

**NOT SO 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP'?**  
**US-ISRAEL RELATIONS DURING OBAMA'S FIRST TERM**

**ILAI Z. SALTZMAN**

**GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT**  
**CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE**

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The “special relationship” between Israel and the United States, according to conventional wisdom, parallels only to the Anglo-American bond. During Barack Obama’s first term (2009-2013), however, some of the underlying foundations of the “special relationship” between Israel and the United States were challenged and the outcome was noticeable discord and ongoing diplomatic friction between Washington and Jerusalem. The objective of this article is to examine the status of these foundations during Obama’s first term in office. It concludes that while in each aspect there was a noticeable change that allowed Obama to exhibit a more critical position towards Israel, it was insufficient to transform the relationship from “special” to “normal”.

**Introduction**

Despite the bumpy start, the relationship between the United States and Israel evolved into something oftentimes called “special”, approximating the intimate Anglo-American bond. What makes a “normal” relationship become “special” is the wholeness of the association; it involves not only intimate military-diplomatic cooperation, vital as it may be, but also extensive and intensive interaction on various levels that causes both Israeli and American leaders to talk about Washington’s “unconditional support” of Israel (Marsden 2009). Scholars identified four key factors that contributed to the emergence of the special relationship: 1.) Common strategic interests; 2.) An influential pro-Israeli lobby; 3.) Common liberal-democratic values; and 4.) An historical similarity partially based on a common ethos and a shared Judeo-Christian tradition (Bar-Siman-Tov 1998, Gilboa 1987 and Organski 1990: 4-6).

During Obama’s first term in office, however, the relationship between Washington and Jerusalem was strained and aloof despite the continued strategic cooperation between the two countries. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was forced by the Obama administration, for example, to publicly endorse the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to order a nine-month freeze of settlement building in the West Bank and to refrain from unilaterally

attacking Iran's nuclear facilities (Migdal 2014: 274-276). But the climax of this bilateral discord occurred during a summit meeting taking place in Washington in May 2011. After numerous disagreements between the two leaders, and just a day before the Israeli Prime Minister was scheduled to meet with the President in Washington, Obama introduced in a speech he delivered at the State Department his vision for a Middle Eastern peace deal that was based on the 1967 borders (Landler and Myers 2011). Netanyahu was completely outraged by this public and premeditated "ambush", and following a meeting with Obama at the White House, the Israeli Prime Minister publicly and blatantly rejected the President's approach calling it unrealistic and naïve:

Israel wants peace. I want peace. What we all want is a peace that will be genuine, that will hold, that will endure. The only peace that will endure is one that is based on reality, on unshakable facts (Myers 2011 and Wilson 2011).

Obama chose to respond to Netanyahu's criticism during an address to the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). But rather than simply backing down, Obama first reaffirmed his administration's commitment to Israel's security but then continued to push the Israeli government arguing that "we can't afford to wait another decade, or another two decades, or another three decades to achieve peace... Delay will undermine Israel's security and the peace that the Israeli people deserve" (Cooper 2011a).

Netanyahu, on his part, did not conceal his wishes that Obama would not be reelected for a second term in the 2012 presidential elections. He repeatedly attempted to influence the elections by implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, endorsing the candidacy of his ideological twin and personal friend, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Moreover, a few months before the elections, Netanyahu began publicly pressuring the Obama administration to toughen

its approach regarding Iran's nuclear program and his aides leaked to the press that Obama refused to meet the Prime Minister during a UN General Assembly event. Furthermore, Netanyahu met Romney for an intimate dinner in his official residence in Jerusalem as part of the Romney's presidential campaign tour in Israel (Ravid 2011a, Sherwood 2012 and Weinberg 2012). Romney rewarded his host by criticizing Obama's policies and attitude towards Israel:

We cannot stand silent as those who seek to undermine Israel voice their criticisms. And we certainly should not join in that criticism. Diplomatic distance in public between our nations emboldens Israel's adversaries" (Rudoren and Parker 2011).

Nevertheless, the Obama administration continued supporting Israel diplomatically, blocking the Palestinian bid for statehood through the Security Council in November 2011, and financially by allocating nearly \$4 billion in military aid (Cooper 2011b and Sharp 2013). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Israeli Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Barak noted in a television interview that Obama's commitment to Israel's defense was unprecedented: "I should tell you honestly that this administration under President Obama is doing in regard to our security more than anything that I can remember in the past" (CNN 2011).

Hence, the objective of this paper is to explain the discrepancy between these two approaches to U.S. foreign policy towards Israel by examining the state of each of the components of the "special relations" during Obama's first term. The evidence reveals significant erosion in that historical framework and the emergence of a more interest-based and confrontation-prone association.<sup>1</sup> First, the American administration's strategic and geopolitical interest shifted considerably during Obama's first term. Second, the monolithic and conservative nature of the pro-Israel lobby was greatly influenced by a vigorous liberal and pro-peace

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<sup>1</sup> On the distinction between the "special relationship" and the "national interest" frameworks, see Ben-Zvi (2011: chap. 1).

newcomer that exhibited a more critical approach to Israel's policies, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Third, demographic changes in American Jewry gave rise to unprecedented notions of indifference and alienation towards Israel among young and liberal Jewish-Americans. Fourth, controversial Israeli legislation potentially endangered the common democratic-liberal connection between the American and Israeli governments and between American Jews and the Jewish State. Lastly, Obama was not as influenced by the evangelic Christian Right as his predecessor and thus the strong religious dimension of unequivocally supporting Israel has significantly diminished.

The article concludes that the effect of these changes on American foreign policy towards Israel was relatively limited, but it did allow the Obama administration to display a utilitarian attitude towards Jerusalem that somewhat resembled Washington's policies during the presidencies of Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and George H.W. Bush. However, these changes did not generate a sufficient critical mass to fully transform the nature of the U.S.-Israel relationship nor to overcome dramatic changes in the region including the Arab Spring. If these tendencies will persist and sufficiently ripen, however, the relationship will eventually become "normal" and lose its uniqueness.

