

# **The Israel Paradox: The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture**

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## **Abstract**

In the 21st Century, a paradox has emerged in the way Americans relate to Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the one hand, sympathy for Israel is widespread and deeply rooted in American political culture. Moreover, in the new millennium it has surged to unprecedented heights. On the other hand, there are increasing divisions among Americans over the Arab-Israeli conflict and these divisions increasingly line up with the main cultural, political, ideological, and religious divides. What is more, these divisions are mutually reinforcing, as evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews are likely to hold conservative political views and support the Republicans, while mainline Christians and non-Orthodox Jews are likely to hold liberal views and support the Democrats. This paper will survey, analyse and explain this paradox by examining both elite discourse and public opinion. It argues that the political impact of this paradox is twofold. Because the cultural foundations of American sympathy for Israel are very resilient, the underlying commitment to Israeli security remains consensual and robust; increased immigration of Hispanics is very unlikely to reverse this. However, the growth of liberalism among younger generations means that support for Israeli policy to the peace process will become increasingly conditional among Democrats.

# The Israel Paradox: The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture<sup>1</sup>

'The United States has a special relationship with Israel, really comparable only to what it has with Britain.' John F. Kennedy<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The United States has a special relationship with Israel; a defining feature of which is that support for Israel goes beyond an empirical calculation of U.S. interests. This is because the special relationship is grounded on deep cultural foundations that predate not only the creation of pro-Israel lobbying organizations but also the mass immigration of Jews to America.

Yet beneath the surface these cultural foundations have begun to shift in conflicting directions. A paradox has emerged in the way Americans relates to Israel. On the one hand, Americans identify with Israel and sympathy for Israel remains widespread. Indeed, the American public's sympathy for Israel has surged to new heights. On the other hand, Americans are increasingly divided about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Republicans and conservatives have become far more supportive of Israel than liberals and Democrats. While Republicans and Conservatives increasingly think that the U.S. should take Israel's side in the conflict, liberals and Democrats prefer an even-handed approach. The most vociferous evangelical supporters of Israel oppose Israeli concessions to the Palestinians, while mainline church activists promote divestment from Israel in order to pressure Israel into making concessions. At the same time in the heartland of pro-Israel sentiment, the younger generation of non-Orthodox Jews appears to be less attached to Israel than older generations and the Orthodox. Moreover, the organized American Jewish community has become increasingly divided over the peace process, as exemplified by the formation of the "pro-Israel, pro-peace" lobby – J Street, as an alternative to the established pro-Israel lobbying organization AIPAC.

What we have here is an 'Israel paradox' in American political culture. On the one hand, sympathy for Israel is deep-seated, widespread and increasingly robust. On other hand, there are increasing divisions among Americans over the Arab-Israeli conflict and these divisions increasingly line up with the main political, ideological, and religious divides. What is more, these divisions are mutually reinforcing, as evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews are likely to hold conservative political views and support the Republicans, while non-religious Americans,

non-Orthodox Jews are likely to hold liberal views and support the Democrats. This paper explores this paradox and analyses its political consequences.

### **Why political culture?**

The US-Israeli relationship is much discussed and much analysed. The approach adopted here focuses on the importance of political culture. The contention is not that political culture explains everything about the relationship but rather that it explains several important factors, that the other two main approaches – Realism and domestic politics -- cannot do independent of the cultural variable.

The Realist approach to international relations views shifts in the balance of power between states and the national interest defined in terms of power and state security as the key to understanding international relations.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective U.S. support for Israel is viewed as stemming primarily from the perception of Israel as a strategic asset for the United States.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, international politics and U.S. interests have clearly played a significant role in influencing U.S. policy to the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, it is not always clear whether supporting Israel has been in the U.S. interest or not. In fact, there has been a long standing debate among American policy makers as to whether Israel is a strategic asset or a liability. This debate has intensified in the twenty-first century. Crucially, it is not simply a debate over the nature of the empirical reality that can be settled by “facts” alone; rather it is a debate informed by different subjective conceptions of what American grand strategy ought to be. As a result, even Realists, such as Walter Lippmann and George Kennan, thought that cultural factors can profoundly affect grand strategy.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in order to explain the influence of strategic factors on U.S. policy, one must first understand the place of Israel in these ideational constructs, which are an integral part of America’s political culture.<sup>6</sup>

While Realists generally view domestic politics as at most a secondary factor driving foreign policy, two prominent Realist scholars have argued that U.S. policy toward Israel is an exception to that rule. In the wake of President George W. Bush’s strong support for Israel, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argued that U.S.-Israeli relations are primarily a function of a powerful pro-Israel lobby. While the strident polemical tone of their work made a big splash, their argument was not in itself original, but rather echoed earlier works that essentially made the same case.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that pro-Israel groups constrain U.S. policy, raising the political

costs of pressuring Israel. But Mearsheimer and Walt's claims are exaggerated.<sup>8</sup> Pro-Israel groups do not control U.S. policy, nor are they its main determinant.

In any case, whatever the precise level of influence exerted by pro-Israel organizations, that influence cannot be properly understood in isolation from wider public opinion. As Kenneth Wald concluded, foreign policies advocated by ethnic groups succeeded "only to the extent that they had allies outside their own communities; could frame their policy in terms that resonated with American values; and, perhaps most important, offered plans consistent with American national interest as perceived by the president and public opinion."<sup>9</sup> Andrew Kohut, the president of the highly respected Pew Research Center that surveys American public opinion, concurred, stating, "If you didn't have a broad base of public support ... you couldn't create the level of support for Israel that exists on the basis of lobbying."<sup>10</sup> In other words, in order to explain the influence of the pro-Israel lobby, one must first of all understand the resonance of Israel in American political culture.

