

CHAPTER SEVEN

The International Arena





7.1 Preserving Bipartisan US Support for Israel



As the US presidential and congressional elections in November 2020 draw near, political polarization in Washington and across America already has begun to intensify, drawing Israel into debate. This poses a challenge for Israel and the pro-Israel community in the US. How do you continue to secure bipartisan support for the US-Israel diplomatic and strategic relationship?

This challenge may become even more difficult as tensions between the US and Iran escalate, possibly into open conflict. It is important that Israel not be perceived as having provoked a confrontation between the US and Iran.

The first component of this challenge is characterized by the rise of the radical-progressive wing within the Democratic Party. This group is highly critical, indeed hostile, towards Israel.

Israel should work to strengthen its identification with broad American values – social, cultural and political – and reach out to a wide cross-section of American society.

The ascension of the progressives has fueled Republican efforts to tar the entire Democratic Party as anti-Israeli, ignoring the differences between the radical fringe and the pro-Israeli stance of the party's mainstream. Support for Israel is thus being transformed from a bipartisan principle, the consensus for over 70 years, into a controversial issue that reflects even wider divisions in American politics.



However, the use of Israel to promote a partisan agenda did not begin with the Trump presidency or with the present Congress. This process has been in play for years, as positions became polarized during the Obama administration. This rift became evident in the lead up to the 2015 JCPOA, during which what could have been a serious national discussion about Iran became a politicized exchange of accusations.

To compensate for this increasingly polarized atmosphere in America, Israel should work to strengthen its identification with broad American values – social, cultural and political. Specifically, Israel must reach out to a wide cross-section of American society. Significant resources should be devoted to this effort. At the same time, Israel cannot recuse itself from the struggle against pro-BDS and anti-Zionist forces in the US.

Israel needs to accomplish two seemingly contradictory goals. On the one hand, it needs to maintain and strengthen close cooperation with the pro-Israel Trump administration on matters of vital national interest. Specifically, Israel and the US administration need to be working from the same playbook with regards to a possible confrontation with Iran (as they have worked together to advance recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem and the Golan and to promote greater Israeli-Palestinian cooperation).

On the other hand, Israel must maintain a neutral position in all matters pertaining to the steaming cauldron that is 2020 US electoral politics. Special efforts should also be made to mend fences with the American Jewish community (see the next section).

Striking the right balance will not be easy and will require constant vigilance, discipline, and intensive personal involvement at the highest political levels.

Meanwhile, in the context of close cooperation with the Trump administration, Israel should seek to re-negotiate the terms of the US Foreign Military Financing aid package, agreed to during the Obama administration. Israel is now very limited in use of US aid for procurement from Israeli defense industries. And yet, Israel must maintain a strong technological base as part of its qualitative edge, and this means strengthening Israeli military industries. With all due respect to the Trump administration's declared role as an ardent defender of US industrial interests, Israel should delicately approach US officials about the prospects of returning to past practices.





7.2 American Jewry as a Strategic Asset



Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, and consequently the Israeli government bears responsibility for Jewish fate and unity around the world. Israel also continues to rely on the support of North American Jewish communities, which constitute a large majority (approximately 75%) of Diaspora Jewry. Jewish leaders and organizations are counted on to influence the US administration and Congress, as well as Canadian counterparts.

This remains a factor of great strategic importance. Even in militarily terms, North American Jewish support is vital due to the scope of US aid and arms supplies. Diplomatically, the Diaspora community helps secure US support for Israel's core national security policies and its firm stance against Iran.

Israel should improve the forums of consultation with leaders of major North American Jewish organizations and other key figures in the Diaspora community.

Despite frictions between Israel and the Diaspora, the assessment that an irrevocable rift has opened between the two communities is overstated. Most American Jews hold a deep attachment to the Jewish state, one that's rooted in faith, historical memory, Jewish peoplehood and family ties. In addition, the growing and positive impact of Birthright, the not-for-profit educational organization that sponsors free heritage trips to Israel for young adults of Jewish heritage, should not be underestimated. However, there are clear warning signs that relations between the world's two largest Jewish communities are entering a difficult period. These challenges necessitate Israeli responses on several levels.



