



Cracks in the Special Relationship

Israel-US Ties under Obama and Netanyahu

**Proceedings of a symposium participated by:
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Preface by Brian Reeves and Dr. Nimrod Goren

The Mitvim Institute

The alliance with the US is a crucial asset for Israel's foreign policy. It brings Israel significant political, security and economy benefits. Public opinion data shows that the Israel public regards the US as the most important country for Israel, and thinks that maintaining good ties with the US should be Israel's top foreign policy priority.¹ However, tensions between the two allies have been mounting. The Netanyahu government's policies towards the Palestinian issue, and especially the settlements, draw much criticism from the Obama administration. The US efforts to reach a deal with Iran over its nuclear project are disapproved by the Israeli Prime Minister.

While differences of opinions among allies on key policy issues are legitimate, the style in which these controversies are being handled – which includes personal attacks and meddling in domestic politics – has a negative impact on Israel-US relations. Support for Israel is not as consensual in the US as it used to be, also among the American Jewish community. Israel is increasingly becoming a partisan issue in American politics, and is losing support among key American constituencies.²

These worrisome trends led [Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) to hold a public symposium on US-Israeli relations. The symposium took place at Tel Aviv University on 19 May 2014, and in cooperation with the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research. The symposium, moderated by Yael Patir of J Street and the Mitvim Institute, featured three distinguished speakers: Dr. Ilai Saltzman, Board Member at the Mitvim Institute and Lecturer at Claremont McKenna College, USA; Jeremy Ben-Ami, President of J Street, and; Alon Pinkas, former Israeli Consul General in New York.

Dr. Ilai Saltzman argued that the US-Israel “special relationship” has come to resemble a more normal one. As the importance of the alliance has waned, America has adopted a more balanced, ambivalent and likewise critical approach while backing Israel. Jeremy Ben-Ami offered lessons on the Kerry-led peace initiative, and discussed the role J Street plays in fielding continued US involvement in the peace process as Americans grow weary of overseas entanglements. Alon Pinkas warned that Israelis should recognize the strategic asset of their US ally and save this key relationship by earnestly working to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians. The following publication includes their lectures in full.

Dr. Saltzman posited that the shift in US attitudes of Israel can best be explained through the lens of the three levels of analysis in International Relations. At the international level, the end of the Cold War, American rapprochement with the Arab World, and reorientation of US foreign policy toward Asia have mitigated the US' need for Israel as an unconditional ally. At the state level, American support for

¹ [The 2014 Israeli Foreign Policy Index: Findings of a Mitvim Institute Poll](#), (Ramat Gan: Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, December 2014).

² [As Mideast Violence Continues, A Wide Gap in Israel-Palestinian Sympathies](#), (Pew Research Center, July 2014); [American Public Attitudes Toward the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#), (The Brookings Institution, December 2014).

Israel has become more pluralistic, as observed by the rise of J Street. Rather than emphasizing the similarities between Israeli and American societies, a large stream of liberal Jews feel a duty to express open criticism of various anti-democratic practices in Israel. Finally, at the individual level we observe President Obama's departure from his predecessors in taking a more distant, tempered approach toward Israel, allowing for more open criticism.

Ben-Ami outlined both the shortcomings and positive takeaways of Secretary of State John Kerry's attempt to broker a peace deal in 2013-2014. Kerry's zealous efforts in the negotiations should be seen as a reflection of shared US and Israeli interests, and continuing to pursue a solution keeps the two countries' interests aligned. The same is true for shared values, which are being offset by Israel's protracted occupation. Kerry mistakenly believed that he could convince Prime Minister Netanyahu that these shared interests and values were at risk, while again trying to play Israel's lawyer. Nevertheless, the negotiations produced progress on recognizing mutually beneficial Palestinian security and economic needs, and incorporating the Arab Peace Initiative. As for American domestic politics, it is important to note the increasing isolationism, national rejection of neocon Republican policies and shift within the Democratic Party toward a more dovish worldview as contributors to a break in the consensus on Israel.

Pinkas described the "tectonic" changes in the US-Israel relationship as driving the countries apart, and claimed that Israelis must adapt to save these crucial ties. The US has served as Israel's strategic asset for a long time, but with the Cold War and more recent post-9/11 period over, the once congruous foreign policies of both countries are gradually diverging. While echoing Dr. Saltzman and Ben-Ami's analyses of America's interest in disengaging from the Middle East, Pinkas charged that Israel needs to reinvent itself as an ally and strategic asset to the US by resolving rather than prolonging its conflict with the Palestinians. Otherwise, it may find itself having to deal with the Palestinian issue, and Iran, alone.

This symposium has been part of ongoing efforts by the Mitvim Institute to monitor and analyze US policies towards Israel, the peace process, and the Middle East. We invite you to follow [The US and Us: The Mitvim-DC Monthly](#). Every issue of this publication series includes an analysis of recent developments, a roundup of commentaries by US think tanks and leading experts, and a profile of a relevant US policymaker.

