

Jews and the Presidency, abroad: the Democrats and Israel

Instructor: Tevi Troy

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Commentary

DECEMBER 2015 ISRAEL

The Democratic Divorce from Israel

The Democratic Party was once the anchor of the pro-Israel community. Not any more.

by **Jonathan S. Tobin**

President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran survived a congressional challenge in September 2015, despite its extreme unpopularity with the American people. With very few exceptions, Democrats in the House and Senate rallied to the president's side and (in the case of the Senate) refused to allow even a token vote to be cast in opposition. This was a turning point, for the deal formally recognizes the eventual right of Iran to become a nuclear power—a right that places Israel in profound existential jeopardy. Supporters of Israel will continue to claim that the Jewish state is a bipartisan cause in the United States, but as the Iran vote has made painfully clear, this assertion has become more hope than reality. When it came to the most important vote for Israel in a generation, Republicans in both the House and the Senate unanimously opposed the agreement, while an overwhelming majority of Democrats backed it.

Though many Democratic activists and voters remain ardent backers of Israel, those making up the liberal base of the party are not. On issues such as Iran and the conflict with the Palestinians, Democrats are, at best, split, with their left wing increasingly speaking in open opposition to the Zionist cause. More to the point, much of the Democratic Party has followed President Obama's lead in seeking to

redefine what it means to be pro-Israel. They claim they are acting out of “tough love” rather than disdain, and that they are acting in Israel’s best interests in contravention of the views of Israel’s own lively and disputatious electorate. Those claims ring increasingly hollow, but until now they have proved sufficient for a strong majority of Jewish voters and a great many financial backers of Jewish origin in the Democratic Party. It seems that while Republicans actually compete with one another to demonstrate their pro-Israel bona fides, Democrats no longer have to bother.

This is remarkable because only a few decades ago, the situation was reversed. In the early years of Israel’s existence as a state, it was the Democrats who were assumed to be reliable supporters of the Jewish state and Republicans who were more likely to be indifferent or hostile. The story of this reversal is in part about the gradual ideological transformation of the GOP. But the changes within the Democratic Party were also decades in the making. They are a reflection of the way the party’s attitude toward foreign policy has come to be dominated by its left wing—which never had much patience for protecting U.S. interests in the Middle East or sympathy for Israel. The ascent of the left during the Obama administration has inevitably dragged the Democrats away from Israel.

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s Michael Oren, Israel’s former ambassador to the United States, wrote in his seminal book *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present*, American support for Zionism goes back to the early years of the republic. Sympathy for the idea of a renewed commonwealth in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people has deep roots in American religious thought. When modern Zionism put that quest back on the international agenda in the early 20th century, there was negligible opposition to it among America’s political class. But Zionism did not become a serious political issue until the aftermath of the Second World War and the campaign for partition of the British protectorate, then called the Mandate for Palestine, into Jewish and Arab states. The heart of that battle was

the effort to convince President Harry Truman to endorse partition when it came to a vote in the United Nations. Despite the active opposition of Secretary of State George Marshall and the State Department, Truman first ordered the U.S. delegates to vote for partition and then quickly granted recognition to Israel after it declared its independence on May 15, 1948.

In the view of Zionism's American opponents, especially Marshall, this seemed to be a function of Democratic Party politics rather than sympathy for Holocaust victims or respect for Jewish rights. Though Truman's aide Clark Clifford had told the president the key to gaining the Jewish vote for his reelection in 1948 was support for liberal policies, there seems little doubt that Truman believed his party would benefit if it were identified with the newborn State of Israel. Truman's efforts for Israel during its initial moment of peril—as five Arab states invaded in its War for Independence—were limited to the moral support his recognition provided. Still, the move was seen as aiding Truman's upset victory that year.

Truman's act would solidify the notion that the Democratic Party was more Zionist than was the Republican Party. The Eisenhower administration's conduct also strengthened the notion that only Democrats could be relied upon to back Israel. Eisenhower offered little support in the 1950s as Israel struggled to deal with terror campaigns emanating from Egyptian-occupied Gaza. When Israel invaded the Sinai in 1956 in cooperation with an Anglo-French effort to seize control of the Suez Canal, an enraged Ike blasted the Israelis and eventually forced them to evacuate the Sinai.