### **The Israel Paradox Pt 1: Identification with Israel and the surge in support for Israel**

'There is no nation like us, except Israel'.<sup>11</sup> *Ronald Reagan*

'Why does the US stand so strongly, so firmly with the State of Israel? We stand together because we share a common story' *Barack Obama*<sup>12</sup>

Americans' support for Israel resonates in terms of two core elements of American national identity<sup>13</sup>. First, there are Protestant roots of America, with their focus on the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language. They believed that it was important to read the Bible in the original Hebrew in order to understand it properly. Subsequently, the study of Hebrew became a core subject in the early American universities, being compulsory at Harvard from its founding in 1639 until 1787. By 1917, 55 institutes of higher education in the US taught Hebrew. Hebrew is to be found on the university seals of Columbia, Dartmouth and Yale. This contrasts with the great universities of Europe, where the focus was on the classical languages of Latin and ancient Greek.<sup>14</sup> Over time this focus on the Hebrew Bible came to influence not only American Protestants, but also large numbers of American Catholics because many cultural traits originally associated with Protestantism have become central to American political culture in general. About half of Americans consistently believe in the Biblical promise that God gave the land that

is now Israel to the Jewish people. This includes not only three quarters of white Protestant evangelicals but also majorities of Black and Latino Protestants, and about a third of non-Latino Catholics. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between belief that the land of Israel was given to the Jewish people by God and support for the State of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

Second, Americans' sympathy for Israel is rooted in the American creed and the accompanying sense of American exceptionalism.<sup>16</sup> Just as America was created by pioneering immigrants fleeing religious persecution who set up a democracy, so was Israel; and this leads many Americans to identify with the Jewish state. In 2008, more than 80% of Americans agreed that the two countries "share common values, including a commitment to freedom and democracy".<sup>17</sup> The American creed also puts great emphasis on America's responsibility to advance the cause of freedom and democracy across the globe. Consequently, in the shadow of the Holocaust American leaders have felt a special responsibility to help protect Israel's security, as part of a commitment to be true to the American creed.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, when the public was asked what US goals in the Middle East should be, 'helping to protect Israel' was among the top five answers, with over three-quarters designating it as an important goal.<sup>19</sup>

This contrasts with opinion in Europe. Indeed, the level of support for Israel in American public opinion is at least double the level in European public opinion. While Americans sympathize with Israel over the Palestinians, Europeans tend to sympathize with the Palestinians over Israel. This serves to highlight the exceptional nature of America's pro-Israel orientation.

**Margin of Sympathy with Israel over the Palestinians %**

	<b>US</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Spain</b>
2002	<b>+28</b>	-11	-17	-2	--
2006	<b>+35</b>	-5	0	+19	-23
2007	<b>+38</b>	-13	-11	+9	-16
2013	<b>+39</b>	-16	-4	+2	--

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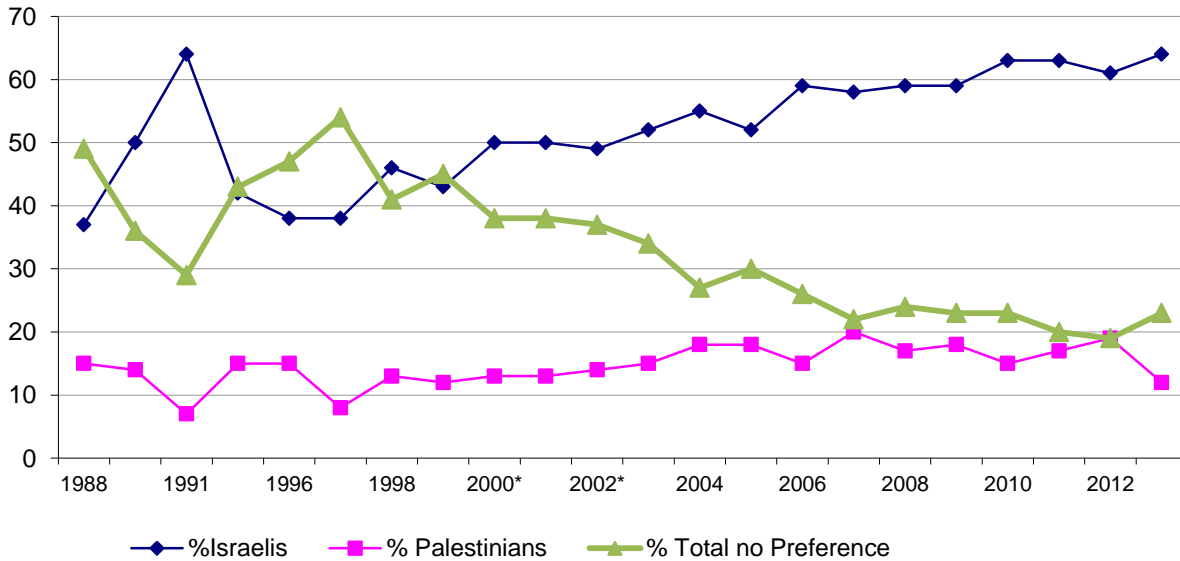
Data from Pew Research Center<sup>20</sup>