We thank the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University for their partnership in carrying out the public symposium, and J Street, for their partnership in producing this publication.

Dr. Ilai Saltzman

The Mitvim Institute and Claremont McKenna College

The relationship between Israel and the US is changing. The “special relationship,” as it has been defined since the early 60s, has become much more normal these days. We have moved from an almost unrestrained system of relations, to one that is more ambivalent, critical, and much more balanced.

To explain this change, it is necessary to examine the relationship between Israel and the US using the three levels of analysis in the classical study of international relations: the international system, including the geo-strategic and geo-political surroundings; the state level, including variable intra-state entities; and the individual level: the approach that leaders adopt as well as their perceptions—for in the end it is all about the people.

A. The International Level

The special relationship that characterizes the relations between Israel and the US was formed during the Cold War. The principal reason for this was the presence of common strategic interests, including the need to confront Soviet influence, the Arab bloc, and the Arab states themselves.

In strategic terms, the need of the US for an ally such as Israel diminished after the end of the Cold War in 1991. Factors that were present under a bipolar global system, as characterized by the Cold War, have become less relevant with the emergence of the current unipolar system. The glue that binds the two countries together has since weakened significantly.

This change is evident in the policy of President Barack Obama (particularly during his first term) to reduce US military presence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf –regions of conflict in which the American public continues to pay a price in both money and lives. This policy resulted from the traumatic experience of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama outlined this in an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, stating that Iraq was an aberration for American foreign policy; as a result, he made the reduction of military presence in the region a major objective.³

In addition, Obama's change in attitude toward the War on Terrorism that was declared by President George W. Bush after September 11 also affected the quality of relations between Israel and the US. Bush's approach was one of fostering close relations between Israel and the US, while distancing the US from the Arab world. Obama has espoused the opposite aim.

Bush painted reality in terms of black and white, using simplistic and shallow concepts. He presented his policy as a crusade against terrorists. Obama has not followed this line, and indeed believes that Bush's approach was devastating in terms of US interests and of US foreign policy in the region.

³ Barack Obama, “[Renewing American Leadership](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (July/August 2007), pp. 2-16.

Obama, perhaps under the influence of his formative childhood experience in Indonesia, believed that the relations between the US and the Arab and Muslim world need not, and should not, be ones of rivalry and hostility. An explicit expression of this can be found in two important speeches he delivered in 2009—one in Ankara and the second in Cairo—in which he reached out to the Middle East and tried to right the wrong, as he called it, that occurred during the Bush presidency. In his speeches Obama called for a new beginning and a reshaping of the relationship between the Muslim world and the US and the Western world; a relationship no longer based on the principle of a "zero sum game."

Furthermore, retired General David Petraeus, a former CIA director and commander of the US armed forces in the area at the time, explicitly defined the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflict as an obstacle to American foreign policy. According to Petraeus, the conflict makes it difficult for the US to achieve its optimal interests.⁴ In the Arab and Muslim world it is commonly perceived that the US lends excessive support to Israel. These claims became even more prevalent during the Bush era, raising questions concerning America's ability to serve as an honest broker in the peace process. The Obama administration sought to change that, or at least to redefine it.

Another strategic change in US foreign policy under Obama which has an impact on US relations with Israel is the attempt to shift the focus of attention from the Middle East and Persian Gulf to Asia, known as the "pivot to Asia." Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laid out this policy as early as 2009, and the issue is still relevant today. The objective of the American Administration is to transfer the economic, diplomatic and military focus of US foreign policy to East Asia, particularly to address the rise of China that undermines regional interests such as trade, territorial disputes, and maritime routes. To this end, the US is reducing its presence in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. This stems from the desire to minimize losses in the area, and to pivot as soon as possible toward the East.⁵

For the US, this process of disengagement is also in line with a move towards "energy independence," that is the move to reduce US dependence on oil from the Gulf. This effort has included investing in various renewable energy sources, as well as unconventional extraction techniques such as fracking. According to estimates, in about 10-15 years the US could fulfill this energy independence, and will no longer be dependent on oil from the Middle East. This is expected to have an impact on US policy in relation to the region, and to Israel.

And yet, growing tensions in the US-Russian arena—regarding the conflict in Ukraine, the crisis in Syria, Iran's nuclear program, and Russia's growing influence in the international system—could lead to a kind of new Cold War that could bring about more change in this critical regional system and remake America's attitude toward Israel once again.

⁴ ["U.S. General: Israel-Palestinian Conflict Fosters Anti-U.S. Sentiment,"](#) *Ha'aretz*, March 17, 2010.

⁵ Hillary R. Clinton, ["America's Pacific Century,"](#) *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 189 (November 2011), pp. 56-63.

B. The State Level - Domestic Actors

Over the years, the growing influence of the pro-Israel lobby in the US political system, the media and public discourse proved a critical element in the establishment of a special relationship between the two countries. Consequently, the significant changes taking place during recent years regarding this lobby and its role are having a significant impact on the nature of this relationship.

