

# Foreword

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Since the founding of the State of Israel – and indeed, even pre-dating its establishment – the American Jewish community has played a critical role in maintaining Israel’s national security. From help to the fledgling state to acquire critical military equipment, to advocacy before the Executive Branch and Congress for foreign aid, to calls for strong American support for Israel at the United Nations, the American Jewish community has made a significant and, in many ways, outsized contribution.

Long accustomed to such support, many Israelis, both average citizens and national security decision makers, while appreciative, may underestimate the impact of this contribution, if not take it for granted. This study aims to dissect the American Jewish community’s role and make it more accessible to Israelis, both in its historical manifestations and in the form it has taken in more recent years. Publication of this work comes against the backdrop of one of the most significant periods of tension between Israel (or at least Israeli political leaders) and the American Jewish community in many years, and a number of trends that suggest the divide is poised to widen in the years ahead.

The sources of these tensions are many. There are instances in which Israel seemingly devalues the religious identity and practices of non-Orthodox diaspora Jews. In 2016, the Israeli government endorsed an agreement, the product of years of negotiations, to create an egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall (the Kotel), only to cancel the deal in 2017. Coalition members have advanced

legislation that would grant greater control to the Chief Rabbinate over the recognition of conversions, calling into question the validity of non-Orthodox conversions performed outside of Israel.

Other sources of tension include initiatives by the Israeli government that some see as weakening the democratic foundations of the State of Israel, such as the expansion of West Bank settlements in ways that could preclude achievement of a two-state solution with the Palestinians; moves to expel African migrants without properly assessing their claims to asylum; and, more recently, the passage of a nation-state law that many interpret to place higher priority on Israel's Jewish identity over its democratic character.

Tensions arise in the other direction as well. A claim often heard in Israel is that many American Jews place a higher priority on their liberal political values than their support for Israel, citing, for example, significant support from American Jews for the Iran nuclear deal, spearheaded by President Barack Obama, even as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described it as inadequate in face of an existential threat. Some Israelis argue that Israel now counts Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews as its most reliable supporters in the United States. It is suggested that demographic trends of assimilation and non-affiliation among non-Orthodox Jews will make them a declining asset in the years to come, not worthy of significant investment, and therefore Israel should diversify the sources of its support in America.

All of these tensions have been exacerbated in the era of President Donald Trump, who is deeply unpopular among American Jews, yet commands significant support among Israelis. Netanyahu's decision to align himself as closely as possible with Trump, even to the extent of declining to criticize a rising wave of anti-Semitism in America, typified by the August 2017 events in Charlottesville, has further deepened the divide.

One challenge in dealing with issues that inject stress in this relationship is the absence of established relevant mechanisms.

We lack formal institutions, or even agreed rules of the road, to help determine when and how American Jews can expect to have a voice in decisions that are rightfully made by the Israeli government, in particular on policies that affect Jews outside of Israel. Similarly, there are blurred lines regarding when it is appropriate for Israel to seek and expect the support of American Jews for its positions on American policy questions, or the methods that are legitimate for it to use to exert influence.

This study cites the 1950 understandings reached between then-Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and then-President of the American Jewish Committee Jacob Blaustein. They agreed that American Jews had only one political allegiance – to the United States; that American Jews would not seek to meddle in Israeli politics; that Israel would not disparage American Jews who choose not to live in Israel or interfere in internal diaspora affairs; and that neither American Jews nor Israelis would speak on behalf of each other.

The framework still has value, and most American Jews and Israelis likely naturally still orient toward it. But as a formal structure, it no longer retains its prior significance. Few people in either community have heard of the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein understandings or could cite them as a principle for bilateral interaction. It has been more than half a century since they were revisited in a serious way, and today the Jewish world looks dramatically different, with just two major centers, Israel and North America, each representing nearly half the Jewish world.

During the years I served as United States Ambassador, I encountered no other American community, no interest group, no segment of American society, with a greater stake, commitment, and dedication to Israel than the Jewish community. And yet, I was often struck by the profound lack of awareness and familiarity with this community in Israel, including among Israeli political, cultural, and national security elites. And when I did encounter Israelis who had major roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis American Jewry, many had developed their expertise on-the-job and without the benefit of in-depth training or

guidance. In this regard, I quickly came to appreciate the importance of the work of the Ruderman Family Foundation, which has supported a wide range of programs to promote greater awareness of American Jewry within Israeli society.

There were instances in which US policy and Jewish community priorities coincided, as with the NGO bill the Knesset debated in 2015 and 2016. I was instructed by the State Department to engage Israeli political leaders about proposed legislation Washington viewed as harmful to democratic principles, counter to shared Israeli-American values, and about which erroneous comparisons were being made to American law. Many American Jewish communal leaders, who were also deeply alarmed, took on a similarly critical posture. Our respective engagements played out in parallel, appearing to have a significant impact on the final text of the legislation.

But on other issues, I came into contact with the community's priorities without a direct means of influence. For example, during the negotiations over egalitarian prayer at the Kotel, I spoke regularly to leaders of the American Jewish organizations participating in these talks. I was personally sympathetic to their goals, but made clear that I had no instructions to articulate a US policy position in support of any particular outcome. At the same time, I offered my analysis that there was a dearth of support, or even awareness, among Israeli Jews for an issue I knew to have great resonance among American Jews, and one very vocal bloc of Israeli opposition voices, the ultra-Orthodox. I expected Israeli politicians – like politicians everywhere – to be most responsive to the voices of their voting public and those they rely on for political survival. In that sense, the deal that was ultimately reached was counter to all domestic political logic, and the renegeing on it far more in keeping with expectations of a political system like Israel's.

In tandem, I engaged in an ongoing dialogue with most of the Israeli political leaders involved in the negotiations. Again, without advocating any particular outcome, I sought to emphasize the strong feelings that the Kotel issue aroused among American Jews, and

the tenet that the community remains a critical pillar of support for the bilateral relationship. My argument to them was that Israel's interests – including its national security interests – would be served by taking a decision that would strengthen the bonds with that pillar of support and would be harmed by taking a decision that would weaken them. American Jews who feel that their values and identity are respected by Israel, even when there are policy disagreements, will naturally be more motivated to continue to play the role they have traditionally played in advocating with the US government and Congress for measures that benefit Israel. Those who feel disrespected and devalued will be less so.

The impetus for this study is underscored by that reality. In every decade of Israel's existence, American Jews have rallied to fundraise, advocate, and lobby on behalf of policies, military acquisitions, and a US-Israel security partnership that have helped strengthen Israel's national security and ensure it can defend itself against any threat. While there have been numerous other factors contributing to Israel's security, this critical element is certainly worth preserving and strengthening.

Israeli decision makers, therefore, will want to take into account the benefits of this partnership when deciding how to address issues of religious equality that hold great sensitivity with American Jews, how to interact with the American government and society, and how to maintain the broadest base of support from the American Jewish community and the American public as the political pendulum of American politics inevitably swings in both directions. This study offers them a useful reminder of the stakes. It also provides initial recommendations for how to take those stakes into account as Israeli policies are determined, expand knowledge of the American Jewish community's contributions among Israeli national security professionals, and enable dialogue that strengthens the bonds between Israel and the community and minimizes points of disagreement.

An ongoing commitment from both sides will be necessary to carry out this work successfully.