By contrast, most Democrats during that era seemed happy to embrace Truman's legacy by expressing sympathy for Israel. Jewish voters were overwhelmingly Democratic. And with a few conspicuous exceptions, such as New York's Jacob Javits, most of the Jews elected to the House and Senate in the postwar era were Democrats as well.

John F. Kennedy was the first American president to meet with an Israeli prime minister and became the first to sell arms to the Jewish state. But a U.S.-Israel relationship did not really take off until Lyndon Johnson succeeded him. Johnson's "green light" to Israel to defend itself against Arab aggression just prior to the outbreak of the 1967 war was a critical moment in the development of the alliance between the two countries. It was only after Israel had triumphed in that war and gained the strategic depth it needed to be less vulnerable to annihilation that American leaders began to think of Israel as an asset to the West in the Cold War, not a mere irritant to relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

But the affinity of Democrats for Israel was more than a function of presidential whim. As the United States began to extend both economic and military aid to Israel in this era, the debate over support for the Jewish state increasingly revolved around the annual battle in Congress about foreign-aid allocations. Most Democrats were reliable supporters of the foreign-aid package while many Republicans were unsympathetic to the notion of sending taxpayer dollars abroad. But the Democratic Party was beginning to change. It split over support for the Vietnam War, a conflict that gave impetus to the growth of a New Left that was doctrinally sympathetic to Israel's Arab enemies. While that division didn't initially affect opinion about Israel, the battle over Cold War strategies did unravel the assumption that Democrats would always be the internationalist party. That became clear after antiwar sentiment propelled George McGovern, a liberal stalwart with an ambivalent attitude toward Israel, to the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination. McGovern's disastrous defeat might have demonstrated the danger to Democrats of veering that far to the left, and indeed, McGovernism was opposed by a more centrist faction in the party during the 1970s. Led by Washington Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, these Democrats were the nation's most ardent advocates of the Jewish state as well as allies of the Jewish community in its effort to free the imprisoned Jews of the Soviet Union.

The first serious indication of trouble between Israel and the Democrats arose during the Jimmy Carter administration from 1977 to 1981. Carter's first intervention came in the early months of his term, when he made a misguided attempt to sponsor a Middle



Carter's thinly disguised disenchantment with Israel led to a record-low Jewish vote for a Democratic presidential candidate when he ran for re-election in 1980—and Carter's unyielding bitterness about that was a key motivation for his emergence as an unmistakably anti-Israel voice in the decades following his humiliating defeat.

East summit with the Soviet Union. That ludicrous plan may have unintentionally spurred Egypt's Anwar Sadat to go to Jerusalem that year and start the peace process with Israel that would end in a treaty Carter helped broker—the Camp David accords, signed in 1978.

Yet Carter's four years in office featured near-constant strife with Israel and the Likud government led by Menachem Begin, who took office

in 1977. It was the first rightist government Israelis had elected in the state's 29-year history. Though Begin's supposed intransigence was blamed for the trouble—an intransigence belied by the accords that were Carter's only foreign-policy success—the real issue was Carter's sub-rosa hostility toward Israel, a factor that would not be fully understood until he left office.

In 1979, UN ambassador Andrew Young took it upon himself to meet secretly with representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization, then correctly designated as a terrorist group. The strength of pro-Israel sentiment among Democrats was such that Carter faced enormous pressure to fire Young, who later resigned at Carter's request. But the incident became a flashpoint, as black leaders hotly protested Young's departure in an intra-party split that foreshadowed future problems for Israel with left-wing Democrats.

