

## **Israel, the Pro-Israel Lobby, American Jews and the Iran deal**

American Jews were deeply divided over the 2015 Iran deal. Such divisions over Israel-related issues were nothing new. But this time the argument was not only particularly vitriolic, it was also especially significant because those in favor of the deal were confronting an Israeli consensus on an issue considered to be vital to Israeli security, a commitment to which was shared *in principle* by the overwhelming majority of American Jews who were skeptical of the agreement's efficacy, even as they approved of it. This paper seeks to explain the cause of these divisions over the Iran deal and their political significance for Israel's relations with American Jewry. Contrary to the terms of the core debate about the relationship of American Jews with Israel, which centers on the extent of American Jewish attachment to Israel, it argues that the key struggle was over the power to determine the political meaning of 'pro-Israel' in this critical context and that the divide was primarily a part of a wider partisan divide among Americans in general.

In theoretical terms, "the authority to determine the shared meanings that constitute the identities, interests and practices... is perhaps the most subtle and most effective form of power because it encapsulates the institutional power to include or exclude, to legitimize and authorize"<sup>1</sup>. Strong and resilient shared meanings function as cultural 'containers' that serve as an important resource for mobilizing political support. The more robust the cultural container the more the political struggle is likely to be focused on interpreting and appropriating it to advance and legitimize a political agenda, rather than seeking to challenge it head-on.<sup>2</sup> The pro-Israel orientation in American political culture is one such shared-meaning and it is centered on the American commitment to Israeli security. Thus, because sympathy for Israel is very widespread in America, politicians tend to prefer to appropriate the pro-Israel label, rather than challenge it head on. This is especially true for American Jews, the overwhelming majority of whom are attached to Israel<sup>3</sup>. Against this background, Liz Shroyer, a former political director at AIPAC once explained that, "AIPAC's great success derives from its capacity to define what it means to be pro-Israel."<sup>4</sup>

The sections below maps divisions in the organized Jewish community and in American Jewish opinion regarding the Iran deal. Subsequently, the paper seeks to explain the cause of these divisions and their political significance.

## The Organized Jewish Community

Three of the four main ‘defense’ organizations that constitute the core of the traditional pro-Israel lobby, AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the American Jewish Committee (AJC) formally came out against the agreement – the AJC after ‘consulting widely’.<sup>5</sup> It was estimated that AIPAC had a war chest of \$20-\$40 million dedicated to this cause. The mainstream organizations were joined by in their opposition to the agreement by many right-wing and Orthodox Jewish organizations, such as the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) and the Orthodox Union (OU). Hundreds of Rabbis also signed a petition against the deal<sup>6</sup>. On the other side of the argument, the ‘pro-Israel, pro-peace’<sup>7</sup> organization J Street led the campaign in favor the agreement, devoting \$5 million to the cause.<sup>8</sup> They were joined by other left-leaning pro-Israel organizations, such as *Ameinu*<sup>9</sup> and *Americans for Peace Now* (AFN)<sup>10</sup>. There was also a letter of support signed by hundreds of Rabbis<sup>11</sup>, as well as a letter in the *New York Times* signed by 26 former leaders of major mainstream Jewish organizations including Tom Dine who was executive director of AIPAC for 13 years.<sup>12</sup> 19 out of the 28, overwhelmingly Democratic, Jewish members of Congress voted in favor of the agreement<sup>13</sup>.

In parallel, key large mainstream Jewish bodies were deeply divided and thus unable to present a clear unified stance for or against the agreement, for example the fourth major defense organization, the Conference of Presidents of major American Jewish organizations, which consists of over fifty organizations. Nonetheless, the organization’s long-serving director Malcolm Hoenlein, spoke publicly of his opposition to the deal and attended a rally against the deal.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the Reform movement and the Jewish communal umbrella organization Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) called on the administration to adopt several tough measures regarding Iran, alongside the agreement.<sup>15</sup> This was in line with the position promoted by the pro-Israel think tank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. In this vein, among other things, the institute promoted the idea that the US should enhance Israel’s military capability to hit the Iranian nuclear program by providing it with Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) bombs and the planes to carry them; an idea the Obama administration appeared to be willing to consider in the summer of 2016.<sup>16</sup> There was also great controversy within local Jewish federations, which usually steer clear of controversial political issues. 21 federations out of 151 federations came out formally against the deal, they were joined by a similar number of Jewish Community Relations Councils; other federations delivered mixed messages or made no formal statement.<sup>17</sup>