An explanation for this divide is provided in terms of more general differences between American and European political and strategic culture. First, America remains a predominantly Protestant, religious country, whereas in Europe, historically Protestant countries have become overwhelmingly secular and Catholic publics often remain not only hostile to Israel, but hostile to Jews per se.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, anti-Semitism remains stronger in Europe than in the U.Ss and the highest levels of anti-Semitism correlate with the highest levels of anti-Israel sentiment.<sup>22</sup> Second, the most virulent anti-Israel attitudes are found on the far-Left and the far-Right, both of which are stronger in European political culture than in the U.S. where classical liberalism is at the foundation of national identity.<sup>23</sup> In particular, far-Left Postcolonialism is the main contemporary fount of anti-Israel activism. Postcolonialism mandates siding with the Palestinians as the victims of Western 'imperialism' and Israeli 'colonialism'. It has much wider resonance in Europe, with its legacy of colonialism and the guilt that this has generated.<sup>24</sup> Third, in terms of strategic culture, Americans are much more willing to countenance the use of force than Europeans. Given the extensive use of force by Israel since 2000, this contrast in strategic culture is of significance in explaining the transatlantic divide over Israel. Finally, one factor which does *not* help explain the transatlantic divide is Islamophobia. Americans are *less* Islamophobic than publics in nearly all large European countries.<sup>25</sup>

#### *The surge in support for Israel 2000-*

As regards public opinion, since 9/11 there has been a surge in support for Israel (figure 1). Much of this has to do with an increased perception of Israel's strategic importance to the U.S. Since 9/11 Americans are far more inclined to believe that what happens in the Middle East, and with regard to Israel, has major implications for the U.S. itself. In the 1980s about a third of Americans viewed Israel as a close ally (a further 40-50% viewed it as a friendly country). In the wake of 9/11, the percentage who viewed Israel as a close ally grew to nearly half while around two-thirds defined Israel as an ally. Only the UK, Australia and Canada consistently ranked higher than Israel as American allies in the eyes of the public.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 1: American Public Opinion -Sympathy for Israel and the Palestinians**



(From Lydia Saad, Americans' Sympathies for Israel Match All-Time High,' *Gallup* March 15, 2013. Copyright © (2013) Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved. The content is used with permission; however, Gallup retains all rights of republication.)

This rise in sympathy for Israel has been reinforced by the fact that Americans tend to believe that the Palestinians are more responsible for the failure to achieve peace. Back in the late 1980s, sympathy for Israel actually fell in the US as Americans were impressed by the PLO's recognition of Israel and critical of Israeli policies towards the Palestinian uprising.<sup>27</sup> However, following the collapse of the Oslo process sympathy for Israel *consistently* reached over 50% for the first time. From 2000 until 2010, sympathy for Israel over the Palestinians rose by over 20% to 63%, a record high.<sup>28</sup> These shifts in the level of sympathy correlate with shifting perceptions of each side's behavior regarding peace. In polls by Harris, Newsweek, and NBC from the start of the violence in October 2000 until its peak in the spring of 2002, less than 15% blamed primarily Israel, while around three times that number blamed primarily the Palestinians.<sup>29</sup> In 2006 and 2009 about four times as many thought that the radical Islamist groups, Hezbollah and Hamas, were primarily responsible for the Second Lebanon War and the Gaza War respectively.<sup>30</sup> Finally, in 2010 five times more Americans thought that Israel was more committed to reaching a peace agreement than the Palestinians.<sup>31</sup>

## The Israel Paradox Pt II: Growing Divisions over the Arab-Israeli Conflict

### Ideology and Partisanship

The most important cleavage in US politics is that between Republicans and conservatives on the one hand, and Democrats and liberals on the other. There is a long-term trend towards ideological polarization along party lines.<sup>32</sup> For many years, this trend did not significantly affect attitudes towards Israel. This is no longer the case. Since the collapse of the Oslo process and 9/11 a **sympathy gap** has opened up. Before then, Republicans and conservatives were only slightly more sympathetic to Israel over the Palestinians than liberals and Democrats, since then the gap has more than doubled. This is because while the level of sympathy for Israel among Democrats has remained stable, support for Israel has surged among Republicans. Yet, it is not just that a larger proportion of Republicans and conservatives are more sympathetic to Israel, but also that a higher proportion of Democrats and liberals prefer the Palestinians over Israel (Table 1).

Table 1: *Sympathy for Israel over the Palestinians: Pro-Israel Margin in Percentage Points*<sup>33</sup>

	<b>Cons</b>	<b>GOP</b>	<b>Lib</b>	<b>DEM</b>	<b>Ideological gap</b>	<b>Partisan gap</b>
<b>1993-8/2001</b>	<b>+41</b>	(+43)	<b>+20</b>	(+25)	<b>+21</b>	(+18)
<b>2002-2006</b>	<b>+56</b>	(+61)	<b>+19</b>	(+27)	<b>+39</b>	(+34)
<b>Gaza War 2009</b>	<b>+52</b>	(+64)	<b>+12</b>	(+24)	<b>+40</b>	(+40)
<b>2011</b>	<b>+65</b>	(+73)	<b>+19</b>	(+33)	<b>+46</b>	(+40)

In addition, a **policy divide** has also developed. A majority of Republicans and conservatives believe that the US should take Israel's side in the conflict (table 5); that Jerusalem should be united under Israeli sovereignty (table 3) and they are divided about Palestinians statehood and settlements (table 4). They put the onus firmly on the Palestinian side. In contrast, Democrats and liberals tend to favor neutrality in the conflict (tables 5), Palestinian statehood (table 2) a divided Jerusalem (table 3), while being clearly opposed to settlements (table 4). Finally, Democrats are far more likely to believe that the Palestinians are serious about peace than Republicans (table 6).