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Yet while Ronald Reagan, the recipient of the Jewish votes Carter lost, was perceived as a friend of Israel, there was a controversy in the early years of his administration that illustrated how the two parties had not yet completely traded positions. Reagan's decision in 1981 to sell AWACS radar planes to Saudi Arabia was opposed by Israel because it feared the oil kingdom would use the planes to aid Arab armies in a future war. The sale went through despite efforts by pro-Israel Democrats to stop it.

A year later came what appears in retrospect to have been a watershed moment for Israel and American liberals. The 1982 invasion of Lebanon was designed to remove the PLO state-within-a-state on Israel's northern border—but the effort led to a sea change in the American media's coverage of Israel. It was no longer portrayed as a lone democratic nation victimized by a plethora of hostile states but as an invading aggressor. This change had an enormous impact on the way American liberals, including many liberal Jews, viewed Israel.

Many Americans had fallen in love with a pioneer Israel governed by the socialist Labour Party and represented by the romance of the agricultural and social collective known as the kibbutz. For liberal Democrats, the full-throated nationalism of Begin's Likud Party proved disquieting, as Likud's voting base was made up not of Jews of European origin like them but of Sephardic Jews to whom they felt little connection. Though his policies were little different from those of his Labour predecessors when it came to security issues, Begin was demonized in the press and disdained by Jewish liberals following the lead of disgusted Ashkenazi Israelis astonished to find themselves out of power for the first time.

Begin had retired by the time the first Palestinian intifada broke out in 1987. By this point, media depictions of Israel as an imperial force dominating a captive populace could no longer be blamed exclusively on Likud. The country was then led by a coalition government, and the task of putting it down fell to none other than the former Labour prime minister and future peace-process martyr Yitzhak Rabin, who oversaw a response he himself called "might, power, and beatings." The

Palestinian attempt to pose as the underdog in the conflict with Israel was assisted by a liberal mainstream media that viewed the Palestinians as the new David to Israel's Goliath.



Arafat responded to Camp David by launching the terror war known as the Second Intifada. Nonetheless, many Democrats clung to the idea that the Jewish state had not taken enough risks for peace. The peace process itself had ironically bolstered the fallacious notion that Israel was the possessor of stolen goods rather than the administrator of disputed territories to which it also had rights.

But as the intifada continued, any concerns that liberals might be abandoning their support for Israel were entirely overshadowed by concerns about the first President George Bush. Bush's Secretary of State James Baker was as openly hostile to Israel as Carter had been. At one point, Bush refused to give Israel loan guarantees to build housing for Russian Jews because of a dispute over West Bank settlements. Democrats railed against Bush's treatment of Israel and reaped the benefits in 1992 when Jewish support

for Bush in his failed reelection bid reached a modern low of 11 percent.

Bush's replacement by Bill Clinton seemed to further solidify the Democratic Party's standing as the preeminent pro-Israel party. Clinton's affection for the Jewish state was genuine, and his hosting of the 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO leader Yasir Arafat on the White House Lawn earned him applause from most of the pro-Israel community.

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y the time of the Clinton administration, moreover, the patron-client relationship between the two countries had been transformed into a strategic alliance. Security cooperation had begun in earnest during the Reagan administration and was

continued by his successors. The annual battles over the foreign-aid package that Israel depended on to maintain its military edge over its enemies had largely subsided, since most Republicans had become fervent supporters of the alliance.

Soon enough, the “peace process” created new problems for Israel among Democrats. With the Oslo process already failing in 1996, Israelis again turned to the right and elected Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister. Netanyahu proved willing to continue negotiating with the Palestinians in spite of their violations of the accords. But the liberal disaffection with him was unmistakable, and it fed off the idea that the dark face of Israel had been unmasked at the moment that Yigal Amir assassinated Yitzhak Rabin during a pro-Oslo rally in 1995.

But when Netanyahu was defeated in 1999 and replaced by Labor’s Ehud Barak, critics of Israel were not satisfied. Barak’s unilateral withdrawal from the security zone Israel had set up in Lebanon after the 1982 war garnered him little credit. Nor were liberals ready to draw hard conclusions about the Palestinians once the Camp David summit, hosted by Clinton in 2000, fell apart due to Yasir Arafat’s refusal of Barak’s offer of a Palestinian state encompassing almost all of the West Bank, Gaza, and even a share of Jerusalem. “I’m a failure, and you made me one,” Bill Clinton told Arafat angrily; but to the left, the failure would always be Israel’s.