## American-Jewish Opinion

In the wake of the Iran deal, four polls of American Jewish opinion were conducted by the *LA Jewish Journal*<sup>18</sup> (16-20 July), *J Street* (21-23 July), *The Israel Project* (TIP) (21-26 July) and the *AJC*<sup>19</sup> (7-22 August). The first two polls showed that a clear majority favored the agreement.

While, the latter polls showed the opinion was almost evenly divided, though the AJC polls gave supporters a slight lead, while *TIP* gave a slight lead to opponents of the deal. Whichever way one looks at it, it is clear that American Jewish opinion was out of kilter with the official position of the largest, strongest and most established pro-Israel Jewish organizations who led the campaign against the deal. Rather, American Jewish opinion reflected the broader clash within the organized Jewish community.

Table 1: American Jewish Opinion towards the Iran Deal

| <b>Polls</b> | <b>Support</b> | <b>Oppose</b> |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| LA Journal   | 48             | 28            |
| J Street     | 60             | 40            |
| TIP          | 44             | 47            |
| <u>AJC</u>   | <u>51</u>      | <u>47</u>     |
| Poll Average | 51             | 41            |

In terms of the credibility of the polls, the *LA Jewish Journal* (JJ) poll was the only one conducted by an organization which did not take a public stand on the Iran deal. AJC and TIP opposed the deal, J Street supported it. But the AJC poll has a less partisan standing than the remaining two polls as the Iran questions were asked as part of a wider annual poll that has been conducted for many years and unlike the polls of J Street<sup>20</sup> and TIP, the poll result did not reflect the official stance of the organization. It is also possible that both the JJ and the AJC poll were reasonably accurate since opinion on the issue may have shifted against the agreement between the dates that the polls were taken in (JJ in July, AJC in August). Such a shift would fit with the trend in American public opinion towards the Iran deal in this period.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the analysis below focuses on the JJ and AJC polls.

## Explaining Divisions of Opinion among American Jews

### *Distancing from Israel?*

The first possibility is that support for the Iran deal could be an expression of a wider on-going distancing of American Jews from Israel, as has been claimed by one school of thought.<sup>22</sup> If so we would expect those who feel closer to Israel to oppose the agreement – given that the Israeli government and a large majority of the Israeli public opposed the agreement: 69% - 10%.<sup>23</sup>

Table 2: American Jewish Attachment to Israel (JJ)

|                     |    |
|---------------------|----|
| Very Attached       | 37 |
| Somewhat Attached   | 43 |
| Not very attached   | 13 |
| Not at all attached | 06 |

Table 3: Attachment to Israel and Support for the Iran Deal (JJ)

|         | <u>Very Attached</u> | <u>Attached</u> | <u>Not Very Attached</u> | <u>Not attached at all</u> |
|---------|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Approve | 49                   | 50              | 70                       | 63                         |
| Oppose  | 38                   | 38              | 23                       | 23                         |

The polls provided some support for this thesis. As illustrated in table 3, according to the JJ survey, those who were less attached were more likely to support the agreement. Thus, 22% supported the agreement even though they thought it harms Israel, which almost exactly tallies with the 20% who do not feel at all attached to Israel. In addition, having visited Israel increased the likelihood of opposing the agreement. However, a clear majority of those Jews who were attached *and those who were very attached* to Israel approved of the agreement, as did a slim majority of those who had visited Israel. Moreover, the correlation between approval of the agreement and attachment was not linear as those who were ‘not attached at all’, were *less* likely to approve the agreement than those who were ‘not very attached’. Critically, across all levels of attachment to Israel, a majority of American Jews supported the agreement.