Israel has come to be perceived by a large percentage of American Jewry, which tends to support liberal causes, as being too closely associated with President Donald Trump. Even though the political culture in Israel is quite different than that of the US, bipartisanship in the American political arena should be clearly pursued by Israel (as discussed above). Specifically, relations with key Jewish pro-Israeli Democrats including Congressional leaders in both houses, should be intensely cultivated to overcome the dangerous winds blowing from this party's radical-progressive camp.

The welcome support for Israel of American Evangelical Christians is not a sufficient alternative to the support of the American Jewish community. Israel needs to renew efforts to reach agreements with America's non-Orthodox Jewish denominations – which continue to comprise the bulk of American Jewry. Israel should reach renewed understandings regarding egalitarian prayer arrangements at the Western Wall.

Alas, younger generations of Diaspora Jews are marching down the road of assimilation and intermarriage. Formative experiences like the Holocaust, the establishment of modern Israel and the Six-Day War resonate less and less with these young Jews. In addition, university students must contend with anti-Israel intimidation in the name of "intersectionality" on campus.

Under these circumstances, it is more important than ever to invest in Jewish education, including extensive funding for Jewish day schools. US Jews should also reconsider their long-held objections to the voucher system for parochial schools. Embracing such a system would enable relevant government agencies to support Jewish parents who are struggling to provide Jewish schooling for their children.

Israel should also do more to promote Birthright ("Taglit"), "Masa," and other like-minded educational programs. Israel should take concrete steps to facilitate the development of undergraduate and graduate study programs in English in Israeli universities and colleges; maintain contact with program participants via intensive post-program activities; and assist American Jewish organizations in mobilizing the leadership potential of outstanding program participants.

More broadly, it is important for Israel's political establishment to improve the forums of consultation with leaders of major North American Jewish organizations and other key figures in the Diaspora community. The ultimate responsibility for this lies with the Israeli prime minister, in close coordination with the Jewish Agency and the Foreign Ministry. The Ministry for Diaspora Affairs needs to be involved in such projects too, should it be retained as a separate ministry.





7.3 The European Arena



Europe is an important player in the international arena. The combined EU economy is the second largest in the world, in nominal terms. The EU is Israel's largest trading partner. Britain and France are permanent members of the UN Security Council. They also maintain a military presence in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean.

If and when it is ultimately implemented, Brexit will be a crucial indicator of a broader breakdown across Europe. The financial crisis of 2008 shook up European economies, threatened the Euro's stability and forced countries with severe budgetary deficits (such as Greece, Spain and Italy) to implement austerity measures.

Israel must continue to cultivate partners in Europe to neutralize unfriendly positions adopted in Brussels.

Immigration is another factor transforming European society. Since 2011, the civil wars in Syria and in Libya have triggered a massive influx of migrants to Europe. This development led German Chancellor Angela Merkel to make the controversial decision in 2015 to accept a million Syrian refugees. Significant migration is also originating from Africa, with new arrivals reaching Europe through the Mediterranean.

Austerity programs and the immigration issue have combined to fuel a rise in the strength of parties that are demanding that political and economic power be taken back from Brussels and returned to elected national governments. These parties, generally labeled as "populist", are currently in power in Italy, Poland and Hungary. Meanwhile, long established parties in Germany and Spain are weakening, as nationalist populists make it increasingly difficult for the traditional centers of political power to form stable governments.



Many populist parties and populist-led governments in Europe hold a positive view of Israel. These new political players regard Israel as an embodiment of their own strategic vision: A sovereign nation state with a thriving economy, conservative society and determination to secure its borders and fight terror. Populists also appreciate Israel's willingness to confront European institutions as necessary.

