
**AMERICA IN THE GRIP
OF A FOREIGN POWER**

ISRAEL'S LOBBY



**ELI CLIFTON
AND IAN LUSTICK**

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ISRAEL'S LOBBY

AMERICA IN THE GRIP
OF A FOREIGN POWER

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AND IAN LUSTICK

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To all those who don't give in to despair

INTRODUCTION

LEVERAGE

A billionaire's sleek private jet ferrying a convicted spy out of the United States sounds like a scene from the fictional worlds of John le Carré and Ian Fleming. Most Americans, if they even entertain the possibility of such events happening in the real world, would assume they happen clandestinely and under the cloak of darkness. But this scene played out on the tarmac of Newark Liberty International Airport on a Tuesday in late December 2020: a camera snapped photos, creating a visual record of linkage between billionaire-financed elections and espionage against the United States. It was a month after the 2020 election in which accusations of illicit foreign influence regarding Donald Trump's ties to Moscow and Hunter Biden's board membership at Ukrainian energy and Chinese private equity companies received nonstop media coverage. Fictional clichés and cynical assumptions that many Americans held about the capture of politicians by billionaires at the expense of US national security were being validated. And the perpetrators were publishing the evidence, complete with images, in real time, indifferent to how they were received or defiant in their ability to shape events from perches at the top of the political donor class.

The spy was former US intelligence analyst Jonathan Pollard. He had boarded a 737 private jet owned by the biggest donors to outgoing president Donald Trump and the Republican Party, Sheldon and Miriam Adelson. They had urged the Trump Justice Department to lift parole restrictions preventing Pollard's immigration to Israel. Current and former members of the US intelligence community strongly opposed lifting these restrictions, but the spy's advocates doggedly sought to downplay the damage from Pollard's espionage on

behalf of Israel. Between 1984 and 1985, that espionage included the sale to Israel of the US National Security Agency's highly classified manual on the gathering of signal intelligence and names of undercover US intelligence sources in return for tens of thousands of dollars in cash and jewelry and the self-reported satisfaction of honoring his Zionist commitments and serving Israel's interests.

"Pollard's operation has few parallels among known US espionage cases," said a now-declassified CIA report on his theft of US secrets. The report detailed how Pollard's Israeli handlers requested heavily classified documents and satellite imagery of Arab and Pakistani nuclear sites and Soviet aircraft, air defenses, and missiles. Some of the most sensitive information that Pollard stole, about US satellite and signal intelligence capabilities, was then reportedly traded by Israel to the Soviet Union, seriously compromising US national security.

A thirty-year campaign for clemency by Pollard's supporters in the United States and Israel, including direct appeals by Israeli president Shimon Peres and prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu, had failed to overcome ferocious opposition to clemency from within the intelligence community, the Department of Defense, and members of Congress. But by 2020, opposition from those with intimate knowledge of the harm Pollard caused our national security could not, in the end, withstand the influence of pro-Israel lobbying over a sitting US president.

The Trump Justice Department's decision to lift Pollard's travel restrictions was just one item in a long list of policy and executive branch actions prioritizing Israeli interests, actions that the Adelsons openly solicited and celebrated. While maintaining close ties to Netanyahu, the couple had also become the top donors to the Republican Party, contributing \$90 million to Trump's failed 2020 reelection efforts and over \$120 million to downticket Republican campaigns.

The Adelsons did not shy away from the potential controversy of using their influence to secure the "homecoming" of a convicted spy who personally profited from the sale of US national security secrets to a foreign state. In fact, the Adelsons flaunted their role in the release.

The Adelsons' fleet of planes has distinctive markings, a livery clearly visible in photos of Pollard boarding the 737 and arriving to a personal welcome by

Netanyahu at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. The photos were exclusively taken and published by the Adelson-owned Israeli mass-circulation newspaper, *Israel Hayom*, and quickly spread across the internet, immediately pointing to the family's involvement. But the Adelsons weren't satisfied with providing one of their private planes for Pollard's use. Miriam Adelson had some thoughts to share with anyone who wanted to hear them.