### *Transnational Ties?*

Those who reject the distancing hypothesis, argue that while American Jews remain attached to Israel, what has changed is merely the way they relate to Israel, which is in part a reflection of increased transnational ties whereby American Jews of a particular ideological or religious hue team up with Israeli compatriots who share their outlook, rather than reflexively supporting the

policy of the government of Israel or large establishment American Jewish organizations.<sup>24</sup> At first glance there would appear to be some support for this explanation given that the deep divisions been American Jews who were attached to Israel over the Iran deal. However, it is unlikely that those who supported the deal were primarily taking their cues from their Israeli counterparts. Not only the Israeli government opposed the Iran deal, so did the main center and left-wing opposition parties *Labor* and *Yesh Atid*. Indeed, a majority of those parties' supporters agreed with Prime Minister Netanyahu that the Iran deal constituted an existential threat to Israel. The only Jewish-Zionist party whose adherents supported the deal was *Meretz*, who had 5 out of the 120 seats in the Knesset.<sup>25</sup> So it makes little sense to suggest that American Jewish supporters of the deal were taking their cue from, or identifying with, Israeli-Jewish supporters of the deal.

### *Obama, Partisanship and Ideology*

The main factor dividing American Jewish attitudes over the Iran deal was their attitudes towards President Obama, and their partisan and ideological affinities in American politics. Indeed, despite the different results of the polls regarding attitudes towards the agreement itself, the polls paint a similar picture in terms of the strength of correlations. The strongest indicator of support for the agreement was support for President Obama, followed by partisanship and ideological affinity (see tables 4, 5, 6 below). Age and level of education also had an effect, but were far less significant.

Table 4: The Obama Factor (JJ)

|                       | <b><u>Favorable to Obama</u></b> | <b><u>Unfavorable to Obama</u></b> |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Approve <sup>26</sup> | 91                               | 6                                  |
| Oppose                | 8                                | 89                                 |

Table 5: Partisanship (AJC)<sup>27</sup>

|         | <b><u>DEM</u></b> | <b><u>GOP</u></b> |
|---------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Approve | 66                | 12                |
| Oppose  | 30                | 87                |

Tables 6: Ideology (JJ, AJC)

|         | <b><u>CON</u></b> |            | <b><u>MOD</u></b> |            | <b><u>LIB</u></b> |            |
|---------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| Approve | 15                | 21         | 44                | 40         | 71                | 73         |
| Oppose  | 72                | 78         | 44                | 58         | 12                | 24         |
|         | <b>JJ</b>         | <b>AJC</b> | <b>JJ</b>         | <b>AJC</b> | <b>JJ</b>         | <b>AJC</b> |

Overall, this demographic breakdown regarding American Jewish attitudes towards the agreement mirrored the demographic breakdown among the general public (e.g. age, education, ideology, partisanship). However, both according to the JJ poll and the Pew polls taken in July and September, the general public was far *less* supportive of the agreement than were American Jews. According to the JJ poll, the general public was almost evenly divided, with a small plurality in favor, while according to the Pew polls, a clear plurality disapproved of the agreement.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that American Jewish opinion ran parallel to trends in opinion among the general public is extremely significant. It demonstrates that American Jewish opinion was part of a wider pattern of partisan and ideological polarization on the Iran deal, policy towards the Middle East and foreign policy in general, which has grown significantly in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>29</sup> While underlying sympathy for Israel remains robust, having risen considerably among non-Jewish Americans since 9/11, at the same time Americans have become increasingly divided over policy towards the Arab-Israeli conflict along partisan, ideological lines that increasingly reinforce each other in a highly polarized political arena. What goes for the Arab-Israeli conflict goes for the Iran deal as well. American Jews were much more supportive of the Iran agreement than the American public in general because American Jews are much more supportive of President Obama, the Democrats and much more liberal than the general public.<sup>30</sup>

But this answer begs another question. Why should American Jews fit the general pattern of attitudes among the American public? Pollsters ask the general public whether they *sympathize* with Israel, but they ask American Jews if they are *attached* to Israel – a qualitatively different relationship. Why did American Jewish attachment not count politically, especially on a core consensus security issue?