Table 2: **Partisanship and Attitudes towards the establishment of a Palestinian State %**

	<b>Republicans</b>			<b>Democrats</b>			<b>Partisan Gap/Divide</b>	
	<b>Favor</b>	<b>Oppose</b>		<b>Favor</b>	<b>Oppose</b>			
2002	<b>42</b>	38	(+4)	<b>44</b>	28	(+16)	<b>12</b>	<b>Gap</b>
2009	39	<b>43</b>	(-4)	<b>59</b>	22	(+37)	<b>41</b>	<b>Divide</b>

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Data from Gallup<sup>34</sup>



**Table 3: Jerusalem in a two-state solution: united under Israel/divided between Israel & the Palestinians<sup>35</sup>**

	<u>GOP</u>	<u>DEM</u>
2010		
United	<b>54</b>	34
Divided	25	<b>46</b>

**Table 4: Should the US ‘get tough’ with Israel over settlements<sup>36</sup>**

	<u>GOP</u>	<u>DEM</u>
2009		
YES	29	68
NO	32	6

**Table 5: What Should the US do in the 2009 Gaza War?<sup>37</sup>**

<u>2009</u>	<u>Publicly Support Israel</u>	<u>Say/do nothing</u>	<u>Publicly criticize Israel</u>
GOP	56%	32%	8%
DEM	34%	40%	13%

**Table 6: How much of an effort are Israel and the Palestinians making to achieve peace?<sup>38</sup>**

	<u>Israel</u>	<u>Palestinians</u>
2011	<i>effort-no effort</i>	<i>effort-no effort</i>
<b>GOP</b>	68-22 (+46)	19-72 (-53)
<b>DEM</b>	<u>57-35 (+22)</u>	<u>49-40 (+9)</u>
	<b>Gap 24 pts.</b>	<b>Divide 62 pts.</b>

The partisan-ideological divide also found expression among intellectual and policy elites. The old conservative establishment that was hostile to Israel<sup>39</sup> in the early decades of its existence has largely been eclipsed by a new mainstream consisting of neo-conservatives<sup>40</sup> and popular nationalists.<sup>41</sup> They view Israel as a vital frontline ally facing anti-democratic, anti-American radicals in the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> Since 9/11, for most conservatives and Republicans, confronting these radicals is a core strategic interest.<sup>43</sup> As such, a victory for Israel was a victory for America and a defeat for Israel would be a defeat for America.<sup>44</sup> As George Will wrote on September 12 2001, 'The acrid and unexpungable odor of terrorism, which has hung over Israel for many years,

is now a fact of American life... Americans are targets because of their virtues -- principally democracy, and loyalty to those nations that, like Israel, are embattled salients of our virtues in a still-dangerous world'.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, since the collapse of the Oslo process, for which they unequivocally blamed the Palestinians<sup>46</sup>, they have become very skeptical of the peace process, which they view as, at best, a secondary strategic concern.<sup>47</sup> Instead, they advocated a strong Israeli military response to defeat terrorism while putting the onus on the Palestinians to stop terrorism and make major democratic reforms.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the minority conservative view has more support among 'realist' orientated Republican foreign policy elites than it does among the party base or conservative intellectuals. Indeed, due to the dominance of the new conservative mainstream, some Republican realists have found a home in Democratic administrations, for example, Robert Gates and Chuck Hagel, both of whom served under President Obama. They advocated an 'even-handed' policy that put the onus on Israel to make concessions or face extensive US pressure to impose a comprehensive settlement.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to the new conservative mainstream, liberal elites are more critical of Israeli policies and the level of criticism has been rising. They have been united in their support of the peace process and a two state solution, as well as in their opposition to settlements and the Israeli Right.<sup>50</sup> Democrats and liberals also tend to favor the U.S. adopting an even-handed approach to the conflict, though a significant minority favor leaning towards Israel<sup>51</sup>, especially when it is led by a center-left government. At the same time they have been divided over who was to blame for the collapse of the Oslo process, and they remain divided both over how important the conflict is to US strategic interests in the region compared to the rise of Islamist radicalism, and over how much pressure the U.S. should apply on Israel in the context of the peace process.<sup>52</sup> A minority on the Left, Progressives and Postcolonialists, favor the Palestinians over Israel because they are viewed as the victims of Western/Israeli 'colonialism'.<sup>53</sup> This position has traction among intellectuals in liberal magazines such as 'The Nation' but not among Democratic politicians. Nonetheless, within the Democratic Party, liberals now form the largest group in the party base.<sup>54</sup> Out of all the major demographic groups, the preference for Israel over the Palestinians is at its narrowest and support for U.S. pressure on Israel is at its highest, among young liberals.<sup>55</sup> This indicates that the partisan divide over Arab-Israeli conflict is likely to widen in the future.

