



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 971, August 31, 2017

**"Unite the Right" Divides the Jews:
Charlottesville and Relations between American Jewry and Israel**

Daniel Shapiro and Rotem Oreg

The August 12, 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville of neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen, and other racists and President Trump's response to the event have drawn sharp condemnation from different quarters. Many Republican governors and members of Congress, conservative commentators, and reportedly members of the President's own staff joined Democrats and liberals who took offense. This broad collection of voices viewed the President's equating the racist marchers - with their Nazi salutes, declarations of white supremacy, swastika flags, and chants of "Jews will not replace us" - with those protesting against hate, as lending legitimacy to the worst elements of American society. Trump's contention that violence emanated from "many sides" and that there were "very fine people on both sides" was particularly troubling in face of the car-ramming attack that killed protester Heather Heyer and wounded 19 others, carried out by a man described as "fascinated" by the Nazis and Hitler.

With the exception of Germany's Angela Merkel, who is highly sensitive to displays of hateful ideology and quickly condemned the Charlottesville marchers, there was little public attention to the reaction of foreign leaders. However, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's limited response - one tweet on his official and generally little-followed account calling for opposition to expressions of "anti-Semitism, neo-Nazism, and racism," with nothing to say about the moral equivalence voiced by Trump - became a lightning rod for criticism, including by many American Jews. Subsequent statements by Israeli ministers that played down any disagreement with Trump on the basis of his friendship toward Israel only attracted more opprobrium.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's motives for his tepid response - though he is usually quick to identify and condemn expressions of anti-Semitism - are easily discerned, difficult though they may be for some American Jews to swallow. It is understandable why any foreign leader, in pursuit of his or her country's interests, would seek to maintain the best

possible relationship with the President of the United States. Israel is no different, and Netanyahu's ideological affinity for Trump (and possible political benefits of being seen as close to him) underscores the point. This political need is heightened by both the perception that President Trump is unpredictable and easily angered, and Israel's reliance on the United States with respect to ensuring its security. Israel is currently engaged in challenging discussions with the United States about how to limit Iranian advances in Syria that can threaten Israel following the collapse of the Islamic State. A row with Trump under those circumstances could prove very costly to Israel.

American Jews might counter that Netanyahu did not demonstrate the same reluctance to criticize President Obama over the Iran deal and other matters. But in that case as well, Netanyahu was presumably acting in what he perceived to be his country's best interests. The closeness of the US-Israel relationship, and the particular bonds that American Jews feel toward Israel, may lead them to have unrealistic expectations that Israeli leaders will not conduct themselves as many other foreign leaders would in pursuit of their self-defined national interests.

At the same time, given Israel's self-definition and historic role as a state that stands up to anti-Semitism and acts to protect Jewish communities anywhere, Israeli leaders could well be expected to comment in stronger language about the Charlottesville event and Trump's response. Netanyahu's muted voice, and statements by Ministers Ayoob Kara and Eli Cohen arguing that relations with Trump supersede concerns about anti-Semitism are troubling to many American Jews. And unlike far stronger expressions of concern by President Rivlin, Minister Naftali Bennett, and Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid about the events and even, subtly but clearly, Trump's reaction, the statements by Netanyahu and others of like mind open Israel to the charge of cynicism - of only taking on anti-Semitism when it is convenient to do so. This harms Israel's standing in the current case, and could also weaken its credibility in the future.

For many American Jews, the sight of neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching in the streets hits them hard in two ways. First, it represents a fundamental threat to their lives and the freedom they enjoy, notwithstanding strong political and law enforcement support against the threat. In some communities, it poses no less and perhaps a greater threat than Islamist-inspired violence. Racists and extremists like the Charlottesville marchers may be few in number - at least those willing to be publicly identified - but even a small number can pose a physical threat. The Anti-Defamation League noted a surge in anti-Semitic incidents in 2016, and an even sharper spike in 2017. In Charlottesville, marchers passing a nearby synagogue spoke so threateningly that community leaders felt compelled to advise worshippers to leave through the back door

and remove the Torah scrolls from the premises so they would be safe in the event of an arson attack.

