

# THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

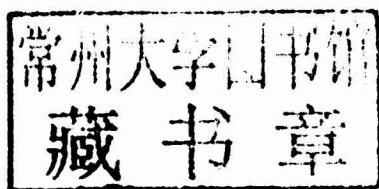


JONATHAN RYNHOLD

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JONATHAN RYNHOLD

*Bar-Ilan University*



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## The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture

This book surveys discourse and opinion in the United States toward the Arab-Israeli conflict since 1991. Contrary to popular myth, it demonstrates that U.S. support for Israel is not based on the pro-Israel lobby, but rather is deeply rooted in American political culture. That support has increased since 9/11. However, the bulk of this increase has been among Republicans, conservatives, evangelicals, and Orthodox Jews. Meanwhile, among Democrats, liberals, the Mainline Protestant Church, and non-Orthodox Jews, criticism of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians has become more vociferous. This book explores and explains this paradox.

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*For my mother*  
*Denise Rynhold*  
1940-1993

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שְׁהֵתֵּינוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

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## Introduction

The United States . . . has a special relationship with Israel . . . really comparable only to which it has with Britain.

—John F. Kennedy<sup>1</sup>

The United States has a special relationship with Israel. A defining feature of the special relationship is that support for Israel goes beyond an empirical calculation of U.S. interests. This is because the relationship is grounded on deep cultural foundations that predate the mass immigration of Jews to the United States. While this special relationship continues to endure; beneath the surface those foundations are shifting in conflicting directions. For in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a paradox has emerged in the way America relates to Israel. On the one hand, Americans identify with Israel and sympathy for Israel is widespread, surging to new heights. On the other hand, Americans are increasingly divided about the Arab-Israeli conflict, and this division increasingly aligns with the major political, ideological, and religious divides in America.

Thus, Republicans and conservatives have become far more supportive of Israel than liberals and Democrats. At the same time, the most vociferous evangelical supporters of Israel oppose Israeli concessions to the Palestinians, while mainline church activists have been pushing divestment from Israel in order to pressure Israel into making concessions. In the heartland of pro-Israel sentiment, the organized American Jewish community has become increasingly divided over the peace process, as exemplified by the formation of the “pro-Israel, pro-peace” lobby J Street, as an alternative to the established pro-Israel lobbying organization the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

What we have here is an “Israel paradox” in American political culture. On the one hand, sympathy for Israel is deep-seated, widespread, and increasingly

robust. On other hand, there are increasing divisions among Americans over the Arab-Israeli conflict. Surveying and analyzing this paradox is what this book is all about.

#### APPROACHES TO U.S.-ISRAEL RELATIONS

American support for Israel is a subject of extensive public debate and academic inquiry. Within the public debate a number of clichés have become pervasive. For example, it is often claimed that Americans' sympathy for Israel is primarily due to two factors: apocalyptic evangelicals trying to bring about Armageddon, or the power of the "Jewish" lobby. Certainly, evangelicals are very supportive of Israel, and the pro-Israel lobby in the United States does possess influence. However, such explanations are simplistic and misleading. After all, as we shall see later on, even secular liberal Americans are more pro-Israel than Europeans. Moreover, Americans' support for Zionism was already apparent in the nineteenth century, predating the existence of a Jewish pro-Israel lobby, and at a time when the American Jewish establishment was anti-Zionist.

Others retort that American support for Israel is simply a matter of shared democratic values and that the reason Europeans are more anti-Israel is because of anti-Semitism. Certainly, anti-Semitism is higher in Europe than in the U.S. and is often associated with anti-Israel sentiment, but European countries with democratic values and low levels of anti-Semitism, like the UK, are still more sympathetic to the Palestinians than Israel. So once again, this simplistic explanation does not suffice.

Finally, a common explanation for the growing divide between Republicans and Democrats on Israel is that right-wing Israeli policies are alienating American liberals. Again, there is no doubt that American liberals oppose the policies of the Israeli Right, but the levels of sympathy for Israel among Democrats has actually remained steady, while liberals have been divided among themselves over who is primarily to blame for failure to achieve peace. Clearly then, there is a need to analyze these issues in depth.

In terms of academic studies, broadly speaking, there have been three approaches to U.S.-Israeli relations, one focused on American national interests, another on the influence of the pro-Israel lobby, and yet another on political culture.

#### THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Realist approach to international relations views shifts in the balance of power between states and the national interest defined in terms of power and state security as the key to understanding international relations.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective U.S. support for Israel is viewed as stemming primarily from the perception of Israel as a strategic asset for the United States.<sup>3</sup> Indeed,

international politics and U.S. interests have clearly played a significant role in influencing U.S. policy to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

However, it is not always clear whether supporting Israel has been in the U.S. interest or not. In fact, there has been a long standing debate among American policy makers as to whether Israel is a strategic asset or a liability. This debate has intensified in the twenty-first century. Crucially, it is not simply a debate over the nature of the empirical reality that can be settled by “facts” alone; rather it is a debate informed by different subjective conceptions of what American grand strategy ought to be.

Grand strategy involves a self-conscious identification and prioritization of foreign policy goals and a selection of a plan and the appropriate instruments such as military power or diplomacy to achieve those goals. It begins with theories about how the world works and what ought to be the role of one’s state in that world. Even Realists, such as Walter Lippmann and George Kennan, thought that cultural factors can profoundly affect grand strategy.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in order to explain the influence of strategic factors on U.S. policy, one must first understand the place of Israel in these ideational constructs, which are an integral part of America’s political culture.<sup>5</sup>

#### THE PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY

While Realists generally view domestic politics as at most a secondary factor driving foreign policy, two prominent Realist scholars have argued that U.S. policy toward Israel is an exception to that rule. In the wake of President George W. Bush’s strong support for Israel, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argued that U.S.-Israeli relations are primarily a function of a powerful pro-Israel lobby. While the strident polemical tone of their work made a big splash, their argument was not in itself original, but rather echoed earlier works that essentially made the same case.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that pro-Israel groups constrain U.S. policy, raising the political costs of pressuring Israel. But Mearsheimer and Walt’s claims are exaggerated.<sup>7</sup> Pro-Israel groups do not control U.S. policy, nor are they its main determinant.

Middle East policy is made primarily by the administration, especially the president.<sup>8</sup> Between 1945 and 1984, when the pro-Israel lobby clashed with the executive it won about a quarter of the time, and then primarily on the details of economic issues rather than on the bigger issues of diplomatic or military policy.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Aaron Miller, a former State Department official who dealt with the Middle East peace process in the 1990s, concluded: “I cannot remember a single major decision on Arab-Israeli peace in which AIPAC, either directly or indirectly, prevented us from moving in the direction we [the Administration] wanted.”<sup>10</sup> Even allowing for the growth of AIPAC in the twenty-first century, the Center for Responsive Politics ranked the pro-Israel lobby’s effectiveness twenty-sixth out of forty industries lobbying Congress.<sup>11</sup>

In any case, whatever the precise level of influence exerted by pro-Israel organizations, that influence cannot be properly understood in isolation from wider public opinion. As Kenneth Wald concluded, foreign policies advocated by ethnic groups succeeded “only to the extent that they had allies outside their own communities; could frame their policy in terms that resonated with American values; and, perhaps most important, offered plans consistent with American national interest as perceived by the president and public opinion.”<sup>12</sup> Andrew Kohut, the president of the highly respected Pew Research Center that surveys American public opinion, concurred, stating, “If you didn’t have a broad base of public support . . . you couldn’t create the level of support for Israel that exists on the basis of lobbying.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, in order to explain the influence of the pro-Israel lobby, one must first of all understand the resonance of Israel in American political culture.

## POLITICAL CULTURE

In terms of International Relations theory, rationalist-materialist paradigms such as Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Marxist dependency theory view ideas as merely an epiphenomenon, dismissing the role of political culture. However, neoclassical Realism<sup>14</sup> and foreign policy analysis<sup>15</sup> do recognize a significant role for ideational factors, while Constructivism gives culture and ideas pride of place.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, a short Constructivist analysis of U.S.-Israel relations has been published.<sup>17</sup> More generally, there have been a number of works about American political culture and attitudes towards Israel and the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> But these are almost exclusively concerned with the Cold War period or earlier. They also tend to emphasize the “stickiness” of attitudes. This is an important part of the story. However, culture and attitudes are, at least in part, dynamic.<sup>19</sup>

Given changes in American attitudes to Israel and the Middle East since the end of the Cold War, there is an acute need for a new and comprehensive analysis of this subject. This is the purpose of the current work. Below, the concept of political culture is defined and the way in which it is deployed in this book is outlined.

