

# Relations between Israel and the United States before and after the Presidential Elections

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Israel's relationship with the United States is one of the most important components of Israel's political, security, and economic strategic situation. Israel puts tremendous effort into maintaining and nurturing this relationship, as it has no substitute in the international arena. Despite some setbacks, which at times are given too much attention, the unwritten and informal alliance between the two and the strategic partnership have been carefully maintained.

## The Foundations of the Relationship

The partnership and cooperation between Israel and the United States are founded on a shared set of values and mutual strategic benefits. At the basis of the shared values is the reality of Israel as a democratic society defending itself in a hostile environment without the need for active American intervention.

While public opinion polls in the United States indicate that support for Israel is firm, Israel must be sensitive to a certain erosion of that support, especially in the liberal segments of American society, resulting from what is perceived as Israel's religious intolerance, discrimination

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against women, and harm caused to Palestinian life and property. Even within the Jewish community, criticism of these phenomena has increased in recent years, and although these voices as yet wield limited internal American political influence, it requires attention, as does the need to confront those who generate the criticism in order to minimize possible damage to the base of support for Israel in the American public.

The second major component of the Israel-United States relationship is the strategic partnership. Beginning in the early 1950s, Israel opted for a strategic connection to the West. While until 1967 Israel relied for military hardware primarily on France and Great Britain, that year Israel's political, security, and to a great extent also economic connection with the United States became almost exclusive. The strategic partnership was expressed through exchanges of intelligence assessments, arms supplies, and improvements in political and security coordination. The political coordination between the two was often a significant factor at important junctions. The strategic partnership does not necessarily signify complete congruence in terms of the strategic goals of the two nations and the paths they choose to reach these goals. Differences of opinion on fundamental issues have always existed, and some of these issues are even seen by Israel as existential, but this has never affected the depth and scope of the relations.

Comparing Israel's relations with the United States to its relations with Europe can be problematic, but it allows us to understand a situation in which there is a strategic partnership that allows differences of opinion without undermining the foundation of that partnership. For example, the positions of the United States on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are fairly similar to those of Europe and especially those of the European Union, but while differences of opinion between Israel and the EU caused a significant rupture and erosion in cooperation between the two sides, the foundation of the relations and cooperation with the United States, even on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, have never been seriously damaged. The fact that in the brief post-1967 history there have been personal tensions in the relations between the heads of state of Israel and the United States has never impacted on the overall fabric of the relationship.<sup>1</sup>

## Current Events: Netanyahu-Obama Relations, the Arab Spring, and Iran

The topics on which recent public discourse in Israel has focused, such as the relations between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Barack Obama, must be seen in the context of American public support and the strategic partnership between the two nations. President Obama's attitude towards Israel is based on a comprehensive view of United States strategic interests and his liberal worldview, rather than on value-linked or emotional considerations about Israel. This distinction is also valid concerning his attitude to America's other allies, not just Israel. It is of course important to try to minimize interpersonal tensions when it comes to relations with the United States, especially given the probability that President Obama will be reelected.

Both because of the importance of the issue to Israel and the United States and in an attempt to improve the overall relationship with the United States, especially at the interpersonal level, Israel would do well to try to advance a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An American president in his second term would likely feel less constrained by internal political considerations than a first term president. President Obama has made the importance he attributes to the Palestinian issue eminently clear. Therefore, an assumption must be made that he will resort to the Israeli-Palestinian question, while learning the lessons of previous efforts and taking into account the far reaching changes that have occurred in the region since the beginning of his current term in office. An Israeli initiative, coordinated with the American administration, would contribute significantly to strengthening the bilateral relationship and especially the relations between the two heads of state. Such an initiative need not necessarily include a comprehensive solution to the three core issues: Jerusalem, refugees, and borders. An Israeli initiative could aim for a partial arrangement for an interim period, and it could include a series of unilateral steps as well as agreements with the Palestinian Authority.

