

# Strategic Partnership in Crisis:

## The American Jewish Community and Israel

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The transformation within the American Jewish community has profound implications for Israel. For years a cohesive entity, united in its unmitigated support of Israel, the American Jewish community has been gradually fragmented and fractured during the last decade. More recently, the conversion law initiative and the continued stalemate of the peace process with the Palestinians are exacerbating this crisis, leading significant segments of this community—particularly within the Reform movement—to drift into alienation and reticence.

American policy towards Israel was never shaped in a political, social or ideological vacuum. Indeed, in seeking to promote both their bilateral and regional objectives, the architects of U.S. Middle East diplomacy were continuously faced with a myriad of domestic constraints that forced them to obfuscate, scale down, postpone or even abort the implementation of certain highly-desired strategic objectives.

Predicated upon a broad and pervasive array of beliefs and sentiments, the elements that were historically integrated into this domestic constraint reflected widespread goodwill towards Israel's national existence, well-being and security. Such support was not solely confined to the Jewish community, but was equally strong and persistent within American public opinion. Comprising a cluster of broadly based attitudes that underscored the affinity and similarity between the two national entities in terms of their pioneering spirit, historic legacy and commitment to democracy, this perception emerged on the American domestic scene as a legitimate concept as

soon as Israel was established in 1948. For more than three decades, it remained essentially intact and, during this period, the vision of this special relationship was translated—on numerous occasions—into effective lobbying and legislative initiatives from pro-Israeli organizations and their congressional allies. These activities narrowed various administrations' margin of maneuverability in their quest to contain the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Indeed, during such episodes as "the reassessment crisis" of 1975 and the joint superpower initiative of October 1, 1977, it was the leadership of the American Jewish community that proved to be the most effective and determined representative of this unique relationship. Acting forcefully and unanimously in support of Israel's position, it repeatedly forced the US administration to revise its approach after mobilizing American public opinion and demonstrating that Washington lacked the infrastructure of domestic support necessary for the effective pursuit of a coercive or punitive posture vis-a-vis Israel.

Notwithstanding the durability, centrality and salience of these domestic constraints, and notwithstanding the continued success of such pro-Israeli organizations as AIPAC in moderating or aborting initiatives that were perceived as detrimental to Israeli interests, it became increasingly clear over the last fifteen years that even strongly-held beliefs and cohesive organizations are susceptible to erosion and decline. Following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, it became evident for the first time that the special relationship was not comprised of a static complex of beliefs immune to change and

reinterpretation.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, several prominent Jewish leaders (including Tom Dine, Director of AIPAC and Kenneth J. Bialkin, National Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League) expressed support for the Reagan Peace Plan of September 1, 1982, in defiance of the official Israeli position. Later in the decade, it was the Intifada and the Shultz Peace Plan that precipitated incessant debates within the American Jewish community, thus transforming what had originally been a highly cohesive and unified entity in its unmitigated support of Israeli policies, into a divided and fractured community.

The 1990s accelerated these centrifugal forces, and further reinforced the concurrent processes of assimilation and alienation from Israel, which increasingly came to characterize the behavior of broad segments of American Jewry, particularly within the younger generation (aged 32-50) of the Reform and Conservative movements. On the other hand, Orthodox Jewry, the group that remained most attached to Israel, embarked upon a new course of action vis-a-vis the Israeli Government. Rather than supporting the Rabin and Peres governments, leading members of this group, who were opposed to the Oslo Accords, became an increasingly consistent constraint—together with their congressional allies—upon both the Clinton administration and the Israeli government. Indeed, during 1993-1996, a new alliance emerged between some leaders of the Jewish community and a number of senators and congressmen in an effort to undercut—or

vastly complicate—progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, in defiance of the official position of the two governments.

This disunity among the various components and groups comprising the American Jewish community became even more permeated with irreconcilable differences following the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister. During the Rabin and Peres era, it was the critics of the Oslo Accords within American Jewry (largely Orthodox Jews) who vociferously attacked Israeli policies from the right wing of the political spectrum. By contrast, with the advent of the Netanyahu government, the liberal mainstream of the community (composed largely of Reform and Conservative Jews) increasingly became the source of protest and opposition to Israeli policies and legislative initiatives.

Much of the supportive infrastructure—which, in the not too distant past, had provided Israeli governments with a vital safety net in their confrontations with Washington—had eroded. This is reflected in numerous public opinion surveys that were conducted in 1996 and 1997. For example, in a February 1997 public opinion poll conducted by Penn and Schoen Associates, eighty-one percent of the Jewish respondents expressed strong support for the active American role in the negotiations that led to the Hebron Agreement and for "an active American role in both future Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian negotiations." This indicates that at least some of the ramifications of such an increased role (including coercive measures vis-a-vis Israel or the formulation of an American peace plan)

would be acceptable to a significant segment of American Jewry which—in previous years—had remained adamantly opposed to a central and assertive American role in the peace process.