Over the course of the Oslo process, there was a rightward shift in the positions of the pro-Israel lobby organizations, led by AIPAC. With the rise of right-wing conservatives during the two Bush terms, there came an urgent need for the dovish camp of the American Jewry to reinvent itself and to connect to Democratic candidates, led by Barack Obama.

J Street's establishment in 2008 led to the expansion of the American discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the two-state solution. Although it is still far weaker than AIPAC in terms of budget and the degree of influence in American politics, it has demonstrated more craft, energy, and higher motivation.

The Israeli government initially chose to boycott J Street and Ambassador Michael Oren refused to attend its first annual convention, despite the fact that President Obama dispatched General James Jones, his National Security Advisor, to participate in this groundbreaking event. But in view of the organization's growing popularity the Israeli government eventually decided to change direction and establish contact with it. However, it has not been a sympathetic conversation. The Israeli Embassy in the US, led by then-Ambassador Oren, chose to warn the organization and its supporters against putting pressure on the US administration for policies inconsistent with the interests of the Israeli government.

Nonetheless, J Street has enabled the Jewish community in the US to voice a different voice which is not necessarily right-wing or conservative, and which legitimizes the two-state vision. The fact that other voices within the pro-Israel lobby were heard was welcomed among members of Congress, as well as Israeli politicians such as Tzipi Livni.

Apart from the role of the pro-Israel lobby, one must also address changing perceptions of shared core values and how these changes contribute to the depreciation that is taking place in the relationship between Israel and the US. The special relationship between the two countries was based on the assumption that they share democratic values and a common ethos. For example, Israel considers itself the "light unto the nations," while the US refers to itself as a "city upon a hill." The shared ethos of both countries is of a frontier state that managed to create a meaningful project and overcome the difficulties along the way. Based on this similarity, a relationship was established, grounded in Judeo-Christian religious, cultural, and philosophical tradition.

There is a tendency to stress the shared democratic values of the US and Israel as the foundation that supported and facilitated a special relationship between the two countries. However, recent voices have been raised in the Jewish-American political discourse that challenge this notion. At the forefront of this challenge is Peter Beinart. Beinart feels committed to Israel, but is also confident enough in his

American identity not to fear expressing criticism of Israel. He sings a tune entirely different and far more critical than we were used to hearing from AIPAC and the conservative wing of the Jewish American community. He sees his role as being to warn of a problem and recommend a change of direction before irrevocable harm is done, and in this role he represents the increasingly popular mood among young Jewish Americans.

The shared American-Israeli ethos of the righteous state whose mission is to serve as a “light unto the nations” has gradually eroded in the eyes of the American public, especially among young liberals—Jews and non-Jews alike. A series of legislative measures in the Knesset and Israeli domestic practices have generated severe reactions even among prominent supporters of Israel in the US, such as Abraham Foxman of the ADL.⁶

Among the topics that have been criticized include: gender segregation in public transportation in Israel; incidents between ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, and secular Jewish residents of Beit Shemesh; laws designed to limit the authority of the Supreme Court; and laws designed to curtail the freedom of action of civil society organizations and others. All of these have created and deepened a rift. Hillary Clinton even claimed that gender-based discrimination in buses in some Israeli cities reminded her of the struggle of Rosa Parks for civil rights and against segregation between blacks and whites in the US. One can argue whether this is true or not and whether the comparison is apt, but this is an analogy that has been increasingly heard among a significant portion of the American Jewish population.

Over the past two years, I experienced many other examples of this trend while teaching at a small college in Southern California. For example, the courses I was teaching were full of Jewish and non-Jewish students alike, and they both failed to understand the internal events taking place in Israel. As part of the curriculum, I saw fit to combine lectures with those of Israeli diplomats in order to present and clarify Israeli policy. Nevertheless, as soon as the speakers finished their lectures and walked out, students would approach me on the grounds that they did not understand what Israel was doing and what it was trying to achieve.

This discourse captures more and more the mood among the American public in general and among the Jews in the US in particular. This is the demographic shift, a kind of inter-generational change. Blind loyalty to Israel and its actions is becoming eroded among young people who are more liberal and less connected to Israel. These young people have not experienced anti-Semitism in the flesh and do not bear personal memories of the traumatic events of the Holocaust, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War. Their need to back Israel is less robust, and the more that happens the more willingness to express criticism of Israel rises.

The fact that Jewish-American young people see themselves as less connected to Israel does not indicate a loss of their Jewish identity. Rather, their approach toward Israel has become skeptical, ambivalent, and critical. In particular, they are sharply critical of Israel’s conduct in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They cannot reconcile the desire to more firmly support Israel with their strong opposition to Israeli

⁶ Abraham Foxman, “[The Assault on Israel's Vibrant Democracy](#),” *Huffington Post*, December 30, 2011.

policies toward the Palestinians. Their connection to Israel is declining, as is the sense of their commitment to it.

