

# Is Israel in danger of losing its U.S. support base?<sup>1</sup>

By Yossi Alpher

## ■ Executive summary

U.S. Jewish support for Israel, like U.S. public support in general, remains steady even as a number of U.S. Jewish commentators speculate on its decline. While there are significant changes in the way certain U.S. Jewish groups view Israel, the really significant factor that could reduce U.S. support in the medium term is the rapid expansion of non-Jewish demographics like blacks and Hispanics who are not committed to Israel and whose views affect the Republican-Democratic balance.

U.S. Jewish leaders are aware of these dynamics and are investing considerable effort in countering them. The U.S. Jewish leadership appears likely to support any serious Israeli peace effort regardless of changes in the composition of the U.S. Jewish community.

Beyond these public opinion factors, a host of additional developments can influence U.S. support for Israel, ranging from attitudes in the U.S. security community to developments in Israel itself.

## Background

I have long looked upon the relationship between the state of Israel, on the one hand, and the U.S. Jewish community and the U.S. itself, on the other, as a kind of strategic triangle. Israel's U.S. support base, which is generally considered vital for its security, consists of both the U.S. government and the U.S. Jewish community. The latter is roughly equivalent in size to Israel's Jewish population and together the two make up over 80% of all Jews worldwide.

The Israeli-U.S. Jewish relationship is as old as Zionism itself. U.S. Jewish influence and money helped support the Zionist movement from the early twentieth century. In 1948 U.S. Jewish leaders successfully petitioned U.S. president Harry Truman to recognise the nascent Jewish state. Israeli-U.S. ties, as a strategic relationship central to Israel's security, began roughly after the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel's lightning victory persuaded Washington to

view Israel as a strategic asset in combating Soviet and radical Arab influence in the Middle East. Israel, for its part, has always recognised a need for great-power support. Since 1967 U.S. Jewish advocacy organisations, led by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), have been particularly effective in maintaining the continuity of this support.

Over recent decades both Israeli and U.S. Jewish institutions and intellectuals have periodically questioned the long-term vitality of U.S. and U.S. Jewish support. During my years representing the American Jewish Committee in Israel and the Middle East (1995-2000) I experienced the concern over this issue firsthand. The "Birthright" programme that offers every Diaspora Jewish youth a free ten-day trip to Israel was founded 19 years ago at the initiative of Yossi Beilin precisely in order to ensure ongoing U.S. Jewish support for Israel. Thus the recent wave of concern

<sup>1</sup> These reflections are based on research, conversations with experts and personal experience.

over the steadfastness of that support, best recognised in Peter Beinart's *The Crisis of Zionism*, is not unusual.

Here a caveat is in order regarding the overall centrality of U.S. Jewish support in the context of the peace process – the primary Israel-related issue of interest to the international community. If the stakes are high enough and/or if the Israeli prime minister is determined enough, U.S. administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have proven capable of acting forthrightly, irrespective of the perception of negative U.S. Jewish influence. Recall Clinton and Barak at Camp David, or Bush and Olmert during the 2008 Annapolis process. These are the two most serious attempts to date to reach an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement, and both were launched despite the likelihood that many Israelis and U.S. Jews would have difficulty supporting them.

Nonetheless, in most instances and contexts – particularly regarding security – U.S. public support for Israel is indeed crucial. Over the past month my own investigation of the issue took the form of reading books like Beinart's, interviewing leading experts and examining polling figures. I quickly set aside the polling figures because, as J.J. Goldberg – former editor-in-chief of *The Forward*, the leading U.S. Jewish weekly – explained to me, they are “all over the map”. Numerous polls can be mustered to demonstrate ongoing U.S. Jewish and U.S. non-Jewish support for Israel. Other polls readily reveal presumed cracks in the façade of support. Indeed, it is striking that most U.S. Jews have never visited Israel and that roughly half are not affiliated to any Jewish organisation. Most polls show that issues involving Israel are actually not high on the agenda of most U.S. Jews.

Put differently by Beilin in a conversation, the issue of U.S. and U.S. Jewish support for Israel is more one of “perceptions” than of hard figures. In the perception of the current U.S. president, Israel enjoys overwhelming U.S. Jewish backing. So strong is this perception that during his March 2013 visit to Israel and Palestine President Obama told an audience of young Palestinians near Ramallah that if they want to influence U.S. positions they should do what Israel does with five million U.S. Jews.