## Definitions and Approaches

In the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Lucien Pye defines political culture as “the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system . . . encompassing both the political ideals and the operating norms<sup>20</sup> of a polity.”<sup>21</sup> As such, political culture incorporates conceptions of collective identity,<sup>22</sup> conceptions as to the nature of politics (ontology), assessments of what is desirable (values), legitimate (norms) and plausible in the political realm, all of which inform the

ideological<sup>23</sup> orientations and political objectives of both leaders and citizens, as well as the strategies they deploy to advance these objectives. Moreover, political culture is not only cognitive and evaluative, but also affective. According to Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba,<sup>24</sup> the cognitive element decodes experience giving it meaning; the evaluative element informs expectations and provide goals towards actions are directed, while the affective element refers to emotions that “move” actors. While some elements of a political culture are consensual, others are contested, often vigorously, by various subcultures.<sup>25</sup>

Some have approached the study of political culture by analyzing the aggregation of individual attitudes through surveys; while others have adopted an interpretative approach that has focused on understanding intersubjective meaning as portrayed in the discourse, in narratives.<sup>26</sup> This involves analysis of how issues are framed, wherein framing is defined as “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.”<sup>27</sup>

The approach adopted here is eclectic and “bottom-up,” driven by the requirements of the empirical case at hand. On the one hand, it looks at long-standing consensual elements of political culture encapsulated in America’s national identity, as well as in its shared values and orientations. On the other hand, it analyzes the impact of changes and divisions in American political culture, including the evolution in the ways key subcultures relate to Israel and the Arab-Israel conflict. In each case, the attitudes and orientations of the wider public, as well as the approaches of, and discourse among, intellectuals, opinion formers, commentators, and communal, religious, and ideological elites, are surveyed and analyzed. The attitudes of the former are drawn primarily from many public opinion surveys, whereas the approaches of the latter are drawn primarily from media and public statements that make up the discourse on the subject. While the focus is contemporary, the historical foundations of different approaches are also traced so as to demonstrate the depth of their cultural roots.

## CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE

The focus of this book is American political culture, and attitudes and approaches to Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict, rather than U.S. foreign policy per se. The emphasis is on predispositions, rather than the nitty-gritty of U.S.-Israeli relations itself. While this book does not assess the relative importance of cultural factors in determining U.S. policy compared to other factors – such as the pro-Israel lobby – it does look at the way cultural factors inform both U.S. domestic politics and American strategy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In order to understand the place of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict in American political culture, it is necessary to analyze it in two different ways.

First, American attitudes toward Israel must be assessed in a holistic sense and compared to the attitudes of other comparable Western countries, in order to get a sense of what unites Americans and distinguishes them from other nations on these issues. This is done in the first chapter, which focuses on the cultural foundations of American support for Israel and the development of contemporary attitudes; these in turn are compared and contrasted to contemporary European attitudes. Among the questions addressed in this chapter are: Why are Americans more sympathetic to Israel than Europeans, and why has the transatlantic divide over the Arab-Israeli conflict grown?

Second, American political culture must be broken up into a number of key subdivisions that signify core cultural and political divisions in America, and/or groups that are especially concerned and active regarding Israel and the conflict. The most important political and ideological division in America is between Democrats and liberals on the one hand, and conservatives and Republicans on the other hand. Whereas in the past this divide was largely irrelevant to Israel, it has now become increasingly significant. Given that presidents often pay more attention to public opinion among their own supporters than to the public at large,<sup>28</sup> clearly this division warrants serious analysis, and this is undertaken in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the divide within the largest and most important religious group in America – Protestants. About half of all Americans continue to identify as Protestants. Religion counts in American politics, and as is explained in the first chapter, Protestantism has a particularly important role in American political culture in general, and with regard to Israel in particular. The central dividing line among American Protestants is between the Protestant mainline church and evangelicals. This divide has become increasingly important concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict. Evangelicals provide the largest base of American support for Israel, and they have become mobilized and highly organized for this cause. In contrast, the strongest base of anti-Israel activism in American society is centered in the mainline Protestant churches, which have been at the forefront pushing the campaign to divest from Israel. Consequently, it is important to examine this divide among Protestants in depth.