### **The Shifting Israeli-American Strategic Interests**

As a transformative figure Obama sought to reinvigorate American global and regional leadership after the controversial presidency of George W. Bush whose Middle East policy legacy was marked by strong unilateralism and military adventurism. In order to realize this goal, it is possible to identify three changes in the American strategic posture that determined his overall relation towards Israel.

First, alongside the basic commitment to Israel's national security, the American administration had more "urgent matters" to attend as a result of Bush's legacy in Iraq and Afghanistan. For Obama, the Israeli-Arab and Israeli Palestinian conflicts were not as pressing in their own right as minimizing or completely ending American military involvement in the region and reducing U.S. "regional footprint" (Layne 2009, 5). It was these bloody and costly protracted military campaigns that required the bulk of the attention and political energy of the Obama Administration in its first days in office. Although George Mitchell was appointed as American special envoy to the Middle East just two days after Obama entered the White House, renewing resolving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and hopefully resolving the conflict was designed to gradually eliminate American military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Commander of U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus articulated this rationale in a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in March 2010:

[E]nduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the area of responsibility... Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples [in the region] (*Ha'aretz* 2010).

From the Israeli perspective the trade-off was clear: support for the withdrawal in return for pressure on Israel in the Palestinian track. Since it was the predominant actor in the conflict, holding most of the territorial and political bargaining chips, Obama's policies primarily involved extracting an Israeli freeze of settlement construction in the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem. Speaking in Cairo in mid-2009, Obama (2009c) told his audience that "[T]he United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop." While this represents a traditional American position, the Israelis were dismayed by the

public criticism and behind closed doors feared the mounting tensions in the relations between Jerusalem and Washington. Particularly apprehensive by Obama's tone regarding the settlements in the West Bank, Prime Minister Netanyahu's advisors argued that "there will be no agreement on this unless the Americans soften their stance" (Ravid 2009).

As for the Arab world, Obama rejected the basic premise of Bush's "global war on terror" and offered an alternative prescription that included engagement rather than estrangement. Already in his inaugural speech, Obama (2009a) addressed Muslims around the world telling them that "we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." After U.S.-Israel relationship flourished during the post-9/11 period, given a shared understanding that radical Islam was a common enemy, this suggested a fundamental policy shift. Obama began emphasizing the need for reconciliation by differentiating between the violent, radical Islamic extremists and ordinary Muslims. In order to illustrate this point, Obama (2009b) delivered an historical speech in the Turkish parliament in April 2009 where he declared that

America's relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We will listen carefully, we will bridge misunderstandings, and we will seek common ground... The United States has been enriched by Muslim Americans. Many other Americans have Muslims in their families or have lived in a Muslim-majority country -- I know, because I am one of them.

In a second historical speech delivered in Cairo a couple of months later, Obama (2009c) reaffirmed his intension to differentiate between Islamic extremists that seek to change political realities through the use of violence and everyday Muslims:

I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and

one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles -- principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

In commenting on the Cairo speech, Netanyahu emphasized the parts that related to the unbreakable bond between the U.S. and Israel and downplayed the unequivocal demand to accept the two-state principle (Schneider 2009). But Obama's reaching out to the Muslim world, according to several Israeli policymakers, was expected to be at Israel's expense and Jerusalem will be asked to sacrifice its national interests for that purpose. Leaders of the settlement movement went as far as declaring that "in many respects the speech pandered to Islam; it emphasized 'Hussein' more than it did 'Barak'... He [Obama] will eventually cause us to divide Jerusalem and cede the Temple Mount" (Weiss 2009).

Recognizing the ending of the post-9/11 honeymoon, Netanyahu reluctantly accepted the two-state solution vigorously advocated by Obama. As then Cabinet Secretary Zvi Hauser admitted, "Within a short time, a dramatic shift occurred here, which was the result of our dialogue with the U.S. administration and of the political circumstances we faced" (Shavit 2013). In a special speech delivered only ten days after the Obama's Cairo declaration, Netanyahu attacked the attempt to mollify the Muslim world at Israel's expense. Acknowledging the gap between Washington and Jerusalem, Netanyahu insisted that,

[E]ven with our eyes on the horizon, we must have our feet on the ground, firmly rooted in truth... Whoever thinks that the continued hostility to Israel is a result of our forces in Judea, Samaria and Gaza is confusing cause and effect (*Ha'aretz* 2011).

Much like Netanyahu, most Israelis also interpreted Obama's outreach to the Muslim world and insistence on Israel's acceptance of the two-state solution as undermining the "special

relationship” between the U.S. and Israel. A *Jerusalem Post* poll conducted after the Ankara and Cairo speeches found that only 6% of Jewish-Israelis believed that Obama’s policies were pro-Israeli whereas 50% of the respondents thought they were pro-Palestinian. In comparison, 88% of the Israeli-Jews believed George W. Bush’s policies were pro-Israel and only 2% defined his policies as pro-Palestinian (Hoffmann 2009). Despite several of Obama’s “charm offensives” that included a televised interview to a leading Israeli network or holding cordial meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the president’s approval ratings in the eyes of the Israeli public did not improve. In another poll conducted in mid-July 2010 by the *Jerusalem Post*, only 10% of the Israeli-Jews sampled said that Obama was pro-Israeli while 46% still maintained that he was pro-Palestinian (Hoffmann 2010).

Secondly, and very much connected to the first point, the Obama Administration was eagerly seeking to curtail American involvement in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf in order to upgrade U.S. presence in East Asia in face of China’s rise and the continued destabilizing behavior of North Korea. Initially, Obama sought to “reset” U.S. relations with China after George W. Bush alienated Beijing during the period leading to the invasion to Iraq in 2003 (Lindsay and Daalder 2003).<sup>2</sup> Already as a presidential candidate, Obama stressed the constructive and stabilizing role of China in regional and global affairs. Calling China a “responsible” rising power and a key global stakeholder, Obama (2009a, 12) wanted to create “an inclusive infrastructure with the countries in East Asia that can promote stability and prosperity and help confront transnational threats, from terrorist cells in the Philippines to avian flu in Indonesia.”

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<sup>2</sup> On the initial “reset” of the relationship, see Wolf (2009).