In recent years, Israel has managed to improve relations with the governments of Greece and Cyprus (as discussed above), Hungary, Poland and Italy. Israel also has openly disagreed with EU policies on upholding the JCPOA, imposition of sanctions on the Islamic Republic and the status of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, populist governments foiled the EU's plan to denounce the move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Hungary, the Czech Republic and Romania have taken initial steps towards moving their embassies to Jerusalem.

The rift in Europe between populist and liberal governments offers opportunities for Israeli diplomacy. However, the rise of increasingly nationalist politics could also prove to be a boomerang that turns against Israel's vital interests. Moreover, some of the populist parties harbor thinly veiled anti-Semitic elements which bear ill will toward Jews and the Jewish state.

Despite the populist problem, Israel must continue to cultivate partners in Europe to neutralize unfriendly positions adopted in Brussels. The most urgent matter for Israel is to try and reverse the present policies of key European players, who seek to undermine the Trump administration's sanctions on the Iranian regime. In this context, Israel should step up its efforts to inform Europeans about Iranian terror activities being planned and perpetrated on their own continent.

Relatedly, Israel should pressure European countries to follow Britain's lead and end the artificial distinction they've drawn between Hezbollah's terrorist armed "wing" and its supposedly "legitimate" political leadership. Moreover, efforts should be redoubled to question, confront and change the EU's positions on the Palestinian issue and specifically on Jerusalem.

Israel should actively pursue the natural gas pipeline project linking Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy.

It is also in Israel's interest that harsh European criticisms of the Egyptian regime in general and President Sisi be dialed back. This policy should be implemented, as previously elaborated on, together with continuing Israeli efforts to increase Israeli cooperation with other eastern Mediterranean countries. Specifically, Israel should actively pursue the natural gas pipeline project linking Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy.

At the end of 2020, the seven-year EU R&D program, "Horizon 2020", will end. Horizon 2020 has become an important asset for the Israeli economy and research community. Israel should start preparing as soon as possible for negotiations over the next such program.

It's worth noting the difficulties that accompanied the negotiations in 2013 over Horizon 2020. During this period, Israel was unpleasantly surprised by the EU's blunt demand that funding be denied to all institutions located over the Green Line, including Jerusalem. At the time, a way was found to finesse what was arguably more of a symbolic than a practical issue. However, Israeli negotiators should learn from recent history and come to the negotiations armed with a detailed grasp of who in the European Commission is hostile to the country's interests and who might be more amenable to supporting Israel's contributions and participation.



7.4 The Asian Continent



Asia is on the rise in the 21st century, with the Pacific and Indian littoral regions becoming a central component of the international system. Today, this part of Asia is both the largest market and biggest production base in the world, outpacing growth in the rest of the world. China's ascendancy is the most notable, fueling fundamental geo-strategic shifts with profound implications for the structure of the international system.

Western countries are increasingly concerned about China's intentions, leading to concomitant rise in Western defense budgets. Many Asian countries also worry about a US foreign policy that seems less purposeful and coherent than in the past. This drift began during the Obama administration and continues today under the Trump presidency and is marked by increasingly isolationist tendencies.

Israel, a western Asian country, has chosen in recent decades to put a greater emphasis on Asia. Israel is a small country that is highly dependent for its continued prosperity on export markets. Asian economic growth has thus generated major opportunities for Israel. Since 2018, about one third of all Israeli exports have been to Asia and a similar proportion of foreign investment in Israel has come from Asian countries. Asian nations are also the largest market for Israel's defense-related industries.

Not surprisingly, the main markets for Israeli products and technologies are India and China. Both countries have populations of over 1.3 billion people. Relations with both countries thawed with the end of the Cold War.



Another economic giant, Japan, decided to lift its trade restrictions with Israel around the same time, as the constraints of the Arab boycott loosened. More recently, obstacles to security cooperation and arms sales between Jerusalem and Tokyo also were removed.