Furthermore, across the partisan and ideological divide, those who favor a more robust US grand strategy and who emphasize the divide between democratic and non-democratic ideologies, tend to favor Israel more strongly, while those who favor a more defensive grand strategy, and who tend to discount ideologies except for nationalism, tend to prefer a more neutral or hostile approach to Israel. For those favoring a robust strategy, appeasement and the 1938 Munich Agreement serve as a key symbol, while for those who support a defensive approach, the Vietnam War and the 1968 Tet offensive play a major symbolic role; although their roots are also traced back to the supporters of isolationism in the 1930s. For younger people who prefer a defensive strategy, the 2003 Iraq War plays a similar symbolic role to that of Vietnam. Today, most Republicans tend to favor a more robust approach, while Democrats are divided but lean towards a more defensive approach. In this way, the partisan and ideological divide, is reinforced by divisions over American grand strategy.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the growing divide on how to handle the Arab-Israeli conflict reflects the growing divide over foreign policy in general. In 1997, majorities in both parties agreed that 'the best way to ensure peace is through military strength'. However, by 2009 an overwhelming majority of Republicans agreeing with peace through strength compared to only a minority of Democrats (table 7).<sup>57</sup> Overall, opinion about assertiveness regarding national security became *the* dominant political issue that distinguished Democrats from Republicans 2001-2010.<sup>58</sup>

**Table 7: Percentage agreeing with 'Peace thru Strength'<sup>59</sup>**

	<u>1997</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2009</u>
GOP	65	72	72	75
DEM	56	55	40	43
<i>Gap</i>	<i>+9</i>	<i>+17</i>	<i>+32</i>	<i>+32</i>

A second area of divergence, which has more direct ramifications for the Middle East, concerns attitudes towards Muslims. In the decade following 9/11 Americans as a whole steadily became more negative in their attitudes towards Muslims. Yet there was a clear partisan divide on the issue. Thus in 2010, Republicans held an unfavorable opinion of Muslims by a margin over more than 2:1; whereas a majority of Democrats had a favorable opinion of Muslim by a margin of

4:3.<sup>60</sup> From 2002-11 the percentage of Republicans who thought that Islam encourages violence more than other religions reached 59%, double the figure for Democrats (table 8).<sup>61</sup>

**Table 8: Percentage agreeing 'Islam encourages violence more than other religions'**<sup>62</sup>

	<u>2002</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2011</u>
GOP	33	57	61	<b>59</b>
<u>DEM</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>43</u>	<u>39</u>	<b>29</b>
<i>Gap</i>	<i>+11</i>	<i>+14</i>	<i>+22</i>	<i>+30</i>

### American Protestants

'To stand against Israel is to stand against God'<sup>63</sup> *Jerry Falwell*

'The occupation is... the root of evil acts committed against innocent people on both sides.'<sup>64</sup>

*Presbyterian General Assembly Divestment Resolution 2004*

Religion counts in American politics and Protestantism plays a particularly important role in American political culture in general, and with regard to Israel in particular. The central dividing line among American Protestants is between the mainline church and evangelicals. This divide has also become increasingly important on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Evangelicals provide the largest base of support for Israel and they have become mobilized to this affect. In contrast, the strongest base of anti-Israel activism in American society is in the mainline church, which has been at the forefront of the divestment campaign. Consequently, it is important to examine this divide in depth.

**Table 9: Percentage agreeing 'Protecting Israel should be a very important goal of US foreign policy', 2011 (Pew)**<sup>65</sup>

Mainline	34
Evangelicals	64

Of all ethnic and religious groups in the U.S. apart from Jews, evangelicals are the most sympathetic towards Israel, with the majority believing that the U.S. should take Israel's side in the conflict. In the political arena, it is the most theologically conservative who are the most active and supportive of Israel. For these Christian Zionists, Biblical prophecy concerning end

times undergirds their support for Israel.<sup>66</sup> However, their political approach is guided primarily by the Biblical injunction to 'favor Israel' rather than by an active attempt to induce Armageddon.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, while the leadership of pro-Israel evangelical organizations tend to be supportive of settlements and the Israeli far-right<sup>68</sup>, in practice they tend to go along with the Israeli government line; the key test case being their refusal to join the Israeli right in campaigning against the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. Aside from Christian Zionist activists, other evangelicals, while very supportive of Israel, take a more moderate position on the conflict, and a small minority on the Left favor the Palestinians. But these groups are far less politically active on the issue than conservative evangelical supporters of Israel.<sup>69</sup>

In terms of the focus of political activism on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the mainline has taken positions diametrically opposed to those of the evangelicals. The divestment campaign is driven by activists who sympathize primarily with the Palestinians and who believe that the onus is on Israel to make concessions. These activists are usually anti-Zionist, singling out the Jewish people as lacking a right to self-determination in contrast to the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular.<sup>70</sup> In this sense their position is a mirror image of that adopted by the Christian Zionists. This anti-Zionism is driven by a mixture of factors, notably liberation theology<sup>71</sup>. It focuses on siding with what are perceived as the victims of Western 'imperialism' and Israeli 'colonialism'. As the Holocaust became a distant memory and Israel became stronger, the case for supporting Israel as a victim has run out of steam. At the same time, support for the Palestinians is informed by the remnants of anti-Jewish theology<sup>72</sup> and by historic connections with Arab nationalism<sup>73</sup>. Still, many mainline clergy, who are dovish, are critical of settlements rather than Zionism per se. However, these voices have not played a central political role.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the theological and political divide between evangelical pro-Israel activists and mainline pro-Palestinian activists could not be much wider.