However, Chinese policymakers remained rather worried about U.S. involvement in East Asia. From Beijing's perspective, in addition to a dense web of anti-Chinese alliances, intellectual property rights, the status of Tibet and human rights violations were also considered persistent obstacles to a Sino-American rapprochement (Lampton 2009). Furthermore, China took advantage of its relatively quick recovery from the global economic crisis to launch on a number of controversial, and possibly bellicose, domestic and external anti-western policies (Pomfret 2010). Beijing, for example, escalated its rhetorical criticism of the U.S. and exhibited greater willingness to challenge the territorial status quo in the South China Sea, especially vis-à-vis Japan, a key American ally (Jacobs 2010 and Johnson 2010).

Consequently, by the end of 2011 the Obama administration began signaling its next strategic challenge, the pivot to Asia. Secretary of State Clinton (2011) declared the following month that

In the next 10 years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region.

Declarations were rapidly translated into actual policies as Obama conducted a nine-day visit of Asia designed to signal American increased involvement in the Asia-Pacific rim given China's military and economic rise (Nicholas and Parsons 2011). The strategic shift from the Middle Eastern theatre to the Asian scene was especially evident when Obama announced during his stay in Australia that Washington intends to deploy 2500 marines in Darwin. In a speech to the Australian Parliament, he further reiterated the need for an American shift to Asia following the termination of the prolonged Afghan and Iraqi campaigns: We “made a deliberate and

strategic decision — as a Pacific nation, the United States will play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future” (Clames 2011). The strategic pivot to Asia did not terminate American interests in the Middle East or the Persian Gulf, as the case of the Arab Spring or Iran’s nuclear program proved, but it significantly altered the hierarchy of the U.S. national interests. Whereas China posed a long-term, systemic challenge to American foreign policy in the post-Iraq/Afghanistan period, the Gulf and the Middle East constituted more of a short-term tactical obstruction (Bader 2012, 142).

Lastly, there is an ongoing U.S. attempt to moderate, and possibly end, U.S. reliance on Middle Eastern oil, a resource that has largely shaped Washington’s regional interests since the mid-1940s in order to fit Obama’s strategic vision for American regional foreign and security policy.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand the influence of oil supply from the Middle East and the Persian Gulf on American foreign policy, one needs only to think about the case of the 1973 oil crisis or the Gulf War of 1991. Due to the Obama Administration’s ongoing efforts to accelerate American energetic independence and use of alternative sources of energy such as natural gas, the International Energy Agency (IEA) announced in its 2012 annual report that within five years the United States will become the world’s leading oil producer surpassing Saudi Arabia, currently at the helm of global oil production. Furthermore, the report declared that the U.S. will achieve energetic independence by 2030 when it will become a net oil exporter (Rosenthal 2012).

Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama stressed the need to decrease American energy dependence while improving the energy sector’s environmental sustainability by focusing on renewable energy. If elected, Obama (2007, 13) wrote in his *Foreign Affairs*

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<sup>3</sup> On the historical role of oil in U.S. foreign policy, see Nash (1968).

article, “I will work to finally free America of its dependence on foreign oil-by using energy more efficiently in our cars, factories, and homes, relying more on renewable sources of electricity, and harnessing the potential of biofuels.” In a campaign speech in Michigan, Obama told the audience that *the* critical aspect of his future energy policy will revolve around “the question of what we will do about our addiction to foreign oil. Without a doubt, this addiction is one of the most dangerous and urgent threats this nation has ever faced” (Sweet 2008). U.S. energy policy has become an acute strategic issue and the administration adopted a terminology that emphasized energy security.<sup>4</sup> The 2010 *National Security Strategy* clearly noted that “[O]ur development of new sources of energy will reduce our dependence on foreign oil... As long as we are dependent on fossil fuels, we need to ensure the security and free flow of global energy resources. But without significant and timely adjustments, our energy dependence will continue to undermine our security and prosperity” (White House 2010, 2, 30).

Indeed, as a result of the Obama administration’s focus on increasing energy independence, including investing more than \$90 billion in clean energy (White House 2011), and increasing local oil production, between 2008 and 2011 the U.S. reduced its Gulf-based crude oil imports by about 20%, from 2.37 million barrels a day (Mb/d) to 1.86 Mb/d. The share of Persian Gulf crude oil imports as share of the overall imports of crude oil to the U.S. decreased from 18.4% to 16.4% (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2012, 127). In response to these and other encouraging figures, such as the fact that in 2011 the U.S. showed the highest growth rate of oil production except for OPEC countries, Energy Secretary Steven Chu noted that “[F]or the first time since the first oil shock, I see us decreasing our dependency on imported oil” (Krauss 2011).

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<sup>4</sup> On energy security, see Yergin (2006).

From a strategic perspective, the Obama administration became relatively less sensitive to Middle Eastern oil in theory and in practice and thus less committed to the historic level of U.S. involvement in that region even if it still constituted a strategic interest. Throughout Obama's first term, the global oil market has experienced a trend of "rebalancing" with oil production originating in Canada and Brazil rising in staggering rates literally undermining the dominance of OPEC and the major Persian Gulf oil producers (Yergin 2012). Given the rise in local natural gas production potential, that only supplements the booming oil production rates, the political ramifications are expected to continue in the form of decreasing American energy-induced political involvement in the greater Middle East (Gonzalez 2012 and Thompson 2012).

### **The Changing Landscape of the pro-Israel Lobby**

One does not need to fully endorse Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer's (2007) argument concerning the omnipotence of the pro-Israel lobby to acknowledge the fact that the special relationship between Washington and Jerusalem is also based on AIPAC's capacity to generate political support within Congress and American public opinion through this powerful organization.<sup>5</sup> However, during Obama's first term AIPAC's exclusivity was significantly challenged when a pro-peace or liberal player gained influence and standing in the once monolithic arena of U.S.-Israel relations.<sup>6</sup> Founded in mid-2008 by Jeremy Ben-Ami, the progressive, pro-Israel/pro-peace lobby organization J-Street was able to exploit the presidential elections to position itself in the political landscape (Ben Ami 2011, 109). The major contribution of J-Street was to provide a dovish alternative to AIPAC, as Representative Bob

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<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive critique of this argument, see Foxman (2007) and Lieberman (2009).