"Jonathan deserves Israel's deepest and eternal gratitude," she wrote in *Israel Hayom*. "Like a wounded soldier returning from a long and difficult journey, he deserves every benefit and grant the state can offer to ensure he can live his life comfortably." Her message to Americans was more ominous: "For our American friends, Jonathan is a memory best left to fade, especially at a time when President Donald Trump is showing the Jews in Zion doing kindness in spades," she said.

Pollard received a hero's welcome in Israel and since then has used his celebrity status to champion one of Israel's most extreme politicians, Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir.

In a political climate increasingly defined by cynical assumptions about the role of money in politics, the Pollard affair is a dramatic illustration of how foreign influence leads politicians to serve special interests instead of those of their constituents. Miriam Adelson's directive for Americans to simply forget what they had seen, to flush truth down the memory hole, is the arrogant argument of a self-satisfied plutocrat convinced that her wealth justifies substituting her whims, personal fetishes, and ideological commitments for truth and the national interest. Confident her request for Americans to forget Pollard's betrayal of his country would be honored, she made an equally brazen ask of Trump. One month later, in one of the final acts in his first term, Trump pardoned Aviem Sella, Jonathan Pollard's Israeli spy handler. The White House issued a statement directly noting Mrs. Adelson's role in securing clemency for the man most responsible for orchestrating Pollard's crimes against the United States, the only civilian alongside several public officials.

Sheldon Adelson died nearly two weeks after Pollard's flight to Israel. But Miriam remains one of the top donors in American politics, contributing \$100 million to her Trump-supporting super PAC and \$37 million to support

downticket Republican campaigns in 2024. Asking who Miriam Adelson is, how she allocates her campaign and philanthropic dollars, what Pollard did, and why it was the Adelsons' private jet that flew him to Israel opens the door to a world where the intrigues and demands of the superrich pose dire threats to US interests around the world and to American democracy. These threats are hiding in plain sight, having become so much a part of the contemporary political landscape as to be invisible, but they are often decisive contributors to the failure of American foreign policy in the Middle East, to our national distress, to cultural polarization, and to assorted misalignments of American resources and purposes.

The Adelsons leveraged their relationship with Trump to satisfy the yearnings of a traitor and the demands of Israeli leaders. Their success parallels the vastly greater leverage Israel's Lobby in America exerts to enforce the terms of its special relationship with the United States. Israel has used that relationship to extract unconditional aid, coordination, and support at a scale and for a duration beyond anything a great power has ever done for a foreign country.

Since the 1970s, Israel has been the largest recipient of American aid and regularly receives one-quarter of all US military aid delivered worldwide. Indeed, between 1948 and 2024, Israel received over \$300 billion in inflation-adjusted loans and grants, compared to the next biggest recipient, Egypt, with \$179 billion. The next three biggest recipients are Afghanistan (\$171 billion), South Vietnam (\$154 billion), and Iraq (\$106 billion), all countries where the US military fought long wars. Since 1980, annual US aid to Israel has averaged \$3 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars. Following the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas, the United States provided at least \$16.3 billion in military aid. Putting this assistance in context, Washington's \$6.8 billion aid to Israel in 2024 was nearly double the \$3.8 billion provided by the United States to the entire Western Hemisphere (a region including the Caribbean, Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America) in 2024.

In September 2016, Susan Rice, President Obama's national security adviser, marked the signing of a new ten-year memorandum of understanding (MOU)

with Israel by describing the \$38 billion package as “the single largest pledge of military assistance to any country in American history.” In a period of record budget deficits, the agreement represented a 27 percent increase over the previous ten-year agreement signed in 2007 by the George W. Bush administration, increasing the official annual aid package from \$3 billion to \$3.8 billion. That ten-year pledge of support spans a period in which Israel engaged in military actions in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Qatar, and Iran, raising questions about whether American aid to Israel is serving American interests in a stable Middle East or fueling reckless Israeli policies. In November 2025, leaked reports indicated that Israel was requesting an MOU to guarantee twenty years of assistance at levels comparable to or higher than the annual \$3.8 billion it receives under the Obama MOU, which ends in 2028.

The lavish outflows of aid to a country whose citizenry amounts to a little over half the population of the New York metropolitan area is an increasingly unpopular use of national resources. Two years after Hamas’s attack and Israel’