

A Big Tent or a Divided Community?

By Alissa Symon & Yael Patir

The relationship between the Jewish American community and Israel is often depicted as a timeless constant, a fruitful symbiosis that constitutes a cornerstone of both parties' defining principles and an island of stability in an otherwise turbulent world of changing interests and fluid political alliances.

Notwithstanding this common perception, the relationship between American Jews and the Jewish state has always been far more dynamic than meets the eye. As demonstrated in the following text, the Jewish-American-Israel nexus has undergone tremendous changes throughout different historical chapters since the founding of Israel. The signing of the Oslo Accords, about a quarter of a century ago (1993), can be seen as a watershed moment in the development of the relationship between Israel and American Jewry.

American Jewry's relationship with Israel

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in the intensity of debate within the US Jewish community about its relationship with Israel. Despite the widespread perception that there is a unidimensional pro-Israel Jewish American lobby, the fact is that US American Jews have not always stood united behind Israel or the ideology of the Zionist movement. In the first years after the establishment of the Jewish state, American Jews were not ideologically aligned regarding their position as a community towards Israel: Some American Jews were careful not to openly show support for the Zionist cause, for fear of being accused of entertaining a "dual loyalty", while others felt at odds with the core concept of Zionism, which sees Judaism as a nationality rather than as a religion.

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Indeed, the first steps of building a relationship between the leaders of the Zionist Movement and American Jewry were measured. In 1941, David Ben Gurion, then chairman of the executive committee of the Jewish Agency and later Israel's first prime minister, signed the Cos-Cob agreement with Maurice Wertheim, president of the American Jewish Committee. The agreement stipulated that Jews should have the right to establish a Jewish state in Mandatory Palestine, but that this would not affect the citizenship of Jews in other countries. Only after the atrocities of the Holocaust became known, it is that Zionism had become a primary cause in American Jewish life. And still, only in the spring of 1948, after the State of Israel had become a fact, did the leadership of the American Jewish Committee declare that supporting a Jewish state or not was no longer a question, and that all American Jews should support Israel.

Nevertheless, the official support of the Jewish American establishment was not instantly picked up by American Jews, and public opinion was not quick to follow suit. Fundraising efforts through the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) and political backing for Israel did not gain momentum or match expectations during the 1950s, and the community's leadership remained hesitant. For example, during the Sinai campaign (1956), the leaders of the American Jewish establishment sided with the US administration and called on Israel to stop the campaign; Ben Gurion ignored their pressure and followed through with the campaign. It was only following the Six-Day War in 1967, which invoked real fear in the Jewish American community that Israel could be "wiped off the map", that significant shifts started to take place and numerous measures were introduced on behalf of American Jews to strengthen Israel, such as financial and political support. The period following the 1967 war was consequently defined by historians as the "golden era" of Jewish

American and Israeli relations, characterized by a solid consensus on Israel and the establishment of numerous institutions and programs through which American Jews provided political, financial and diplomatic support to the young Jewish state. The consensus around Israel was also instrumental in addressing internal needs of the American Jewish community, mainly as a unifying force. Thus, Israel became the “new religion” of American Jews.

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About a quarter of a century into the “golden era”, the first cracks began to appear: the consensus among American Jews around the community’s position on Israel began to dissolve around the launch of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the signing of the Oslo Accords; consequently, American Jews’ solidarity with Israel shifted from a “consensus” model to a “pluralistic” one, in which there existed various – and at times conflicting – views on how Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians should be addressed. Historian Jonathan Rynhold attributed this shift in part to a process in which Israel began to export its domestic political struggles abroad; indeed, the debate around the Oslo Accords was key to this transformation process.

The Oslo Process and the Jewish American – Israel Nexus

Around the signing of the Oslo Accords, the involvement of American Jews in Israeli politics and their influence instigated critical, and at times acrimonious, debates in Israel over the adequacy of such interventions. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin finally expressed his dissatisfaction with the constellation of the relationship between Israel and the Jewish community in the US, stating that the only avenue through which American Jews should be able to influence Israeli policies was if they moved to Israel and became citizens. Skeptical of American Jewry, Prime Minister Rabin preferred to deal with the White House directly and did not appreciate the “American-Jewish” meddling, going as far as to say that American Jews should not lobby on behalf of Israel in the US. Thus, it came as no surprise that in the first stage of the Oslo Accords (1993), when the agreement was concluded between Israel and the PLO, the American Jewish establishment was not involved in the process.