<sup>6</sup> For an attempt to redefine the pro-Israel scene in American politics, see Waxman (2010).

Filner (D-CA) was quoted saying: “for years there was nobody there [advocating for a two-state solution] so we had to vote for all this stuff. Hopefully with J Street, we can be more rational” (Witten 2009).

After openly supporting Obama’s candidacy and his evenhanded agenda regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the U.S.-Israeli relationship throughout the elections, J-Street was politically rewarded twice. First, Obama extended an invitation to Ben-Ami to join a forum for dialogue between the president and major Jewish-American organizations (Traub 2009). Second, U.S. National Security Advisor General James Jones accepted an invitation to address the participants in J-Street’s first annual conference in October 2009. “Israeli security and peace are inseparable,” said Jones, “I’d like to congratulate you on this impressive conference and I’m honored to represent President [Barack] Obama and make sure that we’ll be represented in all future conferences” (Mozgovaya 2009).

The challenge of a “pro-Israel/pro-peace” lobby group competing with AIPAC was noticed by the Israeli government. Used to coordinate its policies solely with a single actor in the Congressional sphere, and possibly attempting to avoid alienating AIPAC, Israeli ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren publicly rejected an invitation to attend J-Street’s first annual conference arguing that he had deep misgivings regarding “several of J Street’s policies that may impair Israeli interests” (Lewis and Landler 2009). However, leader of the opposition party *Kadima* and former Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, wrote to Ben-Ami that “the discussion within the pro-Israel community of what best advances Israel’s cause should be inclusive and broad enough to encompass a variety of views” (Keinon 2009).

Throughout the 2008 presidential and congressional elections J-Street generated sufficient momentum that provided Obama the political backing and public endorsement for his

policies and vision regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process he could never had expected to receive from AIPAC. According to the *Economist*, in 2009 AIPAC enjoyed an annual budget of about \$60 million, an endowment of around \$130 million and more than 275 employees while J-Street had an annual budget of only \$3 million and only a handful of employees. The asymmetry is obvious and significant, but J-Street was able to stir the American discourse on U.S.-Israel relations topic and “plant a foot in the door” nonetheless (Economist 2009).

A couple of years into Obama’s first term, the relationship between the White House and J-Street had turned somewhat sour. After firstly denying rumors regarding the source of their initial funding, Ben-Ami had to admit that J-Street benefitted from the philanthropy of controversial billionaire George Soros, an adamant anti-conservative and, according to several previous remarks, a zealous anti-Israeli figure (Lake 2010a). Fearing the image of supporting and being endorsed by a heavily funded anti-Israeli group, the Obama administration began slowly distancing itself from Ben-Ami and J-Street as a political safety measure. One indication was the White House’s reluctance to confirm whether Ben-Ami was still welcomed as part of Obama’s American-Jewish discussion group that in the past included J-Street (Lake 2010b).

In order to become relevant again J-Street had to adjust its objectives *and* strategy and partially mainstream itself to the American-Jewish political center. It renounced its ambivalent position on many controversial anti-Israeli initiatives including Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and publicly denounced the Palestinian bid to upgrade their status in the United Nations.<sup>7</sup> These steps were very successful as the organization’s domestic and international political recovery suggests. In March 2012, for example, an Israeli official participated in J-Street’s annual conference for the first time. Barukh Binah, the deputy chief of mission at

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<sup>7</sup> Some of these ambivalent positions may be found in Ben-Ami (2011: 138, 158-160).

Israel's Washington embassy, was applauded as he began his speech, seconds before he began criticizing the organization for advocating increased American pressure on the Israeli government. "Pressures on the elected government of Israel can present us with a problem, especially when we need you the most," Binah told the participants (Kampeas 2012). Considering the fact that in previous conferences were boycotted by the Israel government, Binah's appearance is actually indicative of the growing influence of J-Street in American politics and public opinion discourse that deserves official attention.

Moreover, prior to the 2012 presidential and mid-term congressional elections J-Street was able to rehabilitate its public image and its political relevance when it announced the endorsement of key democratic members of Congress including chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA). Prior to the elections, J-Street was able to endorse more than half a dozen Senators and more than 70 Representatives. With more than \$1.8 million in campaign contributions, according to J-Street's annual report, it constituted about 35% of the general funds contributed by pro-Israel Political Action Committees (PACs). Currently, J-Street has 8 Senators and 63 Representatives in Congress that benefited from their endorsement (J-Street 2012, 6-7).

### **The Growing Democratic-Liberal Values Gap**

Reviewing Obama's first term, one can also notice a shift in the sociopolitical and cultural character of the American-Jewish community that allowed the President's ideological views regarding Israel and the Middle East to resonate better than ever before. It is a generational change marking the rise of the young-liberal wing of American Jewry from which Obama recruited his grassroots political activists and his top aides such as David Axelrod and Rahm

Emanuel. One of the symbols of this generation is Peter Beinart who repeatedly writes about the beginning of a new episode in the history of American Jewry. According to Beinart (2010), the major shift revolved around Israel's policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the American-Jewish reinterpretation of Zionism since currently "fewer and fewer American Jewish liberals are Zionists; fewer and fewer American Jewish Zionists are liberal."<sup>8</sup>

For many American-Jewish liberals, Israel's policies towards the Palestinians constitute a crucial litmus test for the viability and resilience of its moral and ethical foundations. As Ofira Seliktar (2002, 207) commented, "Israel and its handling of the peace process had been transformed from a symbol of communal unity, and indeed, the center of its civic religion, to a topic of deep division and much bitterness." Others, however, argue that this value-based clash between Israeli policies and the liberal nature of the American-Jewish community actually results in greater indifference among the younger American Jews.<sup>9</sup> But between rift and indifference, the implications for the special relationship are overwhelmingly straightforward and negative; the political value and attractiveness of unconditionally supporting Israel had weakened and thus eroded one of the key foundations of the special relationship. In fact, a recent survey found that 89% of American Jewry believe that one can be Jewish *and* strongly critical of Israel at the same time (Pew Research Center 2013: 14).