Alongside improved relations with Singapore that have increasingly become common knowledge, India has become the “Jewel in the Crown” of Israel’s Asian policy. The close interaction that has emerged has been described by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as “strategic.” Relations between Jerusalem and New Delhi are characterized by extensive trade links and close cooperation between both countries’ security establishments and military industrial complexes.

At this point, efforts should be made by Israel to bolster its special relationship with India so that it may withstand a change in leadership and the possible return to power of the Congress Party, which historically has taken a decidedly less pro-Israeli stance.

As for China, growing trade and investment in Israel are important to both the Israeli economy and wider geo-political developments. However, the current trade war between the US and the PRC is probably just the very beginning of a wider confrontation between these two superpowers.

To allay US concerns, Israel should proceed with greater caution regarding its developing economic and technological relations with China.

Israel cannot afford to be perceived as ambiguous about who it is allied with, the US or China. To allay US concerns, Israel should proceed with greater caution regarding its developing economic and technological relations with the PRC. A policy of prudence also will prevent potential tensions between Israel and China.





A delicate issue that could shackle the blossoming Israel-China relationship are the security cooperation agreements that Israel has with many nations on the continent. These countries fear Beijing's long-term ambitions and are thus seeking to build up their own military capabilities. Israel has avoided developing similar security cooperation with China, as demanded by the US.

Besides China, Israel should nurture good relations with other Asian and Pacific countries. Some of them have in fact been on good terms with Israel for years: Korea, Thailand, Australia, several Pacific island nations, and Singapore.

These Asian countries are united by their pro-Americanism and concerns about China. These factors are contributing to growing security relations with Israel, as characterized by increased acquisitions of Israeli weapon systems. Japan has joined this club. Other countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, are establishing civilian and military ties with Israel, catalyzed by growing concerns about Chinese expansionism.

Israel also should invest diplomatic energy in influencing the voting patterns of Asian countries in international forums. The declining importance of the Palestinian issue in the international community and Israel's overt efforts to sustain a policy of conflict management make this a promising time for Israel to engage with Asia on the diplomatic front.

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Israel also should intensify its bridge building to Muslim countries in Asia, such as Bangladesh and Indonesia. While some Muslim countries, specifically Malaysia, are currently beyond Israel's reach, friendly Asian nations, such as Singapore and Australia, could play a prominent role in mediating between the Jewish state and governments that are currently hostile towards the Zionist enterprise.

Despite much progress on the economic front in recent years, Israel has no free trade area agreement with any Asian country. Israel should seek to expedite the signing of free trade agreements wherever the volume of trade justifies it.



7.5 Africa and Latin America



Israel's improved international standing has enabled significant diplomatic breakthroughs in Africa and Latin America. Once upon a time, many countries on both these continents were friendly towards Israel. Over the years, however, the growing power of the Arab world in international affairs caused African and Latin American governments to downgrade their relations with Israel. This decline is currently being reversed.

Today, countries around the world that wish to significantly boost their relations with Israel no longer fear an economic backlash from Arab states. Moreover, the declining relevance of the Palestinian problem, along with the clear-cut benefits of establishing strong relations with Jerusalem, are transforming Israel into a much-sought-after destination for many foreign ministers.

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Israel has always maintained fruitful cooperation with several nations in Africa, Kenya being the most obvious example. But today, several new relationships are developing openly, including with Rwanda and Chad. Israel can parlay this trend into better relations with many more African nations, particularly those that have a significant evangelical Christian population.

Meanwhile, Israeli diplomatic efforts in Latin America are beginning to bear fruit. The dramatic transformations currently taking place in the largest Latin American country, Brazil, could catalyze change in other countries across South America.

Another reason for the prospect of improved relations is the declining prestige and power of radical regimes, such as those in Venezuela and Cuba. Historically, the stance of these regimes towards Israel have been invariably hostile.