It is important to remember that alongside the sharp criticism in the US regarding Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, the fundamental support for Israel is still the American consensus. Israel receives unprecedented support from the US, which among other things helped Israel financially to be able to build the Magic Wand, Arrow, and Iron Dome anti-missile defense systems. The US continues to provide approximately \$3 billion worth of foreign aid to Israel each year, despite severe budgetary constraints of its own, and in spite of the fear of Israel becoming an apartheid state (expressed by John Kerry) if it continues with its current policies.

C. The Individual Level – A Leader’s Approach and Perceptions

Obama’s personal conception and the code under which he operates are completely different from those of previous presidents. Obama tends to keep a distance and be less involved with issues. This approach allows him to show more flexibility and to express criticism of Israel more freely. This is reflected in his decision to entrust the role of addressing the Middle East conflict to others—George Mitchell and then John Kerry—and his decision to take a break from the peace process after the failure of Kerry’s efforts.

Obama is committed to the existence of the State of Israel and to its security, but he does not have the messianic fervor and unconditional support for Israel of his predecessor, Bush. On the contrary, Obama sees his role as someone “repairing the world” and as a champion of the weak and disadvantaged. Obama does not see the relations between Israel and the US as based on commonly held Judeo-Christian beliefs per se. He is more committed to the concept of social justice embedded in both Christianity and Judaism, as he defines these religious traditions. His opponents would call him a socialist, Marxist, and sometimes even a communist. It is certainly true that Obama identifies himself almost automatically with the weak side. His is a humanistic and universal approach, for better or for worse.

These characteristics are deeply rooted in his political or ideological DNA, and are clearly evident in his approach to foreign policy in general and the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts in particular. In this regard, his attitude toward Israel is reminiscent of what Martin Luther King said following the Six-Day War in an interview with ABC: There cannot be the slightest doubt in Israel’s right to exist. Still, we need to address the socio-economic problems of the Arab world and find a fair and just solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict.⁷

Demographic changes in the US will also affect the identity of the next American president, which will in turn affect the relationship with Israel. Against the Christian right, which stands with Israel unreservedly, there has been a significant increase in the political power of the Latino community in the US, which has been characterized by some observers as more critical of Israel. The Latino voice decided the last presidential election, and it is possible that this will happen in 2016 as well.

⁷ Martin Luther King, [“Issues and Answers,”](#) ABC, June 18, 1967.

In conclusion, a significant process of change is underway in the relations between Israel and the US. It is a slow change, incremental and ongoing with some fluctuation. We are in the midst of a transitional period, a turning point from a special relationship to a more normal relationship—ambivalent, balanced, and more critical. A generation gap in American Jewry is gradually eroding support for Israel: this is a gap between the generations that grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli wars and the younger generations who no longer have an overriding sense of an imminent and existential threat to the Jewish State. More recently, the aforementioned criticism is becoming increasingly widespread. We are seeing this in view of the rise of new organizations in the pro-Israel lobby in the US, such as J Street, and in view of the identity and policies of the current US president, who has a very different vision regarding the relations between Israel and the US than that of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Jeremy Ben-Ami

President of J Street

I will share a couple of thoughts about what went wrong in the John Kerry-led peace process, and about what I think actually went right. I will also discuss the changes taking place in American politics, as well as in the American-Jewish community. And then I will talk about how these changes look on the ground, as opposed to simply looking at them analytically from afar.

So first of all, John Kerry. Why did Kerry pursue the peace process with the zeal, the obsessive zeal that he was criticized for by the Israeli defense minister and others? And it did feel a little like an obsession. From my point of view, this was a good obsession. I think that the roots of the US-Israel relationship are in shared interests and shared values, and that is where you will find the answer to why Kerry was so set on pursuing a two-state solution and why he tried so hard.

On the one hand, the American diplomatic, security, and intelligence communities widely recognize that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has enormous implications for the entire array of American interests in this region. Even with the pivot to Asia, American interests here continues to be critical. So long as this conflict goes on unresolved, American interests are at risk. And in the analysis of President Obama, of Kerry and of the White House and State Department staff, pursuing the two-state solution is a central American interest, as well as a central interest for the State of Israel. So pursuing it keeps the alignment between American and Israeli interests. And not pursuing it, allowing the status quo to continue, will allow the interests to diverge. For somebody like Kerry, who feels very strongly about the US-Israel relationship, pursuing this is critical to keeping the interests of the US and Israel aligned.

From the values perspective, the values on which the relationship is based—democracy, Judeo-Christian ethics, justice, and equality—are the very foundations of the American spirit and they are consistent with what are perceived to be Jewish values. But if the occupation continues, and if we go down the road that Kerry used a certain word that starts with *A* to describe, the values pull apart as well. And so if you care about Israel and the US-Israel relationship, and you believe that this relationship is based on shared interests and shared values, you have no choice but to pursue the two-state solution just as Kerry did. The two-state solution remains an essential part of the American foreign policy debate. It remains an essential part of politics every American elected official has had to deal with. This is why it remains a central foreign policy priority for this President and for the secretary of state.