First, as for Israel's behavior vis-à-vis the Palestinians, there is a growing discomfort and disapproval regarding the occupation writ large. The control of one people over another, whatever the reasons are, is perceived to be unjust and immoral and essentially puts American Jews in a moral and normative conflict between their personal and collective commitment to liberal-Zionism. For American Jews, as Louis Brandeis noted in a 1915 Zionist convention in

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<sup>8</sup> See also Beinart (2012).

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Rosenthal (2001).

Boston, “[T]he highest Jewish ideals are essentially American in a very important particular. It is democracy that Zionism represents. It is social justice which Zionism represents, and every bit of that is the American ideals of the twentieth century.”<sup>10</sup>

The continued occupation in the West Bank and the flourishing settlement enterprise that, by definition, disenfranchises the Palestinians from pursuing their political and territorial self-determination fundamentally contradicts the basic tenets of contemporary American-Jewish liberalism. Jay Michaelson (2009) admitted, for example, that among his friends, “supporting Israel is like supporting segregation, apartheid or worse... It’s gotten so bad, I don’t mention Israel in certain conversations anymore, and no longer defend it when it’s lumped in with South Africa and China by my friends. This is wrong of me, I know, but I’ve been defending Israel for years, and it’s gotten harder and harder to do so.” Dana Goldstein (2011) asserted in a *Time* magazine article that “as an American Jew, I could no longer in good conscience offer Israel unquestioning support.”

Hence for a growing number of American Jews the contradiction between their liberal values and the democratic nature of Israel, given the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is more acute than ever before. For them, it is no longer possible to unconditionally support Israel like their parents and grandparents did (Sasson 2010, 185). Indeed, a 2007 poll found that American Jews under the age of 35 felt increasingly detached from Israel. As the authors conclude, there is “declining attachment over a wide variety and large number of indicators, testifying to the breadth, depth and irrefutable nature of that decline” (Cohen and Kelman 2007, 11).<sup>11</sup> But it is not only indifference that this age group growingly experiences, but rather overt hostility as well: “these days we find instances of genuine alienation as many more Jews,

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Urofsky (1995, 128).

<sup>11</sup> See also Waxman (2010).

especially young people, profess a near-total absence of *any* positive feelings toward Israel” (Cohen and Kelman 2007, 20).

Second, during Obama’s first term, Israel’s liberal values were apparently compromised. Following the 2009 elections to the Israeli parliament, a number of legislators from the *Likud* Party with strong support from more radical right-wing parties began promoting a number of laws designed to restrict the independence of the Israeli Supreme Court and the freedom local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In their mind, the Supreme Court adopted far too radical leftist and cosmopolitan principles that severely undermined Israel’s Zionist ethos and the *Likud* government’s ability to govern as it wished. One of the proposed bills called for the restructuring of the appointment process for the Israeli Supreme Court and the introduction of public hearings as part of a wider reform in judicial. “[T]his is the end of the radical leftwing hegemony over the courts,” Yariv Levin from the *Likud* proclaimed, “and the beginning of the entire system’s rehabilitation” (Harkov 2011).

NGOs, on their part, were perceived as fifth column entities undermining Israel’s Jewish character and even its national security. Strategic Affairs Minister and Vice Prime Minister Moshe Yaalon, for example, lashed at one of the most prominent NGOs in Israel, Peace Now, calling it a “virus” that needs to be eradicated (Edelman and Mualem 2009). An accompanying proposal sought to limit foreign governments’ funding of Israeli human rights NGOs under the premise that this is a blatant intervention in Israel’s domestic affairs. This proposal, co-authored by members of both *Likud* and *Israel Beiteinu*, attempted to curtail the capacity of Israeli NGOs who question the Jewish nature of the State of Israel, call for an armed struggle or boycotts against Israel to raise funds from foreign governments. One of the *Likud* ministers who supported the bill in the Ministerial Committee for Legislation argued that “We live in a special

situation that is not characteristic of any other country. We can't accept that a group like Breaking the Silence gets foreign funding to persecute Israel Defense Forces soldiers” (Lis 2011).

These bills were widely criticized, and leading liberal members of the *Likud* party, including Benny Begin and Dan Meridor publicly denounced their legitimacy. Begin, for example, argued that it was nothing but “political gluttony” and wondered whether his colleagues in the Israeli parliament had “forgotten the basic rules of democracy” (Buck 2011). The ominous indications of these controversial proposals, perceived by many to undermine the democratic nature of the Israeli political system, were noticed by many in the American-Jewish community. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the leader of the Reform movement in the U.S. was especially alarmed and commented that “the anti-democratic laws that have passed, or that are expected to pass, in the Knesset are not bad only for Israel. These laws could have a catastrophic impact on relations between Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora - especially American Jews” (Shamir 2011). Abraham Foxman (2011), director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and a staunch defender of Israeli policies, was also fearful of the long-term ramifications of such legislation:

When... laws are passed that stifle free expression, seek to undermine the independence of the judiciary and, in the name of defending a Jewish state, seek to undermine the rights of Arabs and other minorities, then the very democratic character of the state is being eroded.

This legislative spree dramatically affected the American administration’s perceptions of Israel as well, questioning the democratic connection between the two countries and societies. As Rabbi Yoffie rightly observed, “commitment to shared moral values and to democracy is what binds Jews to Israel. Without this commitment, ties between the two largest Jewish communities

– Israel and America – will be greatly weakened” (Shamir 2011). In early December 2011, for example, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed grave concerns for Israel’s eroding liberal values when she spoke at the Saban Forum in Washington. Clinton specifically addressed two recent developments that she called anti-democratic, the issue of foreign funding of Israeli NGOs and the exclusion of women from the public sphere in several Ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods and cities. The news regarding the separation between men and women, Clinton told the audience, was especially alarming and was "reminiscent of Rosa Parks" (Murphy 2011 and Ravid 2011c).