### **The Disconnect between Attachment and Political Support for Israeli policies**

While the divide over the Iran deal is *qualitatively* different from previous divisions among American Jews over Israel, it built on a shift in the way American Jews relate to Israel that has been developing for a considerable time.

In the past, American Jews tended to be relatively dovish in their general approach to international affairs, but concern for Israeli security would trump that. Indeed, President Johnson once complained, “A bunch of rabbis came here one day in 1967 to tell me that I ought not to send a single screwdriver to Vietnam – but on the other hand I should push all our aircraft carriers through the Straits of Tiran to help Israel”<sup>31</sup>. Lamenting this situation, thirty years later Peter Beinart castigated the American Jewish establishment for being liberal on everything part from Israel.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the organized community as a whole operated on the basis of the norm of consensual solidarity. There was a communal consensus not to air disagreements with Israeli policy in public and that as Abe Foxman put it, ‘Israeli democracy decides American Jews support.’<sup>33</sup> As has been well documented, since the late 1980s this norm has gradually been challenged by a new norm of ‘pluralistic solidarity’, whereby American Jews decide who and want to support in Israel based on their own predilections.

There are a number of well documented reasons for this.<sup>34</sup> Reality in the Middle East became more complex, as the Arab side began to demonstrate a certain willingness to come to terms with Israel, while Israel became stronger – such that the unity generated by the reality of the situation prior to 1967 dissipated. Against this background, the breakdown of the Israeli consensus over the peace process, fueled and gave legitimacy to American Jewish dissent. This transnational effect was enhanced by the communications revolution which has allowed American Jews easier access to political debates inside Israel itself. The heroic pristine image of Israel was further damaged by the 1982 Lebanon War, the first intifada, the Pollard affair and the ‘Who is a Jew’ affair in 1988. There has also been a generational shift in the way American Jews view Israel and Jewish existence more generally, with a decline in the sense of threat and an increased ‘post materialist’ tendency to view Israel as a place to express one’s individual identity rather than as a form of ethno-religious solidarity and concern for collective security.<sup>35</sup>

Taken together these elements served to erode the moral and consequently political authority of the Israeli government in its relations with the organized American Jewry. In other words, American Jewish organizations became more willingly to openly criticize, and even lobby against, Israeli government policies.<sup>36</sup> They also increasingly direct their financial contributions directly to Israeli partners of their own choosing and according to their own priorities instead of providing a lump-sum to Israeli state and quasi-state institutions to disseminate. According to Sasson,<sup>37</sup> this

constitutes a new form of American Zionism that is less heliographic and more realistic. This decline in deference towards Israel was given expression and reinforced by institutional changes in American Jewry as the large central ‘defense’ organizations have lost their hegemonic position regarding community relations with Israel. They remain the most powerful actors in the community, but there alongside them, have grown up a plethora of different organizations with direct ties to Israel, many of them expressly political on both the right and the left, such as AFN, J Street, Israel Policy Forum, the ZOA, and Americans for a Safe Israel. These organizations promote their views and criticisms of regarding Israel’s domestic and foreign policy with little regard for community consensus. Even some of the large organizations representing religious denominations have moved in this direction, though not to the same extent.<sup>38</sup>

Wertheimer and Cohen<sup>39</sup> views this shift as a return to the pre-Holocaust de-centralized pluralistic (and relatively ineffective) institutional norm among American Jewry; a function of the declining sense of the need for political solidarity felt in the wake of the Holocaust. While this shift has its own particular Jewish and Israeli roots, it can also be viewed as part of a more general shift across Western societies, which has seen the decline of the ‘Fordist’ model dominated by large top-down organizations, be they large conglomerates, trade unions or political parties, and the rise of bottom-up smaller groups in a neo-liberal environment. It may also representative of general changes in liberal democracies over the last several decades where there is growing discontent with organizational and political elites.