So what went wrong? At the root of the problem was a belief on the part of Kerry that he could succeed in bringing Prime Minister Netanyahu along on that journey to an understanding that these shared interests and values were at risk. He thought he could help the prime minister to realize that the only way to save that relationship and to save those interests and values was to go down this road towards a two-state solution. And I think that he felt, based on his personal relationship and the way that he operated as a senator and as a politician, the types of relationships he had with other leaders and the way that he pursued foreign policy, that he personally could do this. That he could bring the prime minister along. That is the root of the failure. The

secretary did not fully appreciate just what a challenge this would prove to be. His entire strategy rested on the belief that he personally had what he needed to succeed. When that proved not to be the case, that he could not move the prime minister, that he could not bring him along, there was no backup strategy that was deeper than that personal approach. There was no plan B.

There was another problem. The US has always pursued the peace process by going to the Israeli side first to try to negotiate. This goes back to Dennis Ross, this goes back to the Camp David summit. The idea is to work out first, as best as one can, an arrangement that satisfies as many of Israel's concerns as possible. And then, feeling really good about how far you have gone, you can go over to the Palestinians and say, "this is what we worked out for you." And then the Palestinians turn around and say, "well, actually that is not what we were thinking." But, by then, the Americans are already invested in what they just negotiated.

What happened in the recent peace talks, particularly on the security front where a lot of progress was made, was that the negotiations were initially between the US and Israel. Only after several months they were brought to the Palestinians, who said, "wait a minute, we were not included in this, we were not involved." This is a flawed approach. The US should not try to get the Israeli yes first, and then go to the other side and say, "boy, have we negotiated a good deal for you." The US needs to either go to the other side at the same time or maybe try to do the exact reverse. If the problem is that we never are able to get a yes from the Israeli side, maybe a better approach might be to get a Palestinian yes first for once, and then go back to the Israelis and say, "here is what we worked out."

So those are two things that I think were at the heart of this failure. Kerry's belief that he can personally move the prime minister, and the approach of talking only to one side first and trying to work out terms with them, before going to the other side.

What went right is the question of security, and recognizing that it needed to be addressed first. The progress that was made by General Allen was significant, and I think that it should not be lost. I know that the secretary was talking about not losing the progress that was made throughout the negotiations.

Second, the economic work that went on, the analysis that was done by the McKinsey firm of the Palestinian economy, to put together a package of six billion dollars of private sector investments as a carrot of what could be the fruits of peace. I think those were very important seeds that were planted, and I hope that they, too, will not be lost.

Third, the work to bring the Arab League along in support of this initiative was important. Many have traced the failure of the Camp David summit, in part, to the recognition that Arafat had no backing from the broader Arab world. Attempts by Secretary Kerry to involve the Arab League in all stages and getting them to re-endorse the Arab Peace Initiative in mid-2013 were very important in that regard.

I also think that the intensity of commitment the secretary showed was very important in focusing people's attention on trying to move the ball forward.

So there were some important things that went right, along with the things that went wrong. But where do we go from here? The position of J Street is that it was correct to draw a line and say time out. The initiative was at an impasse. The US was banging its head against the wall and got to the point of talking about talking about talking. There was nothing of substance being discussed. It was all about how to get out of the impasse.

Suspending the initiative, taking time out and letting the sides consider their political environments in terms of where they were and what was possible, was exactly the right thing to do. But to pull back permanently, to say, “this is it, we are not coming back,” would be an egregious error. J Street would like to see the US pull back and then try a different approach. Our view is that it is time for the US to put a framework of its own on the table that says here is the American position on the core issues.

It is time to put the American position on the table, build international support for it, and create that moment of choice that this prime minister has done a very good job of dodging. He continued to have a coalition that had within it two contradictory streams of thought without having to really come out for himself: Is Netanyahu standing with the right-wing one-staters, the settlers, and the Greater Israel vision or with the Tzipi Livnis and those who have said that it is an existential interest of Israel to achieve a two-state solution. He hasn't had to make the choice, and at some point somebody has to force a choice. Putting an American plan or framework on the table and requiring a yes or no answer, has the potential of creating that moment of choice for both sides. If Netanyahu says yes, then this is an opportunity. If he says no, then we have clarity. It is important to create a test for political leadership.

