

A New Direction? Trump, the Republicans, and the US-Israeli Future

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JONATHAN SCIARCON, JUL 13 2016

Over the past year, Donald Trump, the now presumptive GOP candidate, has caused a stir among ardent Republican supporters of Israel. During the Republican primaries, Trump stood out as the one candidate who was unwilling to promise that he would provide blanket support to the state. Indeed, besides making what he perceived to be complimentary comments about the business acumen of his Jewish audience, the most notable aspect of Trump's speech to the Republican Jewish Coalition this past winter was his unwillingness to promise to overtly privilege Israeli needs over Palestinian ones in a future peace deal. This speech left many Republican supporters of Israel unsure of what a Trump presidency would mean for US-Israeli relations.

Since effectively securing the Republican nomination, Trump has made some conciliatory gestures towards Israel's supporters. Perhaps most notably, he doubled-down on his opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Deal) in a speech to members of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). For some, Trump's recent pro-Israel comments are evidence of his long-standing, unshakeable support for the state, while for others, they are merely the pandering comments of a celebrity who would say anything to become the country's next leader.

Rather than trying to predict exactly what a Trump administration's policies would be towards Israel, it is more important to try to ask what Trump's candidacy says about the current state of Republican support for Israel and about possible shifts in US-Israeli relations in the future. In order to attempt to answer these questions, it is necessary to first consider the history of Republican support for Israel.

Since its creation in 1948, Israel has enjoyed strong bi-partisan congressional support in the United States. This support, however, did not spill over to the executive branch until the mid- to late-1960s, when both the Johnson and Nixon administrations forged closer relations with Israel. Although Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush all had public disputes with their Israeli counterparts, the relationship endured and, arguably, improved. Interestingly, however, the perception arose that Democratic presidents were more consistently pro-Israel than Republican ones. A good guess as to why this was the case is that many Americans, including many Jews themselves, assumed that the American Jewish community was the most pro-Israel community in the country. Since, with the exception of the 1980 election, American Jews have overwhelmingly supported Democratic presidential candidates in national elections in the post-war period, with the perception being that Democratic presidents were more supportive of Jewish interests, Israel was often viewed as a Jewish interest.

This perception ignored increasing cultural acceptance of Jews and high levels of support for Israel among the general American population as early as the 1950s and the increasing political activism of Evangelical Christians in the Republican Party, starting in the 1970s. In fact, over the past forty years, Evangelical Christians, who vote overwhelmingly Republican in national elections, have emerged as the largest and, arguably, most consistently pro-Israel community in the country.

Republican support for Israel reached a new high under the presidency of George W. Bush, who strongly identifies as an Evangelical Christian. Coming on the heels of perhaps the most pro-Israel Democratic president in US history, Bill Clinton, Bush's time in office was marked by nearly unequivocal support of Israeli policies towards Palestinians, even

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when such support drew flak from other allies. When Bush did express mild reprimand for Israel, he was often met with harsh criticism from members of his own party.

Although many American Jewish supporters of Israel remain lukewarm to pro-Israel Evangelical Christians, the Israeli government has long viewed this group as a key ally. Since the 1970s, Israeli officials have courted religious Christian supporters in the United States. Leaders of Israel's Likud party have been especially effective in doing so, and it has paid off. One of the most significant changes in US relations with Israel over the past forty years has been the shift in Republican politicians' support for Likud.

Since the right-wing Likud only came to power for the first time in Israeli history in 1977, neither Dwight D. Eisenhower, nor Richard Nixon, nor Ford had ever dealt with a Likud Prime Minister. However, both Reagan and George H.W. Bush had significant differences with their Likud counterparts. In fact, Bush's problems with Yitzhak Shamir (in office 1983-84 and 1986-92) were so intense that the latter believed that the former was rooting for his opponent, Yitzhak Rabin, in the 1992 Israeli parliamentary elections. It would be fair to say that in the 1980s and early 1990s both Republican and Democratic presidents preferred to have Labor, rather than Likud, counterparts.

The sharp Republican shift to the right in the 1994 Midterm Elections and the increasing influence of Evangelical Christians in the party brought about a change in this regard, as Republican leaders' views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict came to coincide with those held by Likud leaders. Unlike the tense relationship his father had with Yitzhak Shamir, the younger Bush enjoyed a close relationship with Ariel Sharon, even going so far as to refer to him as a 'man of peace' at the height of the Second Intifada. In 2012 as well as 2016, Republican presidential candidates expressed strong support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

This brings one back to Trump. Despite recent attempts to highlight his personal Christian piety, many religious Republicans view him as a secular candidate. While he has won strong support from some Evangelicals, others view him as a problematic candidate. In terms of Israel, Trump's candidacy marks a departure from all previous serious candidates who have pursued the GOP nomination since Bush left office in 2008. In 2008 and 2012, the Republican nominees tried to use their unabashed support for Israel as a proxy for their support for American interests and values. When they criticized Barack Obama for his supposed negative views of Israel, their constituents understood these attacks as criticisms of Obama's perceived lack of desire to uphold the American ideals of freedom and democracy. Such attacks were grounded in the common Republican belief, strengthened by the 9/11 attacks and subsequent War on Terror, that the United States and Israel are western democracies fighting the same enemies for the same reasons.

In contrast, Trump has used free-trade and immigration, and not Israel, as a proxy in debates revolving around upholding American interests. As a representative of a segment of America that wants to turn inward, Trump's campaign has left little space for internationalist rhetoric that would view a strong US-Israeli relationship as an essential part of America's role as *the* global leader. Instead, Trump's campaign sees American alliances abroad as either wasteful or unnecessary. If there has been a common theme in Trump's discussions of global politics it has been the need to renegotiate trade deals with allies to the benefit of American workers.

Trump's approach to foreign policy has alienated many in the Neo-Conservative wing of the Republican Party, since members of this group advocate for a consistently robust American commitment to international involvement. This is also the wing of the party that has provided the most consistent secular intellectual arguments in favor of a strong US-Israeli relationship. At the same time, however, Trump's message has resonated with working-class voters who are far more concerned with the economic challenges facing their families than they are with foreign policy. Many of these same voters are Christian supporters of Israel.

So what are we to conclude about the state of current Republican support for Israel? Based on recent polling, it does not appear to be wavering. What does appear to be different, though, is that the party itself is turning away from an activist foreign policy, at least for the foreseeable future. This is not viewed positively in Israel, whose government depends on the US for over three billion dollars in annual aid, blanket diplomatic support at the United Nations, and help in managing relationships with European countries that are often critical of its actions towards Palestinians. It is

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worth noting that although George W. Bush was beloved by most Israeli Jews, whereas Obama has been viewed negatively by this group, most Israeli Jews prefer that Clinton, and not Trump, become the next US president.

Finally, what might the rise of Trump tell us about the future of US-Israeli relations? If his view of foreign policy continues to hold sway in the Republican Party in the future, then it may lead to a significant decline in US-Israeli relations. As of now, Israel still enjoys strong bi-partisan support in the United States. It appears, however, that we may be witnessing a significant shift among younger voters in the Democratic Party with regard to support for Israel. If, over the next 10 to 25 years, Democrats come to sympathize with Palestinians as much as Israelis, then the bi-partisan support for Israel in the US will likely falter, leaving the Republicans as the country's sole pro-Israel party. But if the Republicans become a party of isolationism, then Israel will be left without even one reliably supportive political party in the US. Under such circumstances, it is possible that Israel would cease to be a major recipient of US foreign aid or diplomatic support. It is no wonder that Netanyahu is following this election with trepidation.

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