Arafat responded to Camp David by launching the terror war known as the Second Intifada, which should at least have demonstrated to all honest observers that the Palestinians were more interested in pursuing their quixotic goal of eliminating Israel than in a two-state solution. Nonetheless, many Democrats clung to the idea that the Jewish state had not taken enough risks for peace. The peace process itself had ironically bolstered the fallacious notion that Israel was the possessor of stolen goods rather than the administrator of disputed territories to which it also had rights. In the view of a growing number of liberals, the rationale for Israel’s existence depended on giving up this land no matter the consequences for its security.

Israelis across the political spectrum lost faith in the peace process owing to both the Second Intifada and the conversion of Gaza into a terror state after Ariel Sharon withdrew every settler, soldier, and settlement in 2005. But their concerns had no impact on many Democrats who still claimed to be friends of Israel.

Just as important, Democratic revulsion against the Iraq War derailed the career of the man who was considered the last of the dwindling Scoop Jackson Democrats. Connecticut Senator Joseph I. Lieberman was celebrated by his party when he was Al Gore's running mate in 2000 and came within a few hanging chads of being the first Jewish vice president. But his hawkish foreign policy forced him out of the Democratic Party and eventually the Senate. The truth that few pro-Israel Democrats wished to acknowledge was that a party that had no room for Lieberman because of his belief that the U.S. could not abandon the Middle East was not vitally concerned with Israel's security.

By the time of Barack Obama's election as president in 2008, the leader of the Democrats was a man who made no bones about representing himself as someone who was hostile to Israel's Likud Party even as he claimed unconvincingly to be sympathetic to the country itself. And unlike his recent predecessors, Obama believed that creating more "daylight" between Israel and the United States was the key to the peace process. His administration sought both to reach out to the Muslim world and to dissociate itself from the policies of George W. Bush, which were, Obama believed, too friendly to Israel. He made good on the promise of putting more daylight between the nations by picking regular fights with Netanyahu (who had been elected prime minister again in 2009). Obama broke new ground by seeking to label 40-year-old Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem as illegal settlements that were as illegitimate as the most remote West Bank hilltop outpost.

Though he continued funding the security alliance between the two nations, Obama proved himself to be, as veteran State Department peace processor Aaron David Miller noted, a man who "isn't in love with the idea of Israel."

But unlike presidents who had picked fights with Israel before, Obama seemed able to do so without getting significant pushback from his own party. He could consistently rely on the backing of most Jewish Democrats in his constant quarrels with the Netanyahu government.

Obama dialed back his criticism of Israel during his 2012 re-election campaign. By this point, the growing nuclear threat from Iran had become the pro-Israel community's main concern. As a result, Obama ratcheted up his rhetoric about Iran's needing to end its nuclear program. But soon after his victory over Mitt Romney, he reversed course and pressured Israel during a new round of talks with the Palestinians. The Palestinians soon blew up the negotiations; Obama blamed Israel again. Meanwhile, secret talks with Iran also brought major U.S. concessions that heightened the security risks to Israel.

As the debate about a final deal with Iran began, some elements of the Democratic Party remained skeptical of negotiations that seemed aimed more at securing a new *détente* with Tehran than eliminating the nuclear threat. But as the talks headed to a conclusion that brought the Iranians recognition for their nuclear program and the end of sanctions, Obama began getting tough with both Israeli critics of his policy and Democrats who were stepping out of line.

This struggle proved to be the culmination of the Democratic Party's long march away from Israel. In early 2015, opponents of a nuclear Iran thought they could still count on overwhelming support from both Republicans and Democrats for an effort to head off a bad deal. Bipartisan majorities had backed toughened sanctions on Iran over the president's objection before, and there was hope that a new sanctions bill could pass as well. But at this point, Obama started to treat improved relations with Iran, and a consequent cooling of ties with Israel, as his foreign-policy priority.