It is also important to note what is happening in Palestinian public opinion. I think that this is more understood in the US than in Israel, because maybe our ears and our eyes are hearing things, seeing things and understanding things from afar that may not be understood in Israel. The younger generation in Palestine is moving away, rather than towards, a two-state solution. This is an incredibly important reality, and is also a danger. It is not something to gloat about, “oh now we are being proven right, they never wanted it in the first place.” If this turns into a one-state movement, inspired by examples such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Israel will be in deep trouble and it might be the end of Israel as we know it. That is where we are headed if we do not seize the opportunity to work with, whether you like it or not, a generation of Palestinians who are still talking about two states, diplomacy, negotiation and non-violence. There is a huge problem coming, and I think that American Jewish liberals who speak the language of civil rights, of equal rights, of voting rights, are viewing this in a way that is not fully understood in Israel.

It is important that Israelis also understand the changes that are taking place in American politics, and that are affecting US policy towards Israel. I want to highlight three of these changes:

Number one is the rise of isolationism in the US over the last decade, since the decision to go to war in Iraq. Isolationism and pulling back from global affairs is

often associated with the right. Half of the Republican caucus does not have a passport and they are proud of it. But there are also isolationist trends on the left, deriving from an anti-war, pacifist, and pro-peace perspective. On both sides, there is a growing sense of, “we just do not need to be doing what we are doing abroad. We need to pull back.”

Number two is that the neocon part of the Republican Party is no longer driving the foreign policy debate. In the 2004 elections and before, when Congress voted on the Iraq war, every Democrat positioned him or herself in order to not appear weak relative to the hawks of the Republican Party. The neocon agenda was the one driving the debate and everybody else reacted. Unfortunately, they reacted in ways that made the Iraq war possible. Today, that is not what is driving the agenda. When you think about the proposal to authorize the use of military force in Syria, which never even came to a vote, the *John McCains* and the *Lindsey Grahams* were the absolute minority. And in fact, I cannot think of too many other people who were coming out and carrying the flag saying, “we must do it, we must be forceful and use force.” The terms of the debate have shifted in American politics and it is not being driven any longer by the Republican neocons.

And number three is the fact that the hawkishness that existed within the Democratic Party a decade ago, and that led the party to an unquestioning support for Israel, no longer exists. There is a real shift within the Democratic Party, and there is no longer a consensus on Israel and an aversion to debate. This became evident in the vote about Jerusalem in the 2012 Democratic Convention.

Where does J Street stand regarding these trends? We think that in the US, if the choice for American Jews is to stand with Israel and its policies no matter what, or criticize, pull back and have no connection with Israel, then Israel is the loser. The majority of American Jews fall somewhere in the middle. They cannot provide, at this point, uncritical, unquestioning support for the policies carried out by Israel and its government. They also do not want to disengage completely because they are deeply connected to their roots, to their community, and to their heritage.

J Street provides a home for American Jews who want to continue to feel deeply connected to Israel. J Street supporters want to connect to Israel in a way that makes sense, given, as they understand it, what the values of the Jewish people are, what our politics are, what we have always fought for in the US – justice, equality and standing for the oppressed. For them, it is just like standing on the side of those who are fighting for their rights in the US. We provide a way for American Jews to maintain their connection with Israel and to be part of the basis of support for the US-Israel relationship in the next generation and the generations to come. For this reason, it is important for Israel and its government to have an open door to J Street.

Alon Pinkas

Former Israeli Consul General in New York

Relations between Israel and the US are the greatest achievement—most significant and most durable in terms of longevity—since the creation of Israel in 1948. In fact, beyond the existence and survivability of Israel—its physical and political sovereignty—Israel's relationship with the US is its greatest, most comprehensive, and most surprising political and security achievement (as opposed to Israeli achievements in academics, the sciences, or economics).

Contrary to what many Israelis seem to think, the US is Israel's strategic asset, and not the other way around. The US (including official and unofficial spokespersons) has never defined Israel as a strategic asset, whether in official documents or oral statements. In fact, we choose to define ourselves as such, among other things, in order to flatter ourselves. However, during certain periods this characterization has also served the US, including members of Congress, government officials, officials at the Pentagon and the US intelligence community.

Being a US strategic asset for Israel is expressed not only in the amount of the annual budget transferred to Israel (currently around \$3 billion), or in access given to Israel for technology, but it is also witnessed whenever the US vetoes resolutions against Israel at the UN (51 times so far). Many of these resolutions were based on Article VII of the UN Charter, under which the Security Council has the authority to impose sanctions. If not for the repeated US veto, it is hard to imagine the state of distress in which Israel would find itself.

Another point that is even more significant is the plethora of anomalies characteristic of the relations between Israel and the US. Israel has a sort of premise that Israel is an asset for the Americans and that the alliance with the US is a law of nature, unchangeable and impossible to appeal. Nonetheless, today we are facing tectonic changes in these relations. The word “tectonics” was chosen not only because of the cracks that appeared or because of the difficulty to distinguish these changes with the naked eye, but also because of the slow pace. There are two main factors to these changes: the anomaly mentioned above, and the basic asymmetry in the relationship. Regarding the latter factor, there is a kind of megalomania among many Israelis, who tend to think that the US is dependent on Israel with regard to its behavior in the Middle East.