In another survey, conducted by Penn and Schoen Associates in September 1997, the percentage of Jewish respondents who

*Since the founding of the state, the American Jewish community has always been united in its support for Israel. Over the last decade, however, it has become a fragmented and fractured alliance. Now, the conversion law initiative, coupled with the continued stalemate in the peace process, threatens to exacerbate the crisis in this strategic partnership.*

indicated their full support for an "active American role" in the peace process increased to eighty-nine, with no less than eighty-four percent supporting the exertion of pressure by the administration upon both Netanyahu and Arafat in an effort to induce them "to act more constructively and be more constructive in the negotiations." Eighty-seven percent of the respondents in the September survey expressed their belief that, in order to revitalize the peace process, the administration "should offer its own ideas to bridge gaps between the parties." This overwhelming support for an expanded American role in the peace process—

which was incompatible with the traditional Israeli approach to third-party mediation—was accompanied by a growing willingness on the part of several Jewish organizations and leaders to openly and harshly criticize the Netanyahu operational code and perceived effort to pursue a policy of procrastination in the Palestinian zone. Theodore Mann, the former head of the Conference of Presidents, Robert Lifton, the former president of the American Jewish Congress, and Henry Siegman, the former executive director of the American Jewish Congress, whose views were considered in previous years as ultra-dovish, suddenly became representatives of the political mainstream of the community. In this capacity, they mobilized broad segments of American Jewry into openly criticizing Israeli government actions such as the opening of Jerusalem's Hashmonaim tunnel and the construction of the Har Homa neighborhood.

For all its gravity and potential ramifications, the growing cleavage within the Jewish community—on issues that were inextricably related to the peace process and to Israel's foreign policy orientation—is only one facet of a broader picture of mounting cultural and religious friction between a large majority of American Jews on the one hand, and the Israeli government and its religious establishment, on the other. In this context, the factor which compounds and exacerbates the already tense relations between the Reform and Conservative movements (which comprise seventy-nine percent of American Jews that belong to established congregations), and the

Netanyahu government, is the proposed "conversion law." This legislation proposes to institutionalize and formalize the existing norm, according to which conversions in Israel can be performed only by Orthodox rabbinical authorities.

A clear illustration of the prevailing mood of the Reform and Conservative communities in the wake of the conversion law initiative was the March 1997 decision of the San Francisco Jewish Federation "to slash its support for traditional Israeli charities by \$1 million" (or seventeen percent of its annual contributions to the United Jewish Appeal) because of Israel's religious policies. In June 1997, the Boston and Cleveland Jewish Federations adopted measures similar to that initiated by the San Francisco Federation. Seeking to disassociate themselves from the UJA, the leaders of these federations were now increasingly prepared to contribute directly to programs and organizations whose activities in Israel were perceived as representing the antithesis to the conversion law legislation. For example, the Cleveland Jewish Federation decided to divert \$3 million of its projected donations in 1998 from traditional outlets, such as Israel Bonds and the UJA, to programs in Israel that promote religious diversity and pluralism. The UJA's effort to defuse the crisis by promising to allocate \$20 million in 1998 to programs that promote pluralism and religious diversity in Israel is unlikely to drastically alter the situation.

Against this backdrop, and with the vision of the unique Israeli experience gradually fading into the background, the

possibility that growing numbers of American Jews (particularly young and Reform) will continue to drift into reticence, indifference and alienation should not be discounted. Whether or not consideration of the conversion law is permanently suspended, the apparent contradiction between the US and Israel—primarily in terms of the different relations between religion and state in the two countries—is likely to further weaken the ties between broad segments of American Jewry and Israel.

In this respect, the intensifying debate within American Jewry regarding the conversion law, as well as over Israel's behavior in the Palestinian sphere, can be viewed as a major impetus for further accelerating the processes of change in the basic political and social attitudes, affiliations and allegiances of American Jewry. With the traumatic memories of the Holocaust receding into the background, and with the vision of Israel as an island of quintessential democracy surrounded by a belligerent Arab coalition appearing increasingly divorced from the heterogeneous landscape of the contemporary Middle East, at least part of the unifying historical experiences which shaped the bonds between the

Diaspora and Israel has evaporated in recent years.

Indeed, with the rate of intermarriage among American Jews reaching fifty-two percent at the beginning of the decade, and with the level of contributions to Israel through the UJA and to pro-Israeli PACs declining steadily (particularly among members of the young Jewish generation), the prospects of once again mobilizing the highly fragmented Jewish community in support of current Israeli government policies appear slim.

In the absence of an acute threat to Israel's physical survival, it is safe to predict that future crises within the confines of the American-Israeli framework will unfold in a new setting, with significant factions of the Jewish community either refraining from actively supporting Israeli policies, or even providing active support to the administration in an effort to persuade, deter, coerce or even punish the Israeli government. The conversion law on the one hand, and the prolonged impasse on the Palestinian front on the other, have thus combined to place the strategic alliance between Israel and the American Jewish community in increased jeopardy.

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