### **Impact of possible changes in support patterns**

Invoking the strategic triangle approach, my own inquiry asked two questions. Firstly, is U.S. Jewish support for Israel waning in any significant way? Secondly, is U.S. support in general declining? The short-term answer I came up with to both questions is “no”. The medium-term (10-20 years) answer to the first question is still in the negative; but the longer-term answer to the second question is a significant “very possibly”.

To understand these trends, we must first look at the principal components at the voting and lobbying level of U.S. support for Israel, and ask what demographic and other changes could affect them.

Beinart makes an effective case that the young generation of liberal, secularised U.S. Jews is increasingly unhappy with key features of Israel's political behaviour such as apartheid aspects of the West Bank occupation, the absence of a serious peace effort, and McCarthy-like legislative initiatives by the Knesset (parliament) featuring loyalty oaths and the like. Goldberg adds that in an era of low anti-Semitism there is a reduction in the importance of Jewish identity to the non-religious individual in the U.S., and attachment to Israel is a natural outgrowth of Jewish identity.

Yet there is no current evidence that this trend impacts overall U.S. Jewish support for Israel or is reflected, say, in attitudes toward Israel in Congress. Even the medium-term prospect that liberal U.S. Jews, as influential older adults, will maintain their critical posture seems to be balanced out by growth within the U.S. Orthodox community, which, as Beinart acknowledges, increasingly functions as the engine of U.S. Jewish support for Israel despite its minority status alongside the U.S. Jewish Reform and Conservative movements. Note that Jewish liberals vote overwhelmingly Democrat, while Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jewish Americans tend to vote Republican. One way or another, most U.S. Jewish leaders assert that the AIPAC's key influence in Congress has, if anything, grown in recent years.

At least at this juncture it appears that the disaffection spotlighted by Beinart is a cause for anguish among a specific sector of U.S. Jews who mourn the loss of the Israel they treasured because it corresponded with their value system, but that it need not concern those dedicated to ensuring overall U.S. support for Israel. Note, in this context, the Israeli parallel: the liberal Israeli left has largely been marginalised by the settler-dominated right wing and by centrists who are relatively indifferent to the issues prioritised by the left/liberals.

The largest pro-Israel U.S. interest group in terms of numbers is not the Jewish community, but portions of the Evangelical or faith community, estimated at some 70 million strong. Evangelicals tend to vote Republican, thereby more than making up for the broad absence of Jewish support for that party regarding Israel (nearly 80% of U.S. Jews vote Democrat and raise significant financial contributions to that party's election campaigns). But as Stephen Simon, executive director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' U.S. office in Washington, DC pointed out to me, there is some potential among the young generation of U.S. Evangelicals to respond to Israel's increasingly negative profile with regard to the occupation and reactionary legislation much as do the U.S.'s young liberal Jews, tracked by Beinart, i.e. by losing interest in Israel or even turning against it, thereby reducing medium-term hardline Evangelical support for the country.

Simon also points out the difficulty in projecting the effect of long-term structural changes in both the Israeli and U.S.

Jewish populations. With the growth in Israel of the ultra-Orthodox and Russian Jewish communities, more and more Israeli spokespersons will in the years ahead address the U.S. public in unfamiliar accents (compared to Netanyahu and many of his advisers!) and even unfamiliar dress, thereby reducing their influence. In parallel, the non-Orthodox U.S. Jewish community at large may become less vocal regarding Israel as a consequence of widespread intermarriage and a decline in Jewish “affiliation”.

The Republicans are in any case expected to lose more and more elections in the years ahead because of the dramatic expansion of the Hispanic, Asian and black portions of the U.S. population and their overwhelming traditional preference as minorities for the Democrats. Despite the energetic efforts of U.S. Jewish advocacy organisations to turn them into supporters of Israel, these sectors of the U.S. population evince little overall interest. In a conversation with me, Beinart argued that this dynamic could only become more negative: as Orthodox influence grows and liberal influence declines in these Jewish advocacy organisations, their traditional agenda of supporting minority and civil rights in the U.S. will in any case suffer, since these issues are of less importance to Orthodox Jews.