The question is whether Israel is preparing for this change and how. The answer is no, but it is necessary to explain in detail what this means. This does not mean at all that Israel has not considered the possibility of worsening relations with the US; rather, it is more a phenomenon that can be defined as separation anxiety. For example, the eccentric statements of Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon against the US Secretary of State were not displays of grandstanding but indicative of separation anxiety and existential fear of what would happen if the Americans give up on Israel as an ally. To the claims of all those great heroes who say that we do not need the US, that we are capable of getting along without it, and that we are not a vassal state, Begin responded in 1978 that Israel has in fact no other country except the US to turn to for urgent requests for assistance. Although the US is indeed in the process of

withdrawing from the Middle East, this process will not happen overnight and there will be no official presidential announcement regarding it.

There are several factors working together on this issue. First, the US is on the verge of reaching energy independence, which is expected to occur not in fifteen years, but within four. That is, within four years the US could, if it desires, reduce the volume of oil imports from the Middle East to zero. In this situation, if the US needs extra oil in addition to the existing reservoirs, it will have the option of turning north to Canada or south to Mexico. Moreover, by 2022, according to the US Department of Energy, the US is expected to produce a greater amount of oil than Russia and Saudi Arabia combined. In other words, it would end US dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

Second, the US is examining the geopolitical map of the Middle East and considers the three most powerful countries in the Middle East region as Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The geopolitical strength of each is measured differently and their relationships are complex, but the common denominator of all three is that none of them is an Arab country.

Third, Americans are tired, wounded, and scarred from their involvement in the region. Being bogged down in the affairs of the Arab world for so long has passed the American tolerance threshold. The US was persuaded by Israel, indirectly and ironically, that it is best to leave the Arabs alone—that nothing good will come of them. Expressions of this can be seen in US policy toward Libya, Egypt, and Syria. In the latter case, for instance, there is a gap between what is seen as a possible US intervention in Israel and in the US. Israel, for its part, sees US policy in Syria as absolute indecision. By contrast, Americans are reluctant to send US soldiers to die on foreign soil. For them, if it is such a significant threat in the eyes of Israel, France, and Turkey, then these countries and their powerful armies should intervene themselves.

What actually happens is that alongside the widespread criticism by countries in the region against the US (that Americans are neo-colonialists, trying to impose democracy on the Middle East without any idea of the area), every time there is a crisis they call the White House for help, before shortly returning to the popular argument that Americans do not understand the Middle East.

Finally, Americans are fed up with the Palestinian Question and Israeli and Palestinian claims that they cannot comprehend. If there were ever something that Israelis and Palestinians could agree on in full, it would be that the US is to blame. And there are many excuses for that: Kerry intervened too much; Hillary Clinton was not involved enough; Bill Clinton wanted too much; Bush was never interested in doing anything. Americans for their part have internalized these criticisms thrown at them and have withdrawn from the issue. In fact, Obama and Kerry's conduct surrounding the failure of the peace process harkens the words of James Baker in 1991, "When you're serious about peace, call us." Nevertheless, this does not mean that the US will not change this trend and increase its involvement in the future.

The trends described so far are occurring in tandem with changes in the global geopolitical reality. The alliance between Israel and the US is one that is unusual, asymmetrical, one that we love to glorify in retrospect and love to describe as a partnership based on true values (the ethos of the "city upon a hill," the appearance

of the Star of David on the dollar bill, the way both societies rose up against the tide of history). In reality, the alliance between Israel and the US is ultimately formed against the backdrop of the Cold War and its exigencies. For instance, the decision of President Lyndon Johnson to sell Israel Skyhawks and Phantoms, provided only after the Six Day War, happened because the Americans wanted to use Israel as a field experiment to Vietnam. Until 1973, the power of Soviet anti-aircraft missiles against US aircraft was unknown until these missiles were used by Egypt to shoot down Israeli aircrafts.

The US-Israel alliance was created in the backdrop of the Cold War and enshrined in the Memorandum of Understanding in the early 80s during the Ronald Reagan presidency. Historically, it was no more than a short window of opportunity: Reagan spoke of “Star Wars” and the evil empire of the Soviets in the mid-80s, but by the early 90’s the Soviet Union was no more.

The next decade of relations between Israel and the US, which began with the fall of the Soviet Union and ended shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, was ideal for Israel. In this decade, a process took place that eventually led to more American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Arab world was in great bewilderment during this decade, without a superpower substitute for the patronage of the Soviet Union. Europe was not a counterweight, was not sufficiently united, let alone united in how it conducted foreign policy. China was already a great power, but was not relevant to the Middle East. Who ultimately remained as a superpower was solely the US. In this reality, Israeli interests and American interests were almost identical. It is rare that the international meter and the regional meter are synchronized together.

Today, however, the situation is different and we begin to see the changes that the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the gradual US withdrawal from the Middle East were to bring. Israel, in this sense, has not tried and has failed to reinvent itself as an ally and as a strategic asset to the US.