Skeptical of American Jewry, Prime Minister Rabin preferred to deal with the White House directly

The Israeli government’s attempt to bypass the Jewish American establishment was no accident; Israeli diplomats who had to “sell” the Oslo Accords to the Jewish American community reported that they were heavily confronted by activists criticizing the Rabin government’s attempt to sign a peace deal with the Palestinians. After years of American pro-Israel advocacy focused on the misdoings of the PLO and Yasser Arafat, the Israeli government faced difficulty mobilizing American Jews to support the peace process. Rabin, who struggled to get the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Jewish establishment to actively support the peace process, was eventually forced to establish a new lobbying organization called the Israel Policy Forum (IPF). From the very beginning, the IPF was meant to provide support from within the Jewish American community for the peace process and for promoting a historic settlement with the Palestinians.

At the same time, Benjamin Netanyahu, the new young leader of the rightwing Likud party and the head of parliamentary opposition in Israel, lobbied the Republican Congress in an attempt to derail the Oslo process and mobilize support for policies that ran counter to the line of the Labor government under Rabin. As part of these efforts, the Likud intensified its cooperation with the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) and with various Orthodox organizations. Netanyahu, who was vehemently opposed to the Oslo Accords, was

quoted as saying, *“I will lobby in Israel and American Jews will lobby in America”*, in a possible reference to Rabin’s demand that American Jews not lobby on behalf of Israel in the US. Netanyahu’s efforts bore fruit with certain American politicians, including Republican presidential frontrunner Bob Dole and speaker Newt Gingrich, who became active supporters of the Likud agenda. One of the most notable legislative successes of the Israeli right during that time was the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, which recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and called for it to remain an undivided city. The act was passed in Congress despite opposition from both the Israeli government and the US administration.

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The Jewish Lobbies

The long-term disruptive effect of the failed peace process on the Jewish American community is evident in retrospect. Israel’s acceptance of the Oslo Accords created a rift within the Jewish American pro-Israel lobby, which continued to deepen long after the assassination of Rabin and the collapse of the peace process. The ongoing fragmentation of this lobby, now consisting of different groups pushing conflicting pro-peace, pro status-quo or pro-annexation agendas, has increasingly shaped the struggle taking place within Congress over US foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mirroring the polarized views within Israeli society itself. Also, internal US debate about political developments such as 9/11, the pursuant “War on Terror” and the Iraq War, have increasingly delineated the different approaches to Israel within the Jewish community along partisan lines, eventually leading to the emergence of two main approaches. AIPAC and the Jewish American establishment represent the more conservative view, which is less critical of Israeli government policies and largely focuses on Israel’s security needs and on the country’s right to defend itself. J-Street, a pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby organization formed in 2008, focuses on promoting “two states for two peoples”, manifesting growing willingness within the predominantly liberal Jewish American community to criticize the Israeli right-wing governments’ policies, particular in regards to settlement expansion and the erosion of democratic values.



Donald Trump speaking at AIPAC – Source: Flickr/ [Lorie Shaul](#)

While the impact of Israeli politics on the Jewish American community is uncontested, the influence of various Jewish lobby organizations on the formation of US foreign policy remains questionable. Although some scholars argue that the US administrations' general pro-Israel stand is a by-product of AIPAC's lobbying efforts, others state that American foreign policy is influenced first and foremost by national geo-strategic interests, which sometimes happen to coincide with Israeli ones. Another group of scholars makes the argument that the fragmentation of the Jewish American lobby and its susceptibility to shifts in Israeli politics has reduced its ability to promote far-reaching agendas regarding Israel and the conflict—bringing it to an ongoing “status-quo” situation.

While the influence of Jewish American advocacy groups on US policy towards Israel and the conflict remains debatable, it is possible to pinpoint instances where Jewish Americans and the pro-peace lobby have been able to promote legislation that supported peace-building between Israel and the Palestinians. These include lobbying efforts that focused on providing financial support for peace-building activities, advancing the settlement building freeze, lobbying in favor of the two-state solution, and routinely engaging officials on Capitol Hill with issues pertaining to the occupation and the conflict, in order to keep the peace process high on their agenda.

Israel and the Polarization of US Politics

The changing attitudes towards Israel are not restricted to the Jewish community; the broader American public's perspective on Israel and on the conflict has shifted dramatically over the past decades. The Pew Research Center, which has been looking at Americans' attitudes to Israel and the Palestinians since 1993, asked the following question: “In the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians, which side do you sympathize with more, Israel or the Palestinians?” The question also appeared for more than a decade beforehand in surveys conducted by Gallup for the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. In one of their last reports on the matter in April 2019, the Pew Center noted that the partisan divide between Israel and the Palestinians with respect to “Middle East sympathies” is now wider than at any point since 1978: 79% of Republican voters say they sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinians, compared to only 27% of Democratic voters.^[1] Among those who sympathize more with Israel, 40% believe a way can be found for Israel and an independent Palestinian state to coexist peacefully, while among those who sympathize more with the Palestinians, 64% say a two-state solution is possible.

