Israel's Advocates

Elizabeth A. Oldmixon, Centennial Center Visiting Scholar and University of North Texas
Marian Currinder, Centennial Center Visiting Scholar and College of Charleston

Israel and United States have been closely allied since Israel's founding. President Harry S Truman officially recognized Israel almost immediately after it declared independence, and popular support for this new state grew among Americans Jews and Christians alike. Support for Israel has remained high even as the strategic value of the alliance has apparently diminished. Indeed, in supporting Israel the United States has at times pursued a sub-optimal foreign policy. This presents an interesting political puzzle: in a country where public policy is made by majoritarian institutions (Congress and the president) designed to represent local interests and opinion, how has the cause of this small country maintained consistently high levels of support from policymakers and the public alike? That is the question we, together with our colleagues Kenneth Wald and Beth Rosenson, investigate in this research project.

One possible explanation is that continued support for Israel is the product of astute "framing" on the part of Israel's supporters. That is, Israel advocates have developed arguments that draw on powerful themes in American culture. At the founding of the state, support for Israel in the U.S. was grounded in support for liberal values. Israel was not unlike the Biblical David, struggling to survive against larger forces lined up against it. The memory of the Holocaust and the dominance of a progressive ethos, Labor Zionism, helped build support for Israel among mainstream and liberal Protestants, for example. Moreover, among the realists who judged policies by how well they advanced the national interest, Israel had value as an outpost of democracy and bulwark against Soviet expansion. Both culture and national security were invoked to build support for Israel.

After the 1967 War, patterns of support for Israel changed. Among many groups on the left, Israel no longer represented the culmination of liberal values; it was no longer David—the Palestinians were. Israel appeared to have abandoned its progressive ethos in favor of an expansionist policy that disregarded the human rights of an indigenous population. When the Cold War came to a close in 1989, Israel lost its significance among many realists, who argued that support for Israel actually hurt U.S. interests vis-à-vis the Arab world. Faced with this erosion of support from critical constituencies, Israel turned aggressively to a new ally—religious conservatives. The support of evangelical Protestants was certainly not a function of liberal idealism or strategic decision-making. For them Israel retained its value as the fulfillment of God's plan and a prerequisite for the end times. Indeed, the events surrounding the 1967 war and its aftermath electrified many in the evangelical community and created an environment ripe for mobilization.

As the context has changed support for Israel among some, overall support for Israel has remained high, arguably a testament to effective framing. This may be the carefully designed product of interest group mobilization. An array of pro-Israel interest groups dots the political landscape in the United States. In addition to money, they can certainly draw on extensive cultural resources in a way that pitches support for Israel differently depending on the political context and the target audience. Our research explores the possibility that as the context changed, the pro-Israel lobby reshaped its message from one of social justice to strategic interests to religious significance. In doing so, it was able to maintain support for Israel across constituency groups, political generations, and sociopolitical contextual changes. This summer, with support from the Centennial Center and the William Steiger fund, we will begin to investigate these research questions.

The bulk of our time in D.C. will be spent conducting elite interviews and gathering information from key interest groups and lobbyists. This will supplement materials on congressional voting patterns that have already been published. Elite interviews will be conducted with veteran lobbyists at AIPAC, American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, and B'nai B'rith, among others. Interviews will be designed to elicit the strategies and measure the extent to which the pro-Israel community has changed tactics and re-framed support for Israel. Time spent in D.C. will also facilitate access to the literature produced by interest groups that is designed to garner support for their cause. The published materials will be content analyzed in an effort to measure how groups pitch and frame this issue in their mass mailings and how that has changed over time.

Our project has the potential to make an interesting and unique contribution to scholarly understanding of foreign policymaking, congressional politics, and interest group politics. In that sense, we hope that our results will be of interest to a large and diverse community.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506250935 Published online by Cambridge University Press