Although there is no disputing the fact that Israel is an ally of the US, this alliance has suffered cracks, which must be identified and patched up, in order to preserve it. The Netanyahu government, however, has done exactly the opposite: instead of slowing down the process, stopping and making a plan that will lead to a redefinition of Israel as an asset to the US and healing the cracks, it has created a relationship with the US that catalyzes and expands those cracks. For example, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came out from the first meeting he had with Barack Obama in May 2009, he defined Israel’s top interest as preventing the development of an Iranian nuclear weapon. Obama for his part agreed and asked Netanyahu to freeze settlement construction so that he could form a broad coalition to support this move. Six months later, Netanyahu accused Obama of lacking an understanding of the Middle East and abandoning Israel and the alliance between their two countries.

In other words, Netanyahu did the exact opposite of what it takes to mend those cracks with the US. Instead of preparing Israel, he returned to the 80s. He referred to Obama as if he were Reagan, he fought the Soviet Union that no longer exists, he did not notice that the Palestinian issue is dire and thereby endangers the American perception that sees a convergence of interests in the alliance with Israel.

Israel must understand that Americans are tired of an interventionist foreign policy. Supporting this notion are the findings in public opinion polls, which have shown, for instance, that a large majority of Americans believe that the US should not be involved in the crisis that transpired in the Crimea. The Crimean crisis, in this context, is perceived as a crisis that is much more important to the US than the repetitive rounds of talks between Israel and the Palestinians. This means that Americans are returning to the isolationism that came after George Washington's farewell address, which recommended that all men avoid unnecessary entanglements in overseas matters.

In summary, the US is currently undergoing a process of slow and gradual disengagement from Israel and the Middle East. However, the intention is not that the US will refrain from vetoing any draft resolution submitted to the Security Council against Israel, although few people in the US understand today why their country behaves this way or justifies the imposition of the automatic veto in favor of Israel. In some cases, the Security Council resolutions on which the US has vetoed are actually based on the texts of official US policy and it seems as if the US is vetoing itself. For instance, in 2011, the US ambassador to the UN at the time, Susan Rice (now the National Security Advisor to President Obama), imposed a veto against the proposed condemnation of Israel following a round of settlement expansion. The surprising fact is that this proposal was formulated verbatim from sections of Obama and Secretary Clinton's speeches. Rice was doing something unprecedented: she published a clarification explaining the US veto, which in reality was designed to explain the decision in the domestic American sphere.

Although Israel sees itself today as strong and capable of handling various threats, does not see the Palestinian issue as one that requires urgent attention, and believes that the tools used by the US against Iran are of limited effect – it still needs the US. A gradual disengagement of the US from the Middle East will leave Israel ultimately with the worst situation imaginable: Israel will have to take care by itself of the Palestinian issue, of Iran, and of all matters in the Middle East.

About the Partner Organizations

[Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) is a foreign policy think tank that envisions a fresh start for Israel among the nations. It aims to reshape Israel's relations in the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean, and is ranked among the top 30 think tanks in the MENA region in 2014. The Mitvim Institute was established in 2011, with the following objectives and goals: (1) To promote a paradigm shift in Israel's foreign policy – introduce and advance a pro-peace, multi-regional, and inclusive foreign policy paradigm; make foreign policy considerations more prominent in Israeli decision-making; and transform Israel's inward-looking culture; (2) To promote regional-belonging for Israel – enhance knowledge and understanding of regional issues; define Israel's desired relations with its adjacent regions; and advance regional-belonging possibilities; (3) To promote Israeli-Arab peace – engage in policy dialogue with Arab and Muslim think-tanks; identify, create and maximize opportunities for peace; and provide process-expertise to support peace-making efforts. The Mitvim Institute engages in the various phases of the policymaking-cycle. It generates knowledge, articulates ideas, plans policies, advocates recommendations, and facilitates implementation. **You can follow the Mitvim Institute on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).**

[J Street](#) is the political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans fighting for the future of Israel as the democratic homeland of the Jewish people. J Street believes that Israel's Jewish and democratic character depend on a two-state solution, resulting in a Palestinian state living alongside Israel in peace and security. Rooted in its commitment to Jewish and democratic values, J Street is redefining what it means to be pro-Israel in America. J Street is changing the US political dynamics around Israel by mobilizing broad support for a two-state solution because it is in Israel's and America's interest. And J Street is expanding support for Israel by affirming – along with many Israelis – that being pro-Israel does not require supporting every policy of its government. The J Street family of organizations is comprised of: J Street: a non-profit corporation and registered lobby; JStreetPAC: a political action committee endorsing federal candidates, and; J Street Education Fund, Inc: a legally independent non-profit. J Street represents more than 180,000 online supporters, 8,000 students, and 700 National Rabbinic Cabinet Leaders. **You can follow J Street on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).**