The deal that gives Iran two paths to a bomb (one by cheating on its easily evaded inspection regime and the other by patiently waiting for it to expire within a decade) was initially announced in April. Most Democrats had previously

expressed opposition to such an agreement, but it was soon evident they were not prepared to oppose Obama. Instead of Obama's finding himself isolated when opposed by AIPAC and the pro-Israel community, it was Democrats such as New Jersey Senator Robert Menendez—conveniently indicted by the Justice Department on a corruption charge just before the deal was finalized—who were marginalized. New York Senator Charles Schumer, the sole leading Democrat who did publicly oppose the deal, was so intimidated by the White House and the loud chorus of left-wing critics that he promised not to lobby his colleagues on the issue.

The Iran-deal vote must be understood in the context of a Democratic Party whose base is now comfortable explicitly articulating its opposition to the Jewish state. At the 2012 Democratic National Convention, pro-Israel motions were omitted from the party platform. Democratic leaders sought to correct the mistake during the proceedings and were visibly shocked when a large majority of those responding to a voice vote on pro-Israel measures expressed their opposition. The convention chair ignored the voice vote and announced that the measures had passed, but there was no mistaking what had happened.

Changes in American Jewish life are having an additional impact on the decline of pro-Israel Democrats. The demographic trends among non-Orthodox American Jewry highlighted by the 2013 Pew Survey also point to marked decline in a sense of Jewish peoplehood and pro-Israel sentiment among a group that comprises disproportionately loyal Democratic voters and donors. Support for Israel has always transcended the influence of Jewish voters; it is an enduring facet of American life. But as that segment of voters became less connected to Jewish identity, so, too, the influence of the pro-Israel community declined among Democrats. Jewish liberals were never single-issue voters obsessed with Israel. But as Israel's image was battered by wars and the disdain of Obama, it slipped even lower on their list of priorities.

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Democratic Party that has been largely captured by the left is a party that will be increasingly disdainful of Israel. Though Democrats had been moving in this direction for decades, in 2015, a critical mass of them in Congress and around the country was not willing to challenge the head of their party on an issue that put Israel's interests and security at stake. Nor is it likely that they would do so if in the coming year the administration decided to abandon Israel at the United Nations, even as a wave of Palestinian terror spreads. In Barack Obama's Democratic Party, pro-Israel voices have been marginalized.

That marginalization might not be permanent. The next generation of Democrats might come to understand that Obama's foreign policy—a set of actions that have led to the rise of ISIS, the growing strength of Iran, and “daylight” between the United States and Israel—has made this country and the world more unstable and more dangerous. In American politics, the centrifugal pull of the center ultimately shifts both parties back to moderation on key issues. That dynamic is the last best hope we have for a pathway back to support for Israel on the part of a Democratic Party that has lost its way.

Jonathan S. Tobin is editor-in-chief of JNS.org and a columnist for Newsweek.

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THE EVOLUTION OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL

Today, the relationship between the United States and Israel is extolled by American presidents. We take it for granted that presidents will stress their commitment to Israel and to the ties that bind us. But it was not always this way. Harry Truman faced enormous resistance within his administration to his decision to recognize the Jewish state. Similarly, selling or providing arms to Israel was taboo until President Kennedy decided to do so—again, a controversial decision within his national security apparatus. Later, during the first week of the 1973 war, Richard Nixon initially resisted Israeli near-desperate pleas to resupply weaponry, following the major losses of aircraft and tanks the Israelis had suffered. Although Nixon eventually provided a massive resupply of arms to Israel, his decision had more to do with cold war concerns that Soviet weapons could not be seen to defeat American weapons than with any special relationship that existed between our two countries.