Yet, the difference between the mainline and evangelical publics is far narrower. A plurality of the mainline public actually sympathizes with Israel over the Palestinians.<sup>75</sup> So while there is an opinion gap between the evangelical and the mainline publics over Israel, there is actually an *opinion divide within the mainline over Israel* – between their political activists and the mainline public. Indeed, the percentage of mainliners who think the US should side with Israel

increased significantly in the first decade of the new millennium<sup>76</sup>, ironically at the very time when the mainline church adopted the diametrically opposed position in strident terms (table 10).

**Table 10: Sympathize with Israel over the Palestinians % (Pew)<sup>77</sup>**

	(Pre 9/11) 2001	2003	2006	2009	2012
General public	40	41	52	49	50
<b>Mainline</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>47</b>
Evangelicals	54	55	64	70	67

## American Jews

'We Are One' Campaign Slogan of the United Jewish Appeal, 1967

'There exists a distance and detachment between young American Jews and their Israeli cousins that...has not existed in the American Jewish community until now'.<sup>78</sup> *Israel in the Age of Eminem*, 2003

### *Attachment to Israel*

While a large majority of American Jews remain attached to Israel, there is a significant **attachment gap** between different over-lapping sub-groups. The Orthodox, the affiliated, the in-married, and older Jews are all more attached to Israel than the non-Orthodox, the inter-married, the unaffiliated and younger Jews respectively. The key factor here is that the first group retains a stronger sense of Jewish peoplehood than the latter group. To some extent, this attachment gap among American Jews mirrors the sympathy gap among Americans in general because the Orthodox, who represent the most conservative stream of Judaism and identify more with the Republicans, are the most attached to Israel, while more liberal streams are less attached, with secular Jews, like secular Americans in general, the least attached of all (table 11).

**Table 11: Emotional Attachment to Israel**

*National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 2000; Pew 2013<sup>79</sup>*

	<u>Very/Somewhat Attached</u>		<u>Very Attached</u>	
	2000	2013	2000	2013
<b>Orthodox</b>	92%	91%	68%	61%
<b>Conservative</b>	80%	88%	39%	47%
<b>Reform</b>	64%	66%	21%	24%
<b>'Just Jewish'</b>	55%	49%	24%	16%

Yet there is also a major difference between opinion trends among American Jews and American non-Jews regarding Israel. For while the American public's sympathy for Israel has increased since 9/11, the debate regarding American Jewish attachment, has been as to whether it is stable or whether American Jews are distancing from Israel. There does appear to be a trend whereby young non-Orthodox Jews are less attached to Israel than their forbearers.<sup>80</sup> Given that young non-Orthodox Jews are extremely liberal, this fits with the picture among American liberals in general where sympathy for Israel is relatively low and criticism of Israeli policies has been on the rise. However, the distancing trend has been nullified by the massive expansion of travel to Israel by young American Jews on the Birthright Israel program and, to a lesser extent, by the demographic growth of the Orthodox within the Jewish community, both of which have increased the number of young Jews with both a strong sense of Jewish peoplehood and attachment to Israel.<sup>81</sup>

In fact the most significant change is not level of Jewish attachment, but the *nature of attachment* to Israel. Young, non-Orthodox Jews are less deferential to Israel, less interested in defending Israel politically, and more willing to criticize Israeli government policies. This has important political implications for the way the organized Jewish community relates to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the peace process.

#### *American Jewry and the Peace Process: Divided We Stand?*

"AIPAC's great success derives from its capacity to define what it means to be pro-Israel"<sup>82</sup>

Liz Shrayner, AIPAC political director 1983-1994.

"AIPAC doesn't speak for the entire Jewish community."<sup>83</sup> Joseph Biden, September 2008

In the past, pro-Israel lobbying was based on the norm of 'consensual solidarity' – which meant operating on the basis of a communal consensus that revolved around supporting the elected government of Israel. However, a divide has opened up over the peace process. In place of 'consensual solidarity' a new norm of 'pluralistic solidarity' is emerging within the organized community, according to which various sub-groups adopt their own public political stance on the peace process on the basis of their ideology, rather than following a communal consensus or following Israeli government policy. The clearest expression of this is the emergence of the 'pro-

Israel pro-peace' J Street lobby as an alternative to the mainstream lobby - AIPAC. However, this shift is not confined to the Left. Right-wing Jewish organizations have also broken with the norm of consensual solidarity. To a certain extent this process has been influenced by developments in the Israeli debate, which became increasingly polarized in the wake of the 1982 Lebanon war and especially after the first intifada, as well as by greater trans-national ties and easier access to the Israeli media.<sup>84</sup> But it is also shaped by the same ideological, theological and partisan divisions that divide opinion to the conflict among the general public in America. Thus, whereas the organized community has become more polarized over the conflict, notably over settlements (table 12) such divisions as exist among the American Jewish public over the peace process have largely been nullified by the widespread belief that the Palestinians do not really want peace and that they are primarily responsible for the failure to achieve that objective (table 13).<sup>85</sup> In this, American Jewish opinion parallels mainstream public opinion in the U.S., as well as Israeli public opinion since 2001.