Furthermore, it was reported in Israeli media that U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro officially warned the Israeli government from curtailing the capacity of NGOs to raise funds for their activities from foreign governments alongside private donors. Conveying a direct message from President Obama, and instructed by the Department of State to stress the importance of the issue for the American administration, Shapiro met with Netanyahu’s National Security Advisor Yaakov Amidror and key political advisor Ron Dremer and urged them to prevent this legislation (Ravid 2011b). Indeed, most of these initiatives were eventually foiled by the government under tremendous public pressure and critical reactions from the Israeli Attorney General who questioned the legality of these measures (Zarchin and Lis 2011).

### **Historical (dis-)Similarity?**

There is no possibility to change history, but people can certainly change their perceptions of, and attitudes toward, past events. Professional historians, sometimes reluctant to talk about narratives, are among the first to introduce new interpretations of history all the time. In other words, there is “one past” but “many histories,” to rephrase British historiographer Keith Jenkins

(2003, 10-11). So is the case of the Six-Day War that ultimately consolidated the social and cultural dimensions of the special relationship between Israelis and Americans. According to Elizabeth Stephens (2007, 12), the Six-Day War “brought together the strains of a cultural identification that underpins one of the most enduring, potent and anomalous alliances of the twenty-first century.” President Lyndon Johnson (1971, 297) was one of the first American leaders to publicly identify with Israel and its survival efforts, as he recalled in his memoirs: “I have always had a deep feeling or sympathy for Israel and its people, gallantly building and defending a modern nation against great odds and against the tragic background of Jewish experience.”

Despite the differences, both the Israeli War of Independence and the Six-Day War symbolized for a very long time a “David vs. Goliath” relationship between Israel and the Arab World. First it was the Israeli War of Independence, fought against a bellicose Arab coalition dedicated to the eradication of the newly established Jewish State. The Six-Day War was another round of violence forced upon Israel by a coalition of Arab states led by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel-Nasser who sought, according to this interpretation, to revenge the failure of 1948. For the American-Jewish community, Israel’s victories in these formative conflicts provided the ultimate proof that the Jewish State was worth fighting for. By the late 1960s, the previously risky Zionist enterprise embodied in the creation of an independent Jewish Homeland proved to be a successful and viable political entity that removed any doubts regarding its resilience.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Jewish State empowered American Jews too; it mended the historical Jewish weakness vis-à-vis “the gentiles”, unified Jewish communities previously divided and fractioned

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<sup>12</sup> On the effect of the Six-Day War on American Jews, see Grossman (1998), Hertzberg (1969), Kaufman (1994) and Morgan (2001, chap. 5).

and reclaimed the sacred religious bond between Jews and the Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*) (Taras and Weinfeld 1990).

Nevertheless, the new territorial and political challenges in the post-1967 era introduced new dilemmas not only to Jews in Israel but also to the American-Jewish community as well. In Israel, gaining control over the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and the Golan Heights led to the growth of a distinct group of Israeli political and public figures who called for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Arab and the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts based on territorial compromise (Bar-On 1996, chap 3). These individuals pooled their ideological beliefs and political resources to establish a number of leading NGOs in order to advocate their cause within Israeli public opinion and the political sphere. Emboldened by the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement signed in 1979, they felt that the principle of “land-for-peace” was successfully implemented for the first time since the establishment of Israel in 1948 (Norell 2002, chap. 4).

While Jews in Israel were moving significantly faster than their American-Jewish counterparts when it came to articulate a more critical view of the Israeli leadership and the policies it implemented on the ground, the younger American-Jewish generation has been very successful in quickly bridging this generational gap since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Rather than interpreting the Six-Day War as a miracle, as their parents and grandparents did at the time, nowadays the “reading” of that event is much more ambivalent in nature. In retrospect, the Six-Day War can be seen as *the* watershed event that its political, territorial and normative dimensions are currently endangering the special relations and their future. Today, more and more American Jews consider this territorial expansion as a tragedy that transformed Israel from a victim to an oppressor. Unlike their parents whose perceptions of Israel were shaped by the looming destruction of the State of Israel during several cycles of Israeli-Arab

violence between 1948 and 1973, the average young, secular, liberal, Zionist American Jews who were born after the Yom Kippur War “have grown up viewing Israel as a regional hegemon and an occupying power,” as Peter Beinart (2010) asserted.

Among young American Jews, the liberal urge to exhibit a more critical approach to Israel is exceptionally strong. But regardless of the age group, there is a firm majority supporting the creation of an independent Palestinian state (55%) and the dismantling of some or all of the settlements in the West Bank (65%). According to one major survey, even the contested issue of Jerusalem is far less definite given that 41% of the respondents expressed their willingness to accept changes in the status of the city (Perlmann 2007, 14-15). A more recent study concluded that it was not necessarily the age variable that determined the positions of American Jews regarding the future of the West Bank and Jerusalem but rather the political affiliation of the respondents. In this 2010 study, 46% of the respondents were in favor of complete or partial dismantling of the settlements while 28% were completely against such a move. Indeed, 62% of the respondents who defined themselves as conservatives or very conservative were against any dismantling of the settlements whereas the figure drops to 34% among “slightly conservative” or 33% among “middle of the road” respondents. Yet, disapproval of complete or partial settlement dismantling further drops to 21% and 12% when the respondents identify themselves as “slightly liberal” or “liberal or very liberal” respectively (Sasson et al. 2010, 24-25).

From an historical vantage point, the majority of American Jews are liberals in their political views (Podhoretz 2010). During the 2008 presidential elections, for example, Barack Obama received 78% of the Jewish vote. But further segmenting the American-Jewish community, as a 2006 study did, reveals that American Jews between the ages of 18 and 39 constitute 29% of the overall number of American Jews or 36% of Jewish adults or 1.46 million

people in absolute terms (Ukeles, Miller and Beck 2006, 53). Hence while the majority of American Jews consider themselves as liberals, and consistently vote for the Democratic Party, it is the younger generation that in both quantity and quality constitutes an even more politically progressive group. As Stephen Cohen (2011, 85) asserts, “[T]heir more Universalist social justice interests, bound with their sense of Judaism’s particular mission in the world, lead them to value Jewish engagement in addressing society’s greater ills... they tend to be situated on the liberal-left of the political spectrum; many see themselves as socially, culturally and politically progressive.”

Turning back to the re-reading of Israel’s historical narrative, there is a growing convergence between the liberal and the more conservative American Jews when it comes to interpreting the symbolism and practical dimensions of the Six-Day War. Indeed, most liberals and conservatives believe now that the maintenance of the status-quo in the West Bank is impractical and hazardous in the long-term. If the fundamental function of Zionism is the creation of a democratic and Jewish independent state, then clinging to the post-1967 territorial and political realities on the ground is a messianic blunder. Even ardent defenders of Israel, such as Alan Dershowitz (2003, 243, 244), admit that “Israeli leaders must stop encouraging settlements and must discourage those who harbor the illusion of a greater Israel that includes large portions of Judea and Samaria. Jewish biblical claims must be abandoned in the name of pragmatic compromise... If a peaceful two-state solution were finally to become reality, it would be a blessing for all.” In sum, for most Jewish-Americans there is a need to alter the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians and make it more compatible with traditional Jewish-American liberalism.

Another component that enables the historical bond between Jews in Israel and their non-Jewish American counterparts involves the highly influential Christian Zionist group.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that there is no consensus regarding the exact meaning of the term, as Stephen Spector (2009, 2, 3) asserts, on the whole it relates to “Christians whose faith, often in concert with other convictions, emotions, and experiences, leads them to support the modern state of Israel as the Jewish homeland.” Alongside the more theological foundations of the connection between Jews and Christian Zionists, it was the Six-Day War that underscored for this highly motivated group the connection between Jews and the Holy Land as the Jewish State expanded to takeover key biblical historical sites such as the Wailing Wall, Bethlehem, the Jordan Valley and the Jordan River. It was a prophetic-formative moment for Evangelical Christian Zionists that led to the complete, and unchallenged, convergence between “biblical and contemporary Israel” (Davidson 2005, 165).

Despite the fact that religion and American politics were always interwoven, Christian Zionists dramatically increased their influence on American domestic and foreign policies following the election of George W. Bush to president. Bush, a “born again” Christian, was deeply influenced by his evangelic Christian convictions (William 2010). This interconnectedness only intensified after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. At that point of time, Bush’s “war on terror” campaign coincided with, and influenced by, the evangelical’s general anti-Islamist approach. Furthermore, the Christian Right’s influence on the Bush administration was also decisive in shaping Washington’s supportive and protective policies towards Israel at the time (Durham 2004).

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent description of these group and its relations with Jews and the State of Israel, see Goldman (2009).

Obama's presidency was completely different as the evangelic Christian Zionists lost their prior influence on the White House, primarily since this was a Democratic administration. Furthermore, however, it became clear during the presidential campaign that Obama's religious or theological beliefs are based on a different set of convictions. He was associated with the Trinity United Church of Christ (UUC) in South Chicago that was known for its connections to the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King's quest to end segregation and empower Christianity with a strong black liberation theology. It was a religious strand devoted to civil social justice and was very critical of the white American establishment (Grant and Gran 2013, 1-2). Although Obama disassociated himself from the UUC's pastor Jeremiah Wright after the latter expressed numerous controversial remarks, he remained committed to the basic ideas of the Church; assisting the weak, the poor and the socio-politically disenfranchised. As Wright (2010, 44) notes, the UUC's underlying mission statement is "to make a positive difference in the world... given our denomination's deep roots in the Social justice Gospel." Obama (2004, 294) acknowledges this powerful and transformative principle in his autobiographical book *Dreams from My Father*:

Inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories — of survival, and freedom, and hope — became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears.

Despite the fact that Obama's campaign managers were successful in gaining the support of a considerable number of evangelical Christians in the presidential elections, he had no political debt to the Christian Right whatsoever as his predecessor did (Goodstein 2008). Indeed, if the presidential and the congressional elections were any indication of the way Americans

wanted their country to be managed, it was an anti-Republican and an anti-Christian Right decision. It was a wall-to-wall disapproval of the Bush administration's principles and policies and an unqualified endorsement of Obama's domestic and foreign policy vision for the U.S in the Executive and the Legislative alike (Jacobson 2009, Rozell 2011).

From the vantage point of the "special relationship", the Obama administration's commitment to Israel lacked some of the religious and theological interpretations of Israel's modern history that Bush held to. Whereas for the Christian Zionists, for example, the 1967 War was a clear case of divine intervention designed to unite Jews and the Holy Land, Obama, supported by his top aides including Rahm Emanuel, David Axelrod and Dan Shapiro, believed it created a split between the just and unjust aspirations of the Zionist movement. In fact, for Obama, as for the UUC and, perhaps, the majority of the African-American community, Israel was no longer the "David" that needed American protection and unquestionable support. Instead, in the post-1967 history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the Palestinians were the new "David" and, from a basic social justice perspective, needed American assistance more than the Israelis. In fact, the Six-Day War intensified the friction between American Jews and African-Americans who were previously allied in the Civil Rights movement (Friedman 1995 250-251).

Martin Luther King, for example, who was a staunch supporter of Israel, found it extremely difficult to reconcile its right to exist and his own pacifism and social justice principles. A week after the Six-Day War ended, King (1967, 13-14) noted in a television interview that "[T]he whole world and all peoples of good will must respect the territorial integrity of Israel. We must see Israel's right to exist and always go out of the way to that right to exist." Still, deeply committed to social justice, he argued that

[T]he Arab world is that third world, a part of that third world of poverty and illiteracy and disease... So long as people are poor, so long as they find themselves on the outskirts of hope, they are going to make intemperate remarks. They are going to keep the war psychosis alive.