### *Why the Iran Deal is Qualitatively Different*

The above shift was a necessary pre-requisite for the clash over the Iran deal. Nonetheless, the deep divide over the Iran deal is qualitatively different from all that has come before for three reasons. First, blocking Iran’s attempt to obtain nuclear weapons was the core of AIPAC’s agenda since the early 1990s, and it has been a major consensual political cause for mainstream Jewish organizations for many years. Second, American Jewish divisions on the Iran deal stood directly in face of an Israeli consensus. Third, the focus of discord was on an issue which Israelis consider to be related to their national security – not religious pluralism, not settlements, not Jerusalem, not even the issue of the proportionate use of force during Israeli military operations.

Indeed, even according to Sasson, -- who emphasizes the growth and institutionalization of political pluralism with the Jewish community regarding Israel expressed in organizations such as *J Street* and the *Emergency Committee for Israel* (associated with Republicans) -- support for Israeli security remains consensual<sup>40</sup>, for example there remains strong backing for American military aid to Israel. In addition, despite concerns about the proportionality of Israel's use of force, three quarters of American Jews approved of Israel's Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in Gaza 2008/9. Similarly, in 2014 when Israel was again fighting Hamas in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge, three quarters of young American Jews (18-26) thought Israel's actions were mostly or completely justified. This was true for self-described liberals as well,<sup>41</sup> in contrast to the attitudes of young Americans in general.<sup>42</sup>

However, the Iran deal presented a somewhat different question. There was almost wall-to-wall American Jewish agreement that Iran represented a serious, potentially existential, threat to Israel, incomparably greater than that presented by the two operations against Hamas referred to above. However, unlike in Gaza, no open, direct, intensive, extended military confrontation was taking place between Iran and Israel. In the face of rockets and terror attacks, Gaza demonstrated the rock-solid commitment of American Jews to the *defense* of Israel. But the Iran deal was not a question of direct defense, but of *national security* broadly conceived. As such, the Iranian nuclear issue allowed greater room for debate about how best to achieve national security. This differs from a situation, like that in Gaza, in which combat has already begun and thus the practical meaning of security is far more obvious and immediate in terms of force protection and protecting one's civilian population – defense-, even though debates about strategy obviously exist in these situations as well. Thus it was not the commitment to Israeli security that lost its political importance. Rather, the issue regarding the Iran deal was who defines what Israeli security means in this real-time political context?

### **Israel's loses its veto-power to define the political meaning of Israeli security for American Jewry**

The failure of the Israeli government and the establishment pro-Israel lobby to galvanize the community behind its position on the Iran deal is especially striking given that American Jewish opinion did **not** consider the agreement likely to prevent Iran going nuclear nor make Israel safer.

Despite the fact that a majority, in both the AJC and the JJ polls, did not think the agreement would prevent Iran going nuclear, a majority nonetheless approved of the agreement. According to the AJC poll<sup>43</sup>, this attitudinal gap was especially significant for Democrats and Liberals. Thus, among American Jews, 66% of Democrats and 73% of liberals approved of the agreement, while a very slim majority of Democrats (50-48%) were *not* confident the deal would stop Iran developing nuclear weapons. Liberals confidence that the agreement would work was 20 percentage points lower than their rate of approval for the agreement. Only 7% of Democrats were ‘very confident’ that the agreement would stop Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, 19% had no confidence at all that the agreement would succeed in this regard.

In parallel, the level of support for the agreement was higher than the number who thought that the agreement would make Israel safer. The importance of this factor breaks down along party lines: it was not significant at all for Republicans,<sup>44</sup> while being strongly significant for Democrats. According to the AJC poll, more Democrats thought the agreement made Israel more threatened rather than less threatened. Meanwhile, a plurality of Democrats (45%) and Liberals (43%) thought the agreement left Israel facing the same level of threat as before. Critically, among these cohorts the overwhelming majority (over 90%) approved of the agreement.<sup>45</sup>

These figures demonstrate that there was a critical group of American Jews, especially self-identified Democrats (about half of all U.S. Jews) who approved of the agreement because they viewed it as the least bad alternative, an alternative that did not negatively affect Israeli security. At the same time, let us recall that the strongest correlations predicting attitudes towards the deal itself was partisanship, ideology and, especially, attitudes towards the President. Taken together, these correlations suggest that American Jewish Democrats either trusted President Obama’s view of the deal and its implications more than they trusted Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the establishment pro-Israel lobby on this issue and/or that in light of their ambivalence over the deal itself they responded to the issue as one which invoked partisan loyalty, rather than reflexive support for the Israeli definition of Israel’s security interests. The section below argues that while this outcome was in line with prior trends, given the special nature of the issue, Netanyahu’s failure to unite American Jewry was *not* a forgone conclusion. The result was significantly affected by the politically strategies deployed by President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu.