**Table 12: Settlements and Israeli Security, 2013, % (Pew)<sup>86</sup>**

	<i>Helps</i>	<i>Hurts</i>	<i>Makes No difference</i>
All Jews	17	<b>44</b>	29
Orthodox	<b>34</b>	16	39
Conservative	23	<b>36</b>	30
Reform	23	<b>50</b>	26
No denomination	13	<b>48</b>	31

**Table 13: 'The goal of the Arabs is not the return of occupied territories but rather the destruction of Israel.'**

	<u>% Agree</u>	<u>% Disagree</u>
<b>2001-10</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>1994-95</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>50</b>

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Data from American Jewish Committee annual surveys of American Jewish Opinion<sup>87</sup>

Regarding the political consequences of the shift to 'pluralistic solidarity' for pro-Israel lobbying, while pluralism may serve to keep more American Jews engaged with Israel, it also weakens the power of the mainstream pro-Israel lobby by eroding its ability to define what it means to be "pro-Israel" in the American political arena.



## Conclusion

Each of the groups discussed above has its own nuances, yet an over-arching pattern is clear. First, in each case the underlying orientation is sympathy for Israel over the Palestinians. Second, the gaps and divides within each group are mutually reinforcing. Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews are likely to hold conservative political views, prefer a hawkish strategy and support the Republicans. All of these groups are also more likely to believe that the U.S. should side with Israel and that the Palestinians are mainly to blame for the failure to achieve peace, while being equivocal about the creation of a Palestinian state and the construction of settlements. In contrast, non-Orthodox Jews and many mainline Christians are likely to hold liberal political views, prefer a dovish grand strategy and support the Democrats. All of these groups tend to support the creation of a Palestinian state and oppose settlements, as well as active American mediation to achieve these ends. The Left is more internally divided on Israel and the conflict than the Right, but the basic division holds.

This coalescence into a single divide is symptomatic of the fact that Americans have become increasingly ideologically polarized; a situation that increasingly finds expression in party politics as the Republican base has become more conservative and the Democratic base more liberal. Indeed, the values gap between Republicans and Democrats has become greater than the gender, age, race or class divide between the parties.<sup>88</sup> The fact that this values divide between the parties has grown across the numerous issues, especially foreign policy<sup>89</sup>, strongly suggests that the growing divide over policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict is part of this general process of partisan-ideological polarization in American politics.

What then are the political consequences of the Israel paradox: increased sympathy for Israel combined with increased division over how to handle the Arab-Israeli conflict?

On the one hand, various factors point in the direction of this pro-Israel orientation becoming stronger. 9/11 greatly enhanced the perception of Israel as a vital ally, while the demographic and political importance of Israel's strongest supporters, evangelicals and Orthodox Jews has been growing. In contrast, the mainline church, the largest base of vociferous opposition to Israel, is declining in size and political significance. In parallel, the membership of AIPAC has increased,

while the number of people attending AIPAC's annual policy conference has risen from about 500 in the early 1970s to 13,000 in 2013, including around half of the members of the Congress.

Yet there are several potential challenges to underlying sympathy for Israel. The first of these concerns American national identity itself. In his provocative book entitled, 'Who Are We?'<sup>90</sup> Samuel Huntington argues that the American Creed is under serious threat from globalization, multiculturalism and their adoption by American elites. Huntington worries that because of this process, the mass immigration of Hispanics and Asians will not be acculturated into the American Creed and that this would signal its decline. Given that support for Israel is closely tied to the Creed, if Huntington is correct, this could signal a decline in sympathy for Israel.<sup>91</sup> One might even speculate that Hispanics may be relatively attracted to the Postcolonialism, which has influence in Latin America in the form of dependency theory and the populist politics of Hugo Chavez who supports Iran while opposing Israel. This is politically significant because in 2003, Hispanics surpassed African-Americans as the largest minority group in the US. In 2010 they comprised about 15% of the total US population and by 2050 this figure is projected to double.<sup>92</sup> Among all the major ethno-religious groups in the US, sympathy for Israel was lowest among Catholic Hispanics, but so was sympathy for the Palestinians was also lowest among Catholic Hispanics. Moreover, sympathy for Israel has, at the least, held steady for Hispanic Catholics, and has increased if one includes the increasing number of Hispanic Protestants in the equation.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, while the growth of the religiously unaffiliated and Hispanics might lower the level of pro-Israel support among Democrats it is unlikely to reverse the pro-Israel orientation. A more significant challenge is posed by attitudes among young liberals.

Another social change of relevance is the decline in religious affiliation. In 1990 8.2% of Americans did not identify with any organized religious group, by 2012 this figure had more than doubled to about a fifth. This was mainly a result of generational replacement. America is also becoming less Christian. 86% of American adults identified as Christians in 1990, 73% in 2012. Perhaps even more significantly, for the first time, in 2012 fewer than half of Americans identified as Protestants.<sup>94</sup> This decline is of significance because one of the main foundations of support for Israel is a widespread belief in the Bible. In contrast, the margin by which the religiously unaffiliated prefer Israel over the Palestinians is the narrowest of any ethno-religious

group in America. Yet even the unaffiliated prefer Israel over the Palestinians by more than a margin of 2-1. Given the contrast with secular Europeans who are generally more pro-Palestinian, this suggests that the pro-Israel orientation remains deeply embedded in American political culture. It may wane somewhat, but will remain significant.<sup>95</sup>

What about changes in the Middle East itself? Sympathy for Israel has been reinforced by negative perceptions of Muslim and Arab countries opposed to Israel and the US. Will the Arab Spring, with its promise of democratization change attitudes? This is unlikely because the benefactors of the Arab Spring appear to be Islamists rather than secular democrats and this only serves to reinforce the sense of otherness Americans feel towards Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East. Finally, changes within Israel might cause it to lose its status as the preferred party. On numerous occasions the level of support for Israel among the general public and American Jews has fallen in response to specific actions that were viewed as inconsistent with democratic values or a genuine commitment to peace. Examples include the dip in support for Israel following the Sabra and Shatilla massacre in 1982 and the outbreak of the first Intifada in December 1987. However, opinion bounced back quickly, so such events in the future would be unlikely to yield a sustained realignment among the general public. However, they may well have a far more significant impact on Democrats, liberals, and young non-Orthodox Jews.

