

Diminishing support

Older generations of Americans understood Israel; that may not be the case for the next generation

By Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis



For an entire generation of Americans, their political awakening has taken place through the struggle against what they perceive as “genocide” in Gaza.

AFTER TWO years of war, Israel’s standing among its Western allies has steadily eroded, with some European countries supporting its boycott, others suspending deliveries of military equipment, and yet more recognizing a Palestinian state.

And while Israeli leaders appeared willing to keep fighting as long as they had the backing of the US, even there Israel is facing what my Institute for National Security

Studies (INSS) colleagues Ted Sasson and Eldad Shavit have called an “unprecedented nadir” in public support.

A series of polls indicates that a majority of Americans disapproved of Israel’s conduct in Gaza, at least in the final months of the war. Other surveys further reveal a sharp rise in the number of Americans who view Israel negatively, sometimes even exceeding those who view it positively.

At the same time, support for Palestinians has risen sharply, and in some polls sympathy for them has exceeded sympathy for Israel.

These negative sentiments were reflected in an August Quinnipiac poll, in which 60% of the respondents supported limiting US military aid to Israel. With a ceasefire now in place, Israel faces the arduous task of rebuilding its international standing.

Generational cliff

There is, however, some room for optimism. For many Americans, perceptions of Israel remain highly sensitive toward Israel’s actions and to the flow of news from the region.

Just as support declined amid growing reports of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the war’s prolongation, it is reasonable to expect that the end of the fighting will bring a swift, if partial, recovery.

However, there is one key segment of the US population where I fear this rebound is unlikely to materialize – young Americans.

Just as partisan divides have deepened, with Democrats viewing Israel far more negatively than Republicans, a sharp generational divide has also emerged. The same polls that show Israel’s declining standing also reveal that public opinion toward Israel is harsher among Americans aged 18–34 than among older cohorts.

This gap persists across party lines: Young Democrats view Israel more negatively than older Democrats, and young Republicans more negatively than older Republicans.

Even among white evangelical Christians, Israel’s strongest supporters in the US public, the share of Israel sympathizers among the young is lower by double digits.

This gap is so deep and consistent that it is no exaggeration to call it a generational cliff.

Explaining the gap

Why then, if Israel's image may yet recover among older Americans, should we expect less improvement among the young? Three factors stand out.

First, formative political experiences carry exceptional weight. Research consistently shows that people's defining political memories are those formed in late adolescence and early adulthood.

For an entire generation of Americans, their political awakening has taken place through the struggle against what they perceive as "genocide" in Gaza.

Furthermore, for those who were in college during this period – and who are likely to occupy leadership positions in the future – this struggle is intertwined with domestic movements for academic free speech and social justice and now feeds into the broader inter-party polarization of American politics.

It is Israel's misfortune that its devastating war in Gaza became the defining political moment of a generation. Reversing that perception will be extraordinarily difficult.

Second is the baseline that current events set for future interpretation of Israeli action. Even if the impression of the war recedes, future Israeli actions will be read by younger Americans against its background.

If for older generations of Americans Israel was a loyal ally, sometimes to be criticized but even then, understood, for many in this younger generation that is not the case.

With no memory of the Holocaust, the Cold War, or peace processes, many will likely consider Israel as a problematic cli-



It is reasonable to expect that an end to the fighting will see support for Israel return, but that is less likely to happen among younger Americans.

It is Israel's misfortune that its devastating war in Gaza became the defining political moment of a generation

ent state at best.

This is true on the Left, where Israel is read into the history of American social and racial (in)justice; and on the Right, where isolationist and antisemitic views drive negative perceptions of Israel.

Third is what we might call the balance of indifference. Most of these younger Americans are unlikely to care very much about Israel one way or the other. However, like most of us, they care about the views of their peers.

Once a negative view and a basic suspicion of Israel in light of the war have set in, even those who do not harbor intense feelings against the Jewish state are more likely to stay quiet than face social pushback, let alone voice support for it.

This is essentially the opposite condition to where things stood regarding Israel in previous decades.

Cracks in support

So far, this trend has been less pronounced among leadership in either party. Even in the Democratic Party, where support for Israel among the rank and file has sharply declined, lawmakers and party elites remain largely supportive of Israel.

That being said, cracks are appearing. In a July vote, more than half of Senate Dem-

ocrats voted to restrict arms sales to Israel, nearly doubling in number since the previous attempt to pass the measure in April.

As a younger generation of political leaders rises, again, especially among Democrats, support for Israel may very well decline even among elected officials. New York's anti-Zionist Democratic mayoral candidate, Zohran Mamdani, might prove to be a harbinger of a shift away from support for Israel.

This does not mean that nothing can be done; and given the threat such a sea change would pose for Is-

rael, something must be done.

Some measures are straightforward: It is always wise to enhance and adapt Israeli public diplomacy to different audiences, including younger Americans, and to changing media environments. However, messaging and marketing alone cannot solve the problem.

Israelis will ultimately have to make their own political choices, guided by a range of considerations. But those choices will inevitably shape how the state is perceived by younger Americans.

The current Israeli government has made clear that it views political accords with the Palestinians as dangerous, and that it prioritizes the interests of Jewish Israelis.

Future Israeli leaders seeking to rebuild ties with the American generation now coming of age should signal a readiness to advance Israel's security through genuine efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to more fully integrate the state's minorities.

If they do so, Israel may yet step back from the precipice. ■

Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis is the Ruderman Family Foundation fellow in residence and senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), and a Liberalism Rekindled postdoctoral fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.