

A FEW MINUTES WITH...

Prof. Jonathan Rynhold



By Machla Abramovitz

The presidential election of 2016 is still 16 months away, but sooner than we know it there'll be a new occupant in the White House. We talked to political scientist Dr. Jonathan Rynhold, a senior researcher with the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) about what we can expect from a new Oval Office occupant after eight years of President Barack Obama. Dr. Rynhold recently studied American attitudes toward Israel in his new book, *The Arab-Israeli conflict in American Political Culture*. Speaking from his home in Modiin, Dr. Rynhold wades through the complexities of American political support for Israel and where it appears to be heading.

A recent poll of American opinion elites conducted by political consultant Frank Luntz found that Israel no longer has bipartisan support in America given that among Democrats, support for Israel has significantly dropped. Do you agree?

Israel has not lost its bipartisan support. Even by the poll's own conclusions 51% of Democrats support Israel while 18% are supportive of the Palestinians. According to Gallup's 2015 poll, overall, American support for Israel is at 62% as opposed to 16% support for the Palestinians. Indeed, over the last decade sympathy for Israel has reached the highest levels of consistent sympathy on record. Still, Israel has challenges among the Democrats, especially among the younger elites. Even though sympathy toward Israel remains strong, Democrats tend to be critical of Israeli policies, although less so than the Europeans. The least pro-Israel demographic in America — the young, secular liberal — is more pro-Israel than the most pro-Israel demographic group in Europe, which is middle-class, middle-aged conservatives. Democrats and Republicans are as divided on Israel as they are divided on all aspects of American foreign policy.

How strong is support for Israel among Democrats?

Generally, Democrats agree on the need for a two-state solution and on the issue of settlements.

As far as a united Jerusalem is concerned; they tend to favor a divided Jerusalem, but when asked, "Who will better safeguard religious freedoms in Jerusalem?" they will answer Israel and will shift positions on this issue. Since the advance of ISIS, there appears to be a drop in Democratic support for the creation of a Palestinian state, according to a 2014 Gallup poll. But it's too early to judge.

Democrat ideology, though, is not monolithic; it falls within three categories, each of which informs the level of support for Israel. The least supportive are the progressive postcolonialists whose opinions are well represented among liberal intellectuals, but not among the Congressional policy-makers. They believe America should stay out of world affairs, including the Middle East, and tend to see Israel as "white colonialists" oppressing "dark-skinned, native" Palestinians, with whom they identify.

The most supportive are the liberal internationalists like President Bill Clinton and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. These are generally older Americans who believe in a robust American foreign policy that includes promoting democratic values, albeit not as forcefully as do the Republicans. They see antidemocratic ideologies like those espoused by Iran and Hamas as real threats that must be forcefully challenged. They criticize Israeli policies and expect Israel to pursue peace aggressively,

should there be a partner in peace.

The most dominant group is the dovish Democrats such as President Barak Obama who argue for limited US involvement in world affairs and for the use of force only as a last resort, if at all. They maintain that rogue states like Iran are ultimately rational and can be managed through international diplomacy and believe in pressuring Israel more than the Palestinians as regards to peace. Their greatest support comes from younger Americans who see America and Israel as strong militaries and who have no reference point — like World War II — by which to grasp that even the strongest militaries can be the most threatened by outside forces. Within this same age demographic, political pundit Peter Beinart is a dove, whereas pundit Jeffrey Goldberg, who served in the IDF and who understands Israel's vulnerabilities, is a liberal internationalist. More Americans identify as doves with every passing generation. That's why Israel faces an uphill battle. Israel, as a country, identifies more with liberal internationalists than with doves given its continuous external threats.

Where does Hillary Clinton fit into the picture?

Hillary is a consummate politician who is after the center base and espouses centrist ideas. My feeling is that she is more centrist than Obama and would be more inclined to use force. How she will act as president or who she will choose for advisers is uncertain. An ideal partnership, between Democrats and Israel, would be between centrists Hillary and Isaac Herzog, although the gap between the center left in America and Israel appears to be widening.

What is the nature of Republican support for Israel? How has it evolved over the years?

Today, Republican support for Israel is exceedingly high. This was not always the case. Prior to the Six Day War, the dominant view among Republicans was encapsulated in the old school Republicans who favored the Arabs because of their massive oil reserves. Following Israel's remarkable victory in 1967, President Richard Nixon and [National Security Advisor and] Secretary of State Henry Kissinger saw in Israel a potential ally against the Soviet Union. These Republicans, whom I have termed Kissingerian Realists, wanted a strong Israel aligned to the US, but were prepared to pressure her as well. The US-Israel alliance was further strengthened by Presi-

dent Ronald Reagan, who, together with the neo-conservatives and the evangelicals, saw Israel as a Judeo-Christian country with shared democratic values on the front lines against dictatorships such as the Soviet Union and later Islamist extremism. They saw Israel's fight as America's fight. This position congealed after 9/11.

The Realists associated with the old school, though, continued to influence foreign policy. A group of advisors maintained that the US should not be closely associated with Israel, that Israel must be constrained from using too much force and that the greater onus for making peace lay with Israel. This was the position of President George H.W. Bush and Secretaries of State Caspar Weinberger and Colin Powell.

Even though the neo-cons, who were influential with President George W. Bush, were discredited following the Iraq War, especially as regards to spreading democracy through regime change, their absolute support of Israel was embraced by the Republican Party and is now the dominant view.

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—Jonathan Rynhold

Is this polarization in attitudes toward Israel between those identifying as Republicans and those identifying as Democrats a worrisome trend?

I believe it's better to have moderately high levels of support evenly spread around than to have very high levels of support concentrated on one side of the political map. Bipartisanship is the ozone layer of the Israeli-American relationship and everything must be done not to damage it. Given that increasing numbers of Americans are identifying as liberal, Israel must make sure that its democratic image is protected and that it appears credible about seeking peace. ●