Obama's approach to Israel and its policies is remarkably similar to King's; he is politically, historically and religiously committed to Israel's security, but at the same time his adherence to universal social justice motivates him to protect the rights of the Palestinians just as vigorously. Hence whenever Israel's policies are out of synch with what Obama believes to be the appropriate standard of behavior vis-à-vis the Palestinians, he openly and harshly criticizes the Israeli government and Netanyahu whom he holds personally accountable. And so when he outlined the objectives of his special envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell after taking office, and following a massive Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip, Obama told reporters that his administration is fully committed to uphold Israel's security in face of Hamas' ongoing rocket attack on Israel. Echoing King's words, nevertheless, Obama also noted that another key task will be "that Palestinians in Gaza are able to get the basic necessities they need and that they can see a pathway towards long-term development that will be so critical in order for us to achieve a lasting peace" (Obama 2010, 17). Throughout his first term, the same dualism manifested itself in Obama's approach to Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu when it came to settlements, final status agreement and Iran's nuclear program as already described; a firm commitment to Israel's security but also to achieving a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

### **Conclusions**

There is very little risk that US-Israel relations will become adversarial or hostile, but considering the changes currently taking place in each aspect of the "special relationship", it will

most probably lose its uniqueness over time. In other words, this association will remain close but based on mutual interests rather than on “special” features. In the long run, it will probably resemble the relations between the United States its key allies in the region and elsewhere; primarily based on a narrower interpretation of American national interests.<sup>14</sup>

There were three major changes in the American strategic landscape. First, the U.S. is attempting to cut its losses from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and decrease American military presence in the region. Second, we see a greater focus on the regional and global ramifications of China’s rise that results in greater emphasis on the East Asian theatre in what was termed the “pivot to Asia”. Third, one of the main anchors of American Middle Eastern foreign policy is expected to dramatically lose its relevance over time. Whereas in the past oil has practically dominated presidential calculations regarding the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, achieving energy independence will reshape these calculations and considerations in the future. Less concern equals less interests leading to less involvement and eventually devaluation of the strategic importance of Israel as a regional ally or proxy.

There are also three noticeable changes in the sociopolitical aspects of the special relations. First, the landscape of pro-Israeli lobby has been transformed with the entry of J-Street to the scene during the 2008 presidential elections. Until then, AIPAC enjoyed an exclusive position and its power was unchallenged. After 2008, there was a serious contender that proved capable of introducing a new discourse in regards to US-Israel relations that was considerably much more liberal and pro-peace. This is not to say that AIPAC and the other conservative organizations became powerless, but only to suggest that Obama was able to advance his

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<sup>14</sup> For a similar prediction, see Heilbrunn (2013, 24).

personal views with the cooperation of a more compatible and influential Jewish –American lobby group that previously did not exist.

Second, the nature of the Jewish community in the US is radically transforming the social base of the special relationship. Fewer young Jewish-Americans report unequivocal support for Israel and a growing number of them are becoming more critical of Israeli policies, especially in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The high percentage of interfaith marriages, presently about 50%, will only exacerbate this trend. Third, the influence of formative historic events such as the Holocaust, the Six-Day War or the Yom-Kippur War is gradually waning with the generational changes currently taking place. Fewer Jewish-Americans have first-hand experience of the possibility that the Jewish State will be destroyed in face of Arab belligerence, and at present the picture is of a mighty Israel attempting to subdue the weak and defenseless Palestinians. Lastly, Obama’s approach to the common Judeo-Christian dimension of the “special relationship” was significantly different compared to George W. Bush’s evangelic attitudes. For Obama, the theological baggage prompted a social justice awareness that contradicted the traditional Christian Right’s unconditional support for Israel. If the evangelic credo entailed unconditional support for Israel, Obama’s gospel focused on the injustice of the Israeli occupation and the suffering of the Palestinians.

Even after president Obama’s March 2013 visit to Israel and the attempt to “reset” the relationship with Netanyahu and the Israeli public, the root causes of the discord were still present. In fact, Obama’s speech in Jerusalem in front of hundreds of young Israelis was an attempt to school Netanyahu in his own backyard after his attempt to school Obama in the White House in May 2011. Given the destabilizing effects of the Arab Spring and the wish to enable Secretary of State John Kerry to bring the Israelis to the negotiations table with the Palestinians,

Obama made a *tactical* decision not to publicly clash again with Netanyahu at the opening of his second term in office but rather charm him and the Israeli society. Nevertheless, Obama remained fully committed to his core beliefs regarding the *strategic* need to resolve the conflict as he told the audience in Jerusalem:

It's not right to prevent Palestinians from farming their lands; or restricting a student's ability to move around the West Bank; or displace Palestinian families from their homes. Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land (*Ha'aretz* 2013).

While the chances of maintaining a special relationship between Israel and the U.S. over time seem grim, changes on the ground and in the administration can delay this trend, at least for a while. For both Israel and the U.S. this means that a more sober and pragmatic approach to the bilateral relationship should be pursued. Coordinating mutual expectations is the first thing in this path, but then the objective should be to articulate a new vision for this association that takes into consideration not only where the two sides were in the past or where they are at present, but actually where they want to be in the future. Such a process of readjustment requires pragmatism, vision and creative thinking. Hopefully, leaders in Jerusalem and Washington have both.

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The United States was the first country to recognize Israel as a state in 1948, and the first to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. Israel has long been, and remains, America's most reliable partner in the Middle East. Israel and the United States are bound closely by historic and cultural ties as well as by mutual interests. The U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship is strong, anchored by over \$3 billion in Foreign Military Financing annually. In addition to financial support, the U.S. participates in a high level of exchanges with Israel, to include joint military exercises, military research, and weapons development. Through the Joint Counterterrorism Group and a semi-annual Strategic Dialogue, the U.S. and Israel have enhanced their cooperation in fighting terrorism. The Special Relationship is an unofficial term often used to describe the political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, military, and historical relations between the United Kingdom and the United States. The term first came into popular usage after it was used in a 1946 speech by former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The two nations have been close allies during many conflicts in the 20th and 21st centuries, including World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, the Gulf War, and US President Obama told British royalty at a Buckingham Palace banquet that the "special relationship" between Britain and the USA was as strong and important as ever. Mr and Mrs Obama are on a state visit to the UK and attended the special dinner along with politicians, movie stars and business leaders. President Obama hailed the friendship between the two nations, particularly since the 9/11 terror attacks. He said: "As we approach the 10th anniversary of 9/11, I'm particularly grateful for the solidarity that the United Kingdom has shown to America over the past decade". From that da