## **Obama's Political Correctness**

Obama understood the great political value in being able to credibly present the Iran deal as good for both U.S. and Israeli security. To this end, according to former Senator Joseph Lieberman<sup>46</sup>, the Obama administration made extensive use of the polls of American Jewish opinion to argue that while one might legitimately disagree about whether the agreement was good or bad for Israel, at the very least the administration position was backed by larger numbers of people who did care about Israeli security, which in turn reinforced its own credentials on this point. As the former Democratic Congressman Robert Wexler who supported the Iran deal put it, "People are going to want to see that people that strongly identify with Israel, people who strongly identify themselves as Zionists and are proud to proclaim it, also support the administration's efforts -- I think that's the key."<sup>47</sup>

From the beginning Obama's overall political strategy was built on the correct assumption that, for the overwhelming majority of Jews who generally vote Democrat or consider voting Democrat (and probably for most donors), although Israel is generally well down the list of election priorities, support for Israel and especially Israeli security remains a threshold issue come election time.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, as a Presidential candidate Obama visited Israel. Having recognized that he made a mistake in 2009 when the President visited Egypt but not Israel, Obama visited Israel in March 2013 very soon after his re-election. Obama worked hard to build up his credibility, constantly repeating the refrain that his commitment to Israeli security was "unshakable and unbreakable".<sup>49</sup> As numerous Israeli defense officials and even one of Obama's harshest critics, the former Israeli Ambassador to Washington Michael Oren, had to admit, despite the political differences with the Netanyahu government, the security relationship remained very strong.<sup>50</sup> Other Israeli security officials went further and claimed publicly that the security relationship had never closer (if only as part of the Administration's attempt to constrain Israel from attacking the Iranian nuclear program unilaterally).<sup>51</sup> As a result, while a large majority of the Israeli public opposed the Iran deal and had a negative opinion of Obama's policy towards the Middle East, a clear majority nonetheless thought the U.S. administration remained committed to maintaining Israel's security.<sup>52</sup> This despite the fact that privately Obama questioned a cornerstone of that obligation namely America's commitment to maintain Israel's qualitative edge.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the Obama administration worked to break the **veto power** of the Israeli government and the establishment pro-Israel lobby to define what 'pro-Israel' and 'Israeli security'

mean in political real-time. This was already apparent during the 2008 election campaign when Joe Biden declared that, "AIPAC doesn't speak for the entire Jewish community,"<sup>54</sup> while Obama himself called for a more open debate about Israeli policies in the US, which he suggested was less open than the debate within Israel itself. He added for good measure that an "unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel...can't be the measure of our friendship with Israel."<sup>55</sup> Such statements were at one with the public divisions within the organized Jewish community over Israeli policy towards the peace process. As such, Obama hardly risked being accused publicly of being anti-Israel; except by American Jews who would vote Republican in any case. Obama's position was strengthened, by the emergence of J Street in 2008. Indeed, the head of the organization Jeremy Ben-Ami explicitly viewed his organization's role as, "to do whatever we can in Congress to act as the president's blocking back."<sup>56</sup> That is, their objective was to promote President Obama's Middle East policy by emphasizing splits within the pro-Israel lobby. Indeed, Obama sent his then National Security Advisor, General Jones, to address the first J Street conference in 2009.