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Whether it was public opinion that influenced the political parties or the other way around, one thing is clear: the diverging attitudes towards Israel along partisan lines in US politics are becoming increasingly reflected in both parties' priorities, resolutions and policies. President Obama's decision in 2015 not to veto UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which condemned the Israeli settlement enterprise despite Israel's request to avoid such a move, signaled a break from the US policy of vetoing any Security Council resolutions on the matter of Jewish settlements. Senator Bernie Sanders' decision to make Palestinians' rights and the need for a more balanced US approach towards the Israel-Palestinian conflict a centerpiece of his foreign policy in his 2016 campaign for presidency should also be seen in this light. On the other side of the political map, the Trump administration's break from the prevailing US approach to the conflict has been even more drastic, most notably by moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but also by not voicing unequivocal support for the two-state solution, not criticizing the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and going as far as to omit the call for a two-state solution from the Republican Party's political platform in July 2016, ahead of the presidential elections. Also, the administration's pressure on the Palestinian Authority, cutting funds and closing the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) offices in

Washington DC, demonstrates a clear break from the more balanced approach towards the conflict of previous Republican administrations.

Young (Jewish) Americans

The profound social and political changes in Israel and the United States since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 have shaped the younger Jewish American generation's views on the conflict. These changes include growing polarization in US politics regarding the country's stance on Israel and the conflict, the Netanyahu governments' shift from conflict resolution to conflict management, the divide among the Palestinian leadership, and the rounds of violent escalation and humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Unlike their parents' generation, having not lived at a time where Israel's very existence was seen to be at risk, and given the collapse of the peace process and the new political setting, the younger generation of American Jews, who are predominantly associated with the Democratic Party, are becoming increasingly critical of the Israeli government. Two thirds of American Jews now state that they believe Israel does not make "sincere efforts to achieve peace" (Rosner & Ruskay, JPPI, 2018). Accordingly, young American Jews seem to have given up on the peace process and the prospect of a negotiated peace deal, and prefer to invest their energy in fighting to end the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. The demonstrated weakness of the peace camp in Israeli politics and its diminishing ability to influence the political course of the country constitute yet another factor in the movement of young American Jews away from pro-Israel frameworks, looking towards their own communities and their potential responsibility in perpetuating a situation that is inconsistent with their progressive views.



IfNotNow protesting AIPAC – Source: Wikipedia

A pertinent example of collective action among Jewish American millennials who broke away from more

traditional Jewish pro-Israel advocacy groups occurred during the Gaza war of 2014. In response to Israel's actions during the military operation dubbed "Protective Edge", young Jewish progressives gathered to recite the *Kaddish* (part of the mourning ritual in Judaism) for both Palestinians and Israeli victims outside the offices of the Conference of Presidents, under a banner reading "If Not Now." IfNotNow (INN) was subsequently established in 2015, not as a peace-building organization between Israel and the Palestinians, but rather with the overall goal of ending American Jewish support for Israel's occupation of the Palestinian Territories, leaving out an explicit call or support of the two-state solution. Another difference between older and younger progressive American Jews is growing support among the latter for pressure on Israel, whether in the form of Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment (BDS) or by placing conditions on American security aid to Israel.

A New Chapter?

The disruptive effect of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process on the Jewish community in the US continues to unfold a quarter of a century after the signing of the Oslo Accords. The increasing transformation of the conflict and of US policy towards Israel into a partisan issue in American politics, along with the current Israeli government's growing alignment with the Republican party (and vice versa) at a time when the political landscape in the US is becoming ever more polarized, is eroding ties between the world's largest two Jewish communities. For American Jews, who are largely progressive Democrats, this growing gap is ideological, as they increasingly see Netanyahu's Israel as an actor that rejects peace with the Palestinians and upholds the occupation while eroding democratic norms and practices – yet it also stems from political and emotional motivations, as Jerusalem grows more aligned with their political rivals at home.

The disruptive effect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the Jewish community in the US continues to unfold

Moreover, the generational change within the US-Jewish community, along with the fact that young Jewish Americans have never experienced Israel as a threatened country but rather as a regional military power, is stoking a growing rift with the Israeli public, which continues to see Israel as a shtetl in distress. Young Jewish Americans are finding it harder to accept Israel's security arguments as justification for its military control over the Palestinians, and are also more skeptical over the chances of peace. Furthermore, the growing difference of perspective between young American Jews and Israel relates not only to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also to a commitment to democratic values, minority rights and religious pluralism.

Taking all these tectonic shifts into consideration, it seems that the relationship between the world's two largest Jewish communities is headed into uncharted waters – and possibly a new chapter in their joint history.

[1] <https://www.people-press.org/2018/01/23/republicans-and-democrats-grow-even-further-apart-in-views-of-israel-palestinians/>