This raises the key political issue at the heart of the Israel paradox, namely whether higher levels of sympathy necessarily translate into higher levels of political support. Regarding Israeli security, the answer is yes. In the wake of 9/11, the rise of Hamas and Hezbollah, and the growing threat of a nuclear Iran, Israel has come to be viewed as one of America's closest allies. From this perspective, a victory for Israel against these enemies is a victory for the US and a defeat for Israel would be a defeat for the US. This fusing of American and Israeli security in the public mind means that for the American public, Presidential support for Israeli security serves as a kind of litmus test of Presidential credibility on American security itself<sup>96</sup>.

However, the overwhelming bulk of this growth in support for Israel is on the Right side of the political spectrum. This means that a Republican administration is more likely to lean towards Israel and less likely to pressure Israel in the context of the peace process than a Democratic administration. On the other side, while Democrats and liberal are very unlikely to follow their

European counterparts and become pro-Palestinian, they are increasingly critical of Israeli policies and their practical support for Israel is increasingly influenced by Israel's willingness to advance the peace process. Those who hold these positions most vociferously are likely to become increasingly important within the Democratic Party in the future. Moreover, whatever their internal divisions, liberals and Democrats share a strong commitment to a two state solution and clear opposition to the expansion of Israeli settlements and consequently an Israeli government which is perceived to be acting contrary to these positions will face increasing problems among Democrats. Orthodox Jews may be the fastest growing denomination, but the overwhelming majority of American Jews are not Orthodox, they are less attached to Israel, less hawkish on the peace process and continue to be overwhelmingly supportive of the Democratic Party come what may. Israel still gets the benefit of the doubt from Democrats and especially American Jews, given their negative perceptions regarding the approach of Israel's neighbors to both Israel and the U.S. These remain significant factors, but beneath the surface their predisposition to instinctively support Israel on the peace process is eroding and in any case, their stance does not constitute a blank check.

To sum up, identification with Israel remains deeply embedded in American political culture. Widespread sympathy for Israel and the bipartisan norm of a U.S. commitment to Israeli security remain strong. However, different interpretations of how to practically implement that norm as regards the peace process are coalescing along partisan and ideological lines. This has important political ramifications for Israel, because when the Democrats are in power, the Israeli government is likely to face an administration more inclined to be 'even-handed' and a pro-Israel community that is more divided and thus less potent when it comes to opposing pressure on Israel on the divisive issue of settlements. This has already been apparent during the Obama administration. It is an illusion for an Israeli government to think that, over time; it can retain bipartisan support in the US and at the same time keep the settlers happy.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws heavily on key themes in my forthcoming book, *The Arab-Israeli conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Palm Beach, FL, December 27, 1962, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII: Near East 1962-1963* (Washington: GPO, 1995), pp. 276-283.

<sup>3</sup> On Realism see William Wohlforth, "Realism and Foreign Policy," in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne, eds., *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 32–47.

<sup>4</sup> A. F. K. Organski, *The \$36 Billion Bargain: Strategy and Politics in U.S. Assistance to Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 6; Peter Feaver, "What Is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It?" *Shadow Government* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2009, [http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/08/what\\_is\\_grand\\_strategy\\_and\\_why\\_do\\_we\\_need\\_it](http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/08/what_is_grand_strategy_and_why_do_we_need_it).

<sup>6</sup> One particularly sophisticated work integrates subjective elements into both the domestic politics paradigm and the national interest paradigm, Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); George Ball and Douglas Ball, *The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992). For a more sober analysis of the pro-Israel lobby, see David Howard Goldberg, *Foreign Policy and Ethnic Interest Groups: American and Canadian Jews Lobby for Israel* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990); Dan Fleshler, *Transforming America's Israel Lobby: The Limits of Its Power and the Potential for Change* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and the Politics in the United States*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 152.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Golden, *Quiet Diplomat* (New York: Herzl Press, 1992) p. 424.

<sup>12</sup> Remarks by President Obama in Arrival Ceremony Ben Gurion International Airport Tel Aviv, Israel March 19, 2013 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/19/remarks-president-obama-arrival-ceremony>

<sup>13</sup> Anatol Lieven, *America, Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Henry Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

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<sup>30</sup> 'Modest Backing For Israel in Gaza Crisis' *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, January 13, 2009 <http://people-press.org:80/report/482/israel-hamas-conflict>.

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<sup>49</sup> Brzezinski and Scowcroft, *America and the World* pp. 19, 80-92; Patrick J. Buchanan, 'The Prisoner of Sharon' April 5, 2002

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<sup>51</sup> Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, *Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East* (New York: Viking, 2009).

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<sup>55</sup> Amnon Cavari, forthcoming.

<sup>56</sup> Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture*, chapters 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> 'Independents Take Center Stage in Obama Era: Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2009', *Pew Research Center* May 21, 2009 <http://www.people-press.org/2009/05/21/section-6-foreign-policy-and-global-engagement/>

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