From the perspective of history, the relationship has clearly evolved. And to understand where the relationship is today and where it is going, particularly during a period of transition in the Middle East, it is important to understand why the relationship changed. To do so, I will examine the policy and approach of every administration since Israel's birth. I will offer a narrative of the policy and the key developments in each administration,

starting with Harry Truman's. I will outline each president's basic instincts or mind-set toward Israel and toward our policy in the region, as well as the basic assumptions that seemed to guide the national security establishment and senior officials about Israel and the region—and whether there was unanimity or division.

What will emerge from the review is remarkable continuity—not of policy, necessarily, but of arguments. Over and over again, we will see recycled concerns that too close a relationship with Israel will harm our ties to the Arabs and damage our position in the region. Until the 1990s, the fear was that we would drive the Arabs into a Soviet embrace. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the concern was that it would damage our relationship with the Arabs and make us targets of jihadist terrorism. The debates that center on these issues produced a pattern: when an administration is judged by its successors to be too close to Israel, we distance ourselves from the Jewish state. Eisenhower believed that Truman was too supportive of Israel, so he felt an imperative to demonstrate that we were not partial to Israel, that we were in fact willing to seek closer ties to our real friends in the region—the Arabs. President Nixon, likewise, felt that Lyndon Johnson was too pro-Israel. In his first two years, he, too, distanced us from Israel and showed sensitivity to Arab concerns. President George H. W. Bush believed his former boss, Ronald Reagan, suffered from the same impulse of being too close to Israel. He, too, saw virtue in fostering distance. And President Obama, at the outset of his administration, certainly saw George W. Bush as having cost us in the Arab and Muslim world at least in part because he was unwilling to allow any gap to emerge between the United States and Israel.

In none of these instances do we actually gain any benefit to our position in the region. Our influence does not increase; our ties with the conservative Arab monarchies do not materially improve. Neither is there any decline in those relationships during administrations that are putatively seen as being closer to Israel. Our ties with the more radical Arab regimes are not good, but then again—with the possible exceptions of the Kennedy administration's concerted effort to reach out to Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Reagan administration's support for Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War—they were never good.¹

Yet arguments that we must distance ourselves from Israel are not discredited when the predicted positive outcomes do not occur. Nor are these arguments discredited when the anticipated terrible consequences of drawing closer to Israel fail to materialize. With regard to the latter, when we

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recognized Israel in 1948, or later when we sold arms to Israel and the Soviets couldn't replace us in the area, and when the flow of oil from the region was not lost, no one questioned why these devastating outcomes did not happen. No one asked what was wrong in our assumptions about the dynamics of the Middle East. Remarkably, there seem to be few lessons ever learned.

These assumptions are obviously about more than Israel's place in the region and its neighbors' reactions to it. They also involve the perceived forces of change and whether and how we should relate to them. Late in the Eisenhower administration, the president signed a policy directive that effectively called for us to "accommodate" radical Arab nationalism. The assumptions that guided that posture are similar to the arguments in parts of the Obama administration in 2011 and 2012 that argued that the Muslim Brotherhood represented the wave of the future in the region and that our more conservative Arab friends were on the wrong side of history—and our policy needed to reflect that. In the late 1950s and in John Kennedy's first two years in office, the logic of that policy was pursued and failed to deliver. Yet no one asked how or even whether the radical Arab nationalists like President Nasser of Egypt could alter their aims without betraying their very identity. The same may be true today with Islamists. It makes sense to take a hard look at these kinds of assumptions and evaluate them in light of what drove the radical nationalists in the past and what factors may drive the Islamists today.

If there was ever a time to rethink assumptions and gain a better handle on the dynamics that are likely to shape the Middle East, this is surely it. Because the American approach to Israel over time was generally derivative of our broad approach to the region, one way to rethink assumptions is to see which ones took hold, why they endured, where they were off base, and how they need to be changed. That is why I examine every administration from Harry Truman to Barack Obama and how each approached both Israel and the region.

Harry S. Truman: The Struggle to Adopt a Policy

"Struggle" is the right word to describe the policy of the Truman administration toward Palestine and the emergence of the Jewish state of Israel. President Truman had to contend with the reality that none of his senior national security officials saw any strategic benefit in supporting Jewish