions of Palestinian families, and for all parties to exercise caution and restraint to prevent further suffering and loss of precious life.”

“And as we near the end of Ramadan, we must recognize and mourn the Israeli and Palestinian lives that have been so tragically lost,” Mr. Stringer said.

The city’s Orthodox Jewish community has long been considered a politically salient voting bloc and has been courted by both Mr. Adams and Mr. Yang, who has been endorsed by several ultra-Orthodox leaders.

The endorsements came after Mr. Yang defended the yeshiva education system, which has faced criticism over the failure of some schools to provide a basic secular education: A 2019 city report found that roughly two dozen Hasidic yeshivas had fallen short of city standards in math, science and English education.

In a race where voter interest has so far been low, the endorsement of influential religious leaders could be a boon to any campaign. But even in neighborhoods with large ultra-Orthodox populations, like Borough Park, Brooklyn, there were mixed feelings about Mr. Yang's initial statement and subsequent turnaround.

"If you're talking about the Jewish community, if someone is pro-Israel, that will always be seen as a plus," said Yoel Greenfeld, 22, as he left a synagogue on Borough Park's main shopping street at midday. "But then for Yang to say something else a day later because of A.O.C.? Let me tell you something, people around here think A.O.C. is a complete joke."

The Astoria Welfare Society rescinded its invitation to Mr. Yang because his tweet felt like an insult to Muslims in New York City, the group's secretary general, Mohamed Javed Uddin, said.

"It is like he is blatantly saying to Muslim New Yorkers that he does not care about us, our issues, the attacks on our houses or worship," said Mr. Uddin. "He will only take a principled stand when it will pay off politically. That is not the type of leadership that we want for this city."

Assemblyman Ron Kim of Queens, a progressive who has endorsed Mr. Yang for mayor, said that he thought Mr. Yang's initial statement was "inhumane," and he said he had called Mr. Yang on Tuesday to relay his concerns.

"He came off as taking a one-sided, 100 percent pro-Israel dominating position, with no nuance, and I know that that's not what he believes and I know that those aren't the values that guide him, especially when there are innocent people dying," he said.