Another current topic of public discourse – the “Arab Spring” – enhances the importance of an Israeli initiative for a political process

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with the Palestinians. Several times, the Arab uprisings forced the United States to choose between friendly though non-democratic regimes and popular regimes relying on Muslim ideological majorities. This dilemma will only intensify if the civil revolution spreads to countries where the United States has clear strategic interests, such as the Gulf states. America's image was also damaged given a prevalent sense in the region that the United States is a superpower in decline because of the administration's decision to leave Iraq, reduce its presence in Afghanistan, lead the operation in Libya from behind, and until now refrain from military action against Syria. The image of a superpower in decline is also strengthened by America's strategic decision to shift the center of gravity of political and military activity to the Far East in order to curb China's growing influence in this part of the world. All of these have negative implications for Israel. A political initiative that would allow America room to maneuver politically is therefore of strategic interest for Israel. The importance of such an Israeli initiative is that it would give the United States room to maneuver in the region, which may help to improve America's image in the region. Such an improvement and continued American presence in the region are in Israel's best interests given recent regional transformations, some of which are liable to have a negative effect on Israel's strategic balance.

In recent months, the Iranian question has monopolized the attention of both the Israeli government and the American administration. The two are mostly in agreement, although their positions are not identical. Both agree on the objectives of the Iranian nuclear project and the projected timetable. Until now there was also agreement on the need to give the political efforts and negotiations, accompanied by effective sanctions, a real chance to work. By contrast, there is not full agreement on when a military option might be implemented, what its goals would be, and who would be responsible for carrying it out. Likewise, there is not complete agreement as to what Iran's response might be and how this response might affect the Middle East and the global economy.

President Obama's statement that Israel is a sovereign nation with the right to defend itself is important, but it does not relieve Israel of the need to avoid surprising the United States with particular moves, in light of the importance of American political and public support in the long run. Any Israeli action on Iran, whether political or military, has ramifications for

American strategic interests in the Middle East and the global economy, and therefore also an impact on American public opinion on Israel. These are considerations that any Israeli leader must take into account when deciding on Israel's response to Iran's ongoing nuclearization.

### **Social Trends and Relations with the Jewish Community**

A third area of relations is connected to social and demographic trends in the United States and the American Jewish community. The Jewish community in the United States has influence on the strengthening of ties with Israel, and this community is an important pillar of the relationship. The proportion of the Jewish community involved in the American political and bureaucratic systems far exceeds its numerical size, and its political and moral support for Israel is an Israeli strategic asset. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the implications of some negative developments within the American Jewish community. Inter-marriage, for example, has resulted in a demographic decrease in absolute numbers, while immigration of other minorities to the United States has resulted in a decrease in the relative percentage of the Jewish community within the American population. The fact that the Holocaust and establishment of the State of Israel – formative events for the Jewish people – recede in time results in a weakening of the emotional aspect of the connection between young American Jews and Israel. The fact that Jewish community-Israel relations are still conducted through older, formal mechanisms does not serve to widen the base of relations between the community and Israel. On the positive side, programs such as Masa Israel Journey and Birthright have had much success in bringing the younger generation closer to Israel, as does the involvement of this generation in the activities of AIPAC, devoted to promoting relations between Israel and the United States.

Significant improvements in the way Israel is viewed on the issues of state and religion and the Palestinian question, and strengthened cooperation with the American administration on Iran will also bolster Israel's ties with certain segments of the American Jewish community. At the same time, however, Israel will have to maintain its bond with the younger generation of religious and ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States whose interest in political issues seems to be smaller than that of its secular counterpart.

In 2012, the number of minority infants born in the United States for the first time exceeded the number of infants born to white Americans, and hence the importance of Israel strengthening its image among the Hispanic, Asian, and African-American communities. Programs mentioned in the context of the Jewish community may, with necessary adaptations, contribute in this regard. It would be especially advisable to expand and intensify the effort to bring delegations of young, politically involved non-Jews to Israel (especially among Hispanics and Asians), encourage them to enroll in study programs, and participate in work programs. This recommendation dovetails with the aforementioned need to maintain the support of liberal Americans and the wide support Israel has enjoyed from this base for many decades.

In light of the challenges Israel will face in the coming years, the Israeli government must continue to preserve and nurture the relationship with the United States, at the personal level between the heads of state, at the strategic level in terms of coordinating interests, and at the level of segments of American society whose internal political influence is steadily growing.

### Note

- 1 For example, there were personal tensions between President Carter and Prime Minister Begin, between President George H. W. Bush and Prime Minister Shamir, and between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu.