

U.S.-Israel Relations: A Changing Landscape?

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Elliott Abrams was a deputy national security advisor in the second George W. Bush administration.



Brief Analysis

On February 23, Jonathan Rynhold and Elliott Abrams addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Rynhold is a senior researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA), director of the Argov Center for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People, and author of the just-released book *The Arab-Israel Conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge University Press). Abrams is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and former deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JONATHAN RYNHOLD

Recent studies by BESA and other organizations reinforce the notion that the Israeli public is concerned about the U.S.-Israel relationship, especially in light of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's upcoming speech before Congress. In the 1990s, the Likud Party government tried to work with Republicans in Congress to block unfavorable policies by the Clinton administration, yet much of this was below the public's radar. Today, the same trend is occurring more openly.

In the past, a majority of Israelis viewed President Obama's approach to their country favorably. Now, however, they are more evenly divided depending on partisan affiliations, and they disapprove of the president's wider Middle East policies by large margins. Perhaps most surprising is their changing calculus on the Iranian nuclear issue; many are beginning to think about how an Israeli attack without American support might affect the bilateral relationship. These views dilute the impact of Netanyahu's decision to speak before Congress despite the president's opposition.

On a deeper level, Israelis generally do not understand -- and therefore underestimate -- the importance of shared democratic values to Americans. Many Americans do not just sympathize with Israel, they identify with Israel. Yet a

paradox has emerged in the way they relate to Israel. On the one hand, their sympathy for Israel has surged to new heights this century. On the other hand, they are increasingly divided about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this rift aligns with major political, ideological, and religious divides in the United States.

To be sure, the extent of sympathy for Israel is still vastly greater in America than in Europe. This is due largely to historical and cultural reasons, tied to America's Protestant foundations and Israel's status as a democracy. In Europe, democracy is typically viewed as a system and not part of one's identity.

What has changed in the United States is the way different groups relate to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this regard, Republican support for Israel has made a huge jump while Democratic support has stayed about the same. The policy divide is even starker. Republicans see support for Israel as a matter of embracing common values in a wider struggle against common enemies, and they blame Palestinians for lack of progress in the peace process. Democrats are united in their support for two states and opposition to settlements, but divided about who is to blame and how assertive America should be in the Middle East.

These differences are partly generational -- younger liberal commentators are far more critical of Israel's security policy and believe it bears more responsibility for the conflict. The millennial generation in America is the first in which there are more liberals than conservatives. With the two parties sharply divided on foreign policy and especially the Middle East, Israel is at the center of a broader polarization in American policy.

Neither party shows a significant gap between elite and public views on most of these issues, though elites tend to be more moderate. Yet even the least pro-Israel demographic in the United States is still more supportive than the most pro-Israel demographic in Europe.

Israelis and Americans still broadly agree on at least one issue: the security of Israel. This cannot be taken for granted and should be a starting point for strengthening the relationship. Additionally, since the two-state solution and settlement policy are increasingly important to Democrats and liberals, Israel needs to focus on these issues if it wants to maintain strong bilateral relations. It will be much easier to garner American support if Israel crosses the threshold of credibility on peace.

That said, one major concern is the failure among many liberal Democrats to understand the realities of the Middle East and their potential policy implications. Debates on college campuses today tend to reflect the shift toward more liberal attitudes in America; European countries went through a similar trend. Yet those who care about peace must realize that it has to be good for both sides. When dealing with any given policy issue, they must constantly ask, "Is this good for peace?" This will force people to answer the difficult questions that cannot be sloganized.

In sum, while the special connection between the United States and Israel is not in immediate danger, supporters should not allow the relationship's longstanding bipartisan nature to be eroded.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS

Israel has had right-wing governments for fifteen years now, a situation that explains much of the tension with America's current left-wing administration. If a left-wing government were to win Israel's upcoming election, tensions with the Obama administration would likely decline. The situation has also forced many American Jews to choose which affiliation -- liberal American or pro-Israel Jew -- is more important to them. This in turn raises the broader question of whether diaspora Jews still feel connected to Israel, which is more than a left-right issue. How do you sustain peoplehood when much of the American Jewish community is de-Judaizing? Will American Jews maintain a sense of peoplehood if they do not practice Judaism?

Another striking trend is the "Palestinianization" of American-Israeli relations. For example, if you ask people in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates, their relationship with Israel does not turn exclusively or even

primarily on the Palestinian issue. There are many other important issues -- Iran, ISIS, Hezbollah, and so forth. For left-of-center Americans, however, the critical issues are the Palestinians, settlements, and statehood. To increase support for Israel among this constituency -- in Europe as well as the United States -- one must de-Palestinianize the relationship, though that may require a different U.S. administration.

Israelis also face a problem with their message on the peace process. It is one thing for them to say "We want peace, but the Palestinians keep saying no"; Americans can understand that line of reasoning. It is harder to sell the argument that "It's hopeless, there's no point in negotiating because there is no partner on the other side." When many Americans, particularly those on the left, are presented with such arguments, what they hear is "The occupation is permanent." They don't want to hear that -- Americans do not expect peace tomorrow, but they expect Israel to be working toward it.

So what can be done to improve relations? First, Israel would need to increase its outreach to American Democrats, perhaps by enlisting the help of its own left-wing politicians (depending of course on the outcome of next month's Knesset election). Second, it is difficult to argue that improving daily life for Palestinians would improve how some Americans and other foreigners view Israel, since the Netanyahu government has made great efforts toward that end in the West Bank without receiving much credit. Third, clarifying Israel's settlement policy would be a significant step forward. In reality, the vast majority of controversial construction has taken place within the major settlement blocs lying inside the security barrier, not in the middle of what will someday be Palestine -- this was essentially the deal the Bush administration struck with Israel, and the resultant construction activity has not fundamentally altered the peace map. Although Israel has been unable to convey those terms effectively during the current administration, Washington should be able to find a formula for making clear that the settlement policy does not challenge the possibility of a two-state solution.

As for Israel's election, Netanyahu would be better off creating a grand coalition than a right-wing government if he wins, at least in terms of relations with the Obama administration. Moreover, while tensions with Washington are typically a negative for the incumbent during a campaign, they may hurt the opposition in this election because Netanyahu can use major security threats to portray his opponents as weak. For example, when Labor Party chair Isaac Herzog was asked recently about Iran, he said he trusts President Obama on the issue -- perhaps the wrong answer from an Israeli political view. Contrary to popular belief, this election is a referendum on Herzog, not Netanyahu. Israelis already know what they think of Netanyahu after his many years in office; the question is whether they trust Herzog to be prime minister.

This summary was prepared by Raquel Saxe. ❖

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