The final group analyzed in this book is the American Jewish community, the backbone of support for Israel in America. While constituting less than 2 percent of the American population, American Jewry's political influence is magnified by the fact that they are far more engaged in American politics than other ethnic and religious groups, voting in far higher proportions, generous in funding political parties and races, and historically highly organized and active in support of Israel. This is not simply a question of political power, but also more subtle kinds of influence. Because American Jews are understood to be the most invested in Israel, wider American debates about the Arab-Israeli conflict are influenced by debates over the issue among American Jews, much of which takes place in forums that are not specifically Jewish, like the *New*

*York Times*.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, what goes on inside the community is of great significance to the U.S. relationship with Israel. Chapter 6 examines the growing gap among different Jewish groups in the level of attachment to Israel, while addressing the question of whether American Jews, and especially the younger generation of American Jews, are growing more distant from the Jewish state. Chapter 7 focuses on American Jewish attitudes to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the growing divide within the organized Jewish community over the peace process.

Finally, the conclusion brings together all the different strands referred to above. It addresses the political significance of the “Israel paradox” for U.S.-Israeli relations, with the key question being: will rising support reinforce the pro-Israel tendency in U.S. policy, or do growing divisions signal the weakening of the special relationship?

Overall, each of the chapters is structured in a similar manner. First, they explain the demographic and political makeup of the relevant group. Second, they provide the historical and cultural foundations of approaches to Israel and the conflict within the group. Here the impact of identity, ideology, theology, and/or strategic thinking is examined, as appropriate. These sections focus mainly on elite approaches, though they also help explain the orientations of wider elements of the public. Third, the chapters survey public attitudes within each relevant group toward the conflict from the early 1990s until approximately 2010; in many cases the elite discourse in the relevant media and/or among key organizations is also assessed for the same period. Finally, each chapter demonstrates how cultural factors feed into politics and policy, with the focus on the way culture informs politics, and not on a detailed analysis of U.S. policy per se.

Throughout the book an important distinction is made between a *gap* and a *divide* in opinion. An opinion gap exists when both sides share a basic orientation, the difference being one of degree. An opinion divide exists when the sides adopt opposite positions on an issue, or when one side has a strong opinion pointing in one direction and the other side is equivocal. Finally, a number of recurring questions are addressed. These help provide some overarching benchmarks that aid comparisons across the various groups. They include the following:

Do sympathies lie more with Israel, the Palestinians, or neither/both?

Who is more to blame for the conflict?

On whom does the onus primarily lie, in terms of acting to try to resolve the conflict?

What are people’s preferences in terms of key issues at stake in the conflict, such as Palestinian statehood, settlements, and Jerusalem?

How important is the Arab-Israeli conflict to American interests compared to other issues in the Middle East, like terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and radical Islamism?

How active should the U.S. be in relation to the peace process?

Should the U.S. take sides in the conflict? If so, whom should it support?

Should the U.S. apply heavy pressure on one or both of the parties?

The upcoming chapter looks at how American and European publics answer these questions; but before it does so, it explores the cultural foundations of Americans' support for Israel.

## Like U.S.: American Identification with Israel

### *Cultural Foundations and Contemporary Attitudes*

There is no nation like us, except Israel.

—Ronald Reagan<sup>1</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

American sympathy for Zionism and the State of Israel is widespread, long-standing, and deeply rooted in American political culture. This orientation not only predates the creation of professional pro-Israel lobbying organizations; it actually preceded the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1948, Jews constituted fewer than 4 percent of all Americans. Even if every American Jew favored Israel, no more than 10 percent of American supporters of Israel could have been of Jewish origin in that year. By 2009, Jews were estimated to be only 1.8 percent of the population, accounting at most for 3 percent of Israel's supporters in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the answer to the puzzle of American sympathy for Israel does not lie on the Lower East Side of New York; rather, it is deeply embedded in the very foundations of American national identity and political culture.

The chapter begins by identifying the main strands of American identity and political culture. It then explores the way in which those strands have informed positive orientations toward Zionism and the State of Israel. Subsequently, American public opinion toward the Arab-Israeli conflict is surveyed and contrasted with Western European attitudes, with the focus on the first decade of the twenty-first century. This transatlantic divide is then explained in terms of broader cultural differences between America and Western Europe.