Second, the extreme racist views of such groups violate the rooted American value of equality of all citizens, regardless of race or religion. The scars of a Civil War fought to preserve the Union riven by the issue of slavery, and the pride in the hard won legal protections of the civil rights movement in which Jews played such a prominent role alongside African-Americans, are never far from the surface. American Jews, like many other Americans, see the prejudice and threats heard in Charlottesville as unequivocally un-American. To them, Trump's unwillingness to condemn the perpetrators and cast them as outsiders - indeed, their leaders, including David Duke and Richard Spencer, touted his equivocation as a sign of support - was a serious failure of presidential leadership.

Many Israelis, even those who share American revulsion at racism and hate, may view other examples of anti-Semitism, such as certain manifestations of the BDS movement, as a greater threat. The Israeli government devotes vast sums to combat efforts to delegitimize Israel, and this activity frequently leads it to voice strong criticism of left wing organizations that espouse or associate themselves with BDS. Israelis, skilled in defending themselves against physical threats, often fixate on this political threat as the greater danger, while many American Jews, including those who deeply oppose BDS, reverse the order. Anti-Semites on the right or the left (only the former were a factor in Charlottesville) are dangerous and should be opposed vociferously, but which threat poses the more urgent danger is a matter of perspective.

While these differences risk widening the existing gap between Israelis and American Jews, several steps could help balance or assuage these tensions. First, the Israeli government must find a way to pursue two courses at once - maintain the best possible relationship with the President and current US government leadership, and acknowledge the vulnerabilities felt by another key constituency: a significant majority of American Jews. The fact that these concerns stem from views expressed by Trump supporters and staff, and now by the President himself, makes the task undeniably delicate for Israeli officials. However, clarity on the moral issue at stake in Charlottesville provides a good framework for such statements, without needing to criticize Trump directly. Avoiding seeming dismissiveness of American Jewish anxieties about Trump supporters or staff with extreme views is another. If Israel wishes to maintain its image as the physical and spiritual homeland for all Jews, it needs to take a clear stand when Jews face actual threats to their lives and safety, whether from Islamist terror or from racists and anti-Semites who also pose a bigoted assault on their values.

Second, American Jews may need to adjust their expectations about the role any Israeli government is likely to assume regarding an issue that plays out in American politics. Even when they are sympathetic, Israeli officials represent a foreign government that must pursue its own interests. There will undoubtedly be moments when Israeli reactions and involvement in US events will seem disappointingly timid or overly interventionist. But Israel should strive not to cross clear moral or political lines, and American Jews may need to be prepared not to make the perfect the enemy of the “good enough.”

Third, a dialogue is necessary to help American Jews understand why Israelis see BDS and the movements that support it in the same dire terms that American Jews see what Charlottesville represents. Through such conversations, American Jews may acquire tools to help educate allies engaged in various progressive political causes who feel pulled by the argument of “intersectionality” toward BDS, why it is unjust, unwise, and counterproductive. Israelis will feel a greater sense of solidarity, which they would do well to reciprocate as these conversations progress.

Finally, Israelis must be prepared for some distancing by American Jews if they cannot embrace the priority American Jews feel toward fighting prejudice and the threats to religious and racial justice that were on display in Charlottesville. As in other areas, this gap may simply be a manifestation of two communities moving in different directions. But as responsible Israeli leaders have no fundamental disagreement on the principles at stake, it should be possible to communicate to American Jews a consistent message of solidarity. Indeed, if Israel seeks American Jewry’s assistance in fighting BDS and delegitimization, it needs to provide such support in return. And if Israeli leaders cannot do so, they should be prepared for further estrangement.

This article is published within the framework of the INSS research project on American Jewry and Israel’s National Security, supported by the Ruderman Family Foundation.