As was explained by the President's close adviser Ben Rhodes<sup>57</sup>, the President and other leading figures in the administration, gave the influential American Jewish journalist Jeffrey Goldberg a number of interviews (and extensive access) in which they sort to make the case to centrist Jewish (and non-Jewish) Democrats who were uneasy about aspects of Obama's policy towards Israel and Iran, as indeed was Goldberg himself – though he was also highly critical of the Netanyahu government – which served the administration's purpose perfectly. Goldberg eventually came out in favor of the agreement, without much enthusiasm as a necessary evil in which he did not have great confidence– as indeed did many American Jewish Democrats – as we have seen.<sup>58</sup> At least equally as important, the Administration and American Jewish supporters of the deal played down the Israeli consensus against the deal, instead emphasizing the minority of ex-Israeli security figures who publicly supported the deal. They also played up Israel security assessments that pointed out some positive aspects of the deal, alongside its negative consequences, though without endorsing the deal itself.<sup>59</sup> Altogether this was enough for the President to make a strong case that he did care about Israeli security and that many other people who had strong credentials regarding caring about Israeli security, agreed with him on the Iran deal.

### **Netanyahu's Political Incorrectness**

One of the core operating norms of AIPAC and the establishment pro-Israel lobby is bipartisanship. The political logic of this position is obvious since no party wins every election and both parties and their supporters have a long history of being overwhelmingly sympathetic to Israel. In the wake of the second intifada and 9/11<sup>60</sup>, sympathy for Israel surged among Republicans while remaining stable among Democrats. In parallel, Republicans were more likely to think the US should take Israel's side in the conflict with the Palestinians and they were more supportive when Israel used force against its enemies. On the other side, Democrats were far more supportive of Palestinian statehood and far more opposed to settlements than were Republicans.<sup>61</sup> In any case, despite the logic of AIPAC's position, there was a temptation, especially for right-leaning Israeli governments, to lean towards the Republicans, despite the long-standing American Jewish predilection for voting for the Democrats in national elections.

Indeed, since the 1990s Netanyahu and other figures associated with the Likud worked especially closely with Republicans in Congress who were willing to help him confront the Democratic Clinton administration's promotion of the Oslo peace process.<sup>62</sup> While officially remaining neutral in the 2012 Presidential election, it was clear to commentators that Netanyahu was acting in ways designed to assist the Republican challenger Mitt Romney.<sup>63</sup>

Yet to have any chance of Congress blocking the Iran deal, bipartisan support was essential. For although the Republicans controlled Congress, reaching the two-thirds majority to over-ride a Presidential veto would require significant support from Democrats. Again, while Netanyahu formally adopted a bipartisan position, in practice his behavior gave the impression that he was working first and foremost with the Republicans in Congress. The act that did most to cement this impression was his March 2015 address to Congress in which he lambasted the emerging Iran deal framework. Netanyahu was invited to address Congress by the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, although it was the Israeli side that actually requested the invitation<sup>64</sup>. This was portrayed by the White House and many leading Democrats in Congress as an unacceptable intervention in American domestic politics designed to boost Netanyahu's standing with the Israeli electorate just prior to Israeli elections. Over fifty Democratic Congressional representatives refused to attend Netanyahu's speech.<sup>65</sup> While Netanyahu's standing with Republicans far outstripped Obama's, Netanyahu's standing among Democrats fell

from a dead heat of 32% favorable and unfavorable in February 2015 to 46% unfavorable and 17% favorable post speech, in March 2015.<sup>66</sup>

Netanyahu's problem with Democrats in general was also evident among Jewish Democrats. According to the AJC poll, American Jews were almost evenly divided over Obama's handling of US-Israeli relations (49-48).<sup>67</sup> But a large majority of Jewish Democrats approved of the President's handling of the relationship (69-29).<sup>68</sup> Netanyahu's grade for handling US-Israeli relations was better than Obama's among American Jews as a whole, 55% approved, 42% disapproved. But among Jewish Democrats a small majority *disapproved* of Netanyahu and more than twice as many disapproved strongly as approved strongly (21-9). Meanwhile according the JJ poll, among those who held unfavorable attitudes towards Bibi (31%) a majority of more than 80% favored the agreement.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, Netanyahu is not responsible for the partisan-ideological polarization in American foreign policy that was reflected in attitudes towards the Iran deal. However, his strategy for opposing the deal played straight into President Obama's hands. It allowed the President to successfully portray Netanyahu's attacks as partisan politics rather than principled policy opposition. The net result was that American Jewish Democrats rallied round Obama's flag. Given the large number of American Jewish Democrats (and significant minority of non-Jewish Democrats) who were ambivalent about the efficacy of the agreement, this was a major blunder by Netanyahu. In the end, this critical group supported the agreement on the basis of party loyalty and support for their Party's leader President Obama. By adopting a strategy that played up partisanship<sup>70</sup> Netanyahu made it less likely that American Jewish Democrats who were attached to Israel but uncertain about the agreement would back Israel's position.