Then there is the question of the possible influence of the U.S. security community. Occasionally, as in General David Petraeus’s Senate testimony in 2010, U.S. security veterans openly argue that Israel is jeopardising U.S. security interests in the Middle East. Some commentators on U.S. security issues like Waltz and Mearsheimer make similar claims, often focusing on the argument that Israeli hawks helped push the George W. Bush administration into invading Iraq in 2003.

There are few indications that these contentions have gained broad traction among U.S. security decision-makers and congressional legislators. Indeed, much of the U.S. mainstream still perceives the Muslim world as a hostile entity and, accordingly, views Israel as a near-automatic ally. Still, events in the Middle East could conceivably reinforce a more suspicious view of Israel in the years to come, as they could boost support in the U.S. for the anti-Israel BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) campaign – which thus far remains at a low profile compared to Europe.

## Conclusion

All told, we cannot ignore the serious possibility of a decline in U.S. political support for Israel within a decade or two. The U.S.’s changing demographic (a “majority of minorities”) will ensure the ongoing election of Democrats. Liberal, non-affiliated and non-Orthodox Jews, who constitute a majority of the U.S.’s Jews and tend to vote Democrat, will be less inclined overall to support Israel enthusiastically, while blacks, Asians and Hispanics will be indifferent, if not worse (a number of surveys show a dangerous potential for anti-Semitism among U.S. blacks

and Hispanics). On the Republican, or minority side of the political spectrum, Orthodox Jewish and Evangelical support for Israel will remain relatively steady. Overall, support for Israel on the part of a Democratic president and Congress could decline, particularly if the current trend of U.S. disengagement from an active superpower role in Middle Eastern affairs continues.

The many pro-Israel actors in U.S. politics and civil society are perfectly aware of these trends. They have time to prepare to counter them and undoubtedly will do so with their usual efficiency. For the time being, they can fall back on broad (non-Jewish) public support that derives from Americans’ sense of where their values lie. Martin Raffel, senior vice-president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an organisation that has its finger on the grassroots Jewish pulse, summed it up as follows: “There is no imminent fundamental change in American Jewish support, but long-term trends could make a difference 10-20 years from now.” Note in this context the possible ramifications of a more proximate event: 50 years of Israel’s West Bank occupation, to be marked in June 2017.

Meanwhile, Israel’s own behaviour could be critical. An even partially successful peace process or the perception of a truly existential threat to the Jewish state would make it far easier and more urgent for U.S. Jewish advocacy and lobbying groups to rally U.S. support over the medium term. In contrast, ongoing Israeli-Palestinian tension and an increase in legislation inside Israel that seemingly reflects extremism and intolerance could alienate more Americans.

## Epilogue: the ultimate relevancy of U.S. Jewish opinion to peace issues

Earlier, we noted that determined U.S. and Israeli leaders could act on peace process issues despite anticipated negative public opinion. By the same token, U.S. Jewish opinion is also highly sensitive to the will of a determined Israeli leader. In July 2000 I was sent as a special adviser of Prime Minister Ehud Barak to rally the support of the U.S. Jewish leadership for Barak’s position at the Camp David talks. Unlike most of his predecessors and successors, Barak had not devoted significant energies to cultivating U.S. Jewish support, and his readiness to offer far-reaching concessions to the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s Yasser Arafat was, to say the least, controversial among U.S. Jews (like their Israeli counterparts; by this time, Barak was clinging to power without a parliamentary majority).

I recall in particular a meeting with the leadership of the Los Angeles Jewish community, the second largest in the U.S. It was clear that Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews – almost certainly supporters of the Israeli right – were prominent in the audience. When I finished presenting Barak’s ideas I appealed to the gathering in the prime minister’s name to openly (through media ads, communi-

qués and the like) express its support. After a moment of silence, one of the Orthodox leaders stood up and sadly addressed his colleagues: "We knew this day would come. Much as it hurts, we have no alternative but to support the elected leader of Israel." No one dissented.

Earlier this month I asked the U.S. Jewish experts I spoke to whether in 15 years this scenario would play out in the same way. Most thought so. ■

## ■ THE AUTHOR

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