

INSS Insight No. 1163, April 17, 2019

The Changing United States: Implications for Israel

Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Shahar Eilam

The growing process of public and political polarization in the United States impacts on support for Israel, which for many years was in the bipartisan political consensus. Joined by awakening waves of anti-Semitism, support for Israel, now identified most strongly with the Republican party, is becoming a controversial issue. These developments have weighty implications for Israel. First, the Israeli government is fully identified with the policies of President Trump, and this stands to challenge relations with the Democratic party and its representatives. Second, there is a growing gap between Jews in America and Jews in Israel, originating in religious, values-based, and political disagreements. These trends threaten two essential assets for Israel's national security. One is the special relationship between Israel and the United States. Ironically, the record closeness currently evident between the two governments also highlights the growing challenge of maintaining bipartisan public and political support for Israel, as the main anchor for relations between the countries. The second is the internal cohesiveness of the US Jewish community and its relations with Israel.

The theme of the AIPAC Policy Conference, held in Washington in late March 2019 and attended by 18,000 participants, was "Connected for Good." The double entendre of this slogan – connected for ever, and connected for good purposes – was deliberate. The conference was held against a background of fiery public and political discourse in the United States following a series of pronouncements by newly elected Democratic Congresswomen Ilhan Omar (Minnesota) and Rashida Tlaib (Michigan), both open supporters of the BDS campaign, which calls for a boycott of Israel. In January, in a discussion about a bill to fight the boycott of Israel, Tlaib tweeted that the supporters of the bill "forgot what country they represent." A few weeks later, Omar hinted in a tweet that AIPAC "buys" the votes of American legislators ("It's all about the Benjamins, baby"), and later added that there should be a discussion of the fact that in the United States "the political influence...says it is OK for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country." The whiff of anti-Semitism accompanied by hints about Jewish money, which allegedly controls American foreign policy, and the remarks about dual allegiance aroused a storm that has not yet subsided.

These events reflect trends and dramatic changes in American society and politics, and have important potential implications for United States Jewry and for Israel. In the United States there is growing public and political polarization, strengthened identity politics, populist rhetoric sometimes accompanied by blatant and violent hate speech, increasing extremist influence on the public discourse and public agenda, more attacks against traditional elites and institutions that represent the existing order, and a collapse of the principle of the bipartisan consensus as a basis for legislation and policy. This atmosphere provides fertile ground for the awakening of waves of anti-Semitism from the right, in addition to the attempts to delegitimize Israel from the left. All these join the growing criticism of Israeli policy, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and attitudes to the Arab minority in Israel, and they are compounded by the close relations between the Trump administration and the Israeli government.

Indeed, these trends have intensified under the Trump administration, in part due to the President's blunt style, his critical attitude toward various American sectors and institutions, and his frequent preferential treatment of his electoral base at the expense of statesmanship. Moreover, the impassioned public and political debate is not exclusive to Trump's right wing, conservative support base. In fact, the President's style has validated these rules of the game for his many opponents on the left wing of the political map.

The waves of popular protest against President Trump are characterized by the consolidation of various – generally weakened – minority groups, with a variety of identities and agendas, into a joint action front. This phenomenon, known as intersectionality, is also a central platform in the United States for promoting the delegitimization of Israel. Until recently, it was claimed that this was a marginal grassroots phenomenon, with no foothold in the establishment and mainstream circles, but the entry of Omar and Tlaib into Congress shows that the phenomenon has penetrated the US establishment. Moreover, these new representatives and their supporters are demonstrating increasing influence over American politics, and in particular on the internal conduct of the Democratic party (although the vast majority of Democrats in Congress remain supporters of Israel). To illustrate, cries from within party ranks to take steps against Omar and Tlaib were followed by an initiative to promote a Congressional resolution condemning anti-Semitism, but when the party had difficulty reaching agreement on the matter, the statement grew into a broader condemnation, which also included reference to Islamophobia and xenophobia. The process reflected a compromise that was dictated by extremist voices in the party, and the result was cast as a victory for Omar, the person who brought about the precedent-setting condemnation of Islamophobia in Congress.

The growing polarization impacts on support for Israel, which for many years was in the bipartisan political consensus, but is now a controversial issue, identified most strongly with the Republican Party. In fact, following the series of problematic statements by the Democratic Congresswomen, the President claimed that a Democratic victory in the 2020 elections could “leave Israel out there,” and that Jews are leaving the Democratic Party in large numbers. The term “Jexodus” quickly made its way to the political lexicon and was adopted by the President to taunt the rivaling party. However, it is still too early to say whether this claim represents reality: data from in-depth studies and public opinion polls over recent decades show that the Jewish community of the United States, which comprises 2 percent of the population, is the most liberal minority group in the country, with over 70 percent supporting the Democratic Party. Research also shows that at least until now, the question of support for Israel was not a significant factor in the voting behavior of American Jews.

Alongside the widening gap between the parties regarding support for Israel, a poll published by Gallup in March indicated another, internal party phenomenon – a gap of 25-29 percent between extremes within the Republican and Democratic parties regarding support for Israel. For example, when supporters of both parties were classified into four groups over a range of attitudes – liberal Democrats, moderate Democrats, moderate Republicans and conservative Republicans – a dramatic gap emerged between those who support Israel more than the Palestinians: among the conservative Republican group 81 percent supported Israel more, as opposed to a mere 3 percent among the liberal Democrat group. The gaps on the subject of support for Israel within the ranks of the Democratic Party could in the not too distant future coerce Jewish supporters of the party to choose between the party as a political home and their support for Israel. An extreme example of this is the dilemma faced by British Jews who support the Labour party, now characterized by growing anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist attitudes.

These developments have weighty implications for Israel. First, the Israeli government is fully identified with the policies of President Trump, and this stands to challenge relations with the Democratic Party and its representatives. There is no doubt that good working relations between Jerusalem and Washington are an important asset for Israel’s national security, but absolute identification with Washington is a problem when it comes to President Trump’s many opponents throughout the world, in the United States itself, and among the US Jewish community. This difficulty is enhanced by manifestations of anti-Semitism from the right, which the President has refused to condemn (such as the event in Charlottesville in 2017) and the sense in some sections of the Jewish community that the massacre in the Pittsburgh synagogue in October 2018 was a product of the anti-Semitism that is once again rearing its head during Trump’s presidency.

Second, there is a growing gap between Jews in America and Jews in Israel, originating in religious, values-based, and political disagreements. On the religious front, parts of the non-Orthodox majority, comprising 90 percent of US Jewry, feel that the Israeli establishment refuses to recognize their Jewishness. On the values-based and political fronts, there is growing criticism among American Jews, who are mostly liberal, of what they see as illiberal and anti-democratic moves by the Israeli government, such as the Nation-State Law and Israel's policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

These trends threaten two essential assets for Israel's national security. One is the special relationship between Israel and the United States. Ironically, the record closeness currently evident between the two governments also highlights the growing challenge of maintaining bipartisan public and political support for Israel, as the main anchor for relations between the countries. The second is the internal cohesiveness of the US Jewish community and its relations with Israel. Given that for the first time the question of support for Israel may become an issue in the political discourse during the 2020 US presidential election campaign, the challenge to these assets is likely to grow.

The preservation and cultivation of these two assets should head the list of priorities of decision makers in Israel. The Israeli government must avoid interference in internal American politics and the preference of one side over the other, particularly as the campaigning for the presidential elections begins. There should be stronger channels of communication with the Democratic Party, even as close ties with the Republican Party are maintained. There is a need for extensive activity by Israel and its supporters in the United States to strengthen cooperation with both young liberal-progressive groups and with important developing communities, such as Hispanics and Afro-Americans. This infrastructure is necessary in order to preserve bipartisan support for Israel, as well as a means of fighting anti-Semitism and delegitimization of Israel. There must be a joint effort with the American Jewish community to nurture relations, with an emphasis on liberal millennials, whose connection to Israel has grown increasingly weaker, as has their connection to the Jewish community. Finally, the decision making process in Israel – on both foreign policy and internal issues – requires a preliminary examination of the anticipated implications of Israeli policies for both crucial assets.