Moreover, there was another alternative. Netanyahu could have addressed the AIPAC policy conference, which was taking place at the same time and he could have taken with the leaders of the center-left Israeli opposition to join in him in speaking there in opposition to the deal. Such a move would have removed the issue of partisanship in American politics, while damaging J Street and the Obama Administration's attempt to portray themselves as 'pro-Israel.' In any case, with the Israeli elections due on March 17, this did not happen.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

The political significance for Israel and the traditional pro-Israel lobby of their defeat over the Iran deal is **not** the fact of defeat. They have often lost when confronted by a determined President, for example in 1975 during the ‘reassessment crisis’ or in 1978 over the sale of military planes to Saudi Arabia and Egypt or in 1981 over AWACS or in 1991 over the linkage between settlements and loan guarantees.<sup>72</sup> The pro-Israel lobby has never been as powerful in reality as depicted by Walt and Mearsheimer<sup>73</sup>. Nor is the significance that American Jews are divided over policy towards Israel; that is old news. Rather the real significance is that the Israeli government and the establishment pro-Israel lobby failed to generate a consensus in the organized American Jewish community and the American Jewish public behind Israel’s position on a consensual core national security issue for Israelis. This represents a serious decline in the ability of Israel and traditional pro-Israel organizations to mobilize political support for Israel. Israel and the traditional pro-Israel lobbying organizations have a declining capability to determine in a singular definitive fashion what ‘pro-Israel’ means in practical terms in the American political arena. They have lost the veto power over what it means to be pro-Israel regarding Israeli *national security* within the American Jewish community, outside of a real-time live military conflict.

Still this caveat-- outside of a real-time live military conflict-- is very significant, for despite the decline, American Jews are still rock-solid in their support for Israeli *defense* and this is understood by American politicians. Consequently, once the Iran deal was reached the Obama administration immediately sought to upgrade the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship and in September 2016 an agreement to extend Israel \$38 billion of military aid over 10 years was signed. Moreover, the agreement allows Israel to apply to Congress for further aid in an emergency or during a military conflict.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that Israel has lost its veto power over what it means to be pro-Israel regarding Israeli *national security* within the American Jewish community, in turn lessens Israel and the traditional pro-Israel lobby’s ability, relative to the White House, to set the terms of the US-Israeli strategic relationship. Indeed, in the aid deal, Israel was forced to accept phasing out of its ability to spend around a quarter of US aid inside Israel itself, thereby ending a unique advantage for Israel that had been in place since the 1980s. Israel also agreed to return to the US any additional aid that Congress grants Israel above the \$38 billion (outside of an emergency or military conflict).

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<sup>44</sup> The level of Republicans opposition to the agreement almost exactly matched the percentage who thought the agreement made Israel less secure (86%) and this tallied with the percentage opposed to the agreement (87%).

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<sup>68</sup> 91% of Republicans disapproved!

<sup>69</sup> While among those who held the very favorable attitudes to Netanyahu (20%), a large majority opposed the agreement (67%).

<sup>70</sup> Against AIPAC's advice, interview with senior AIPAC official; see also statement by former senior AIPAC official Steve Rosen quoted in Guttman 'Was Battle against Iran Deal a Noble Crusade — or Epic Flop?'

<sup>71</sup> Netanyahu did belatedly invite opposition leaders Livni and Herzog to join him on the US visit, but they declined. This is consistent with their public opposition to Netanyahu speaking at Congress which they viewed as counterproductive; conversation with an official in a large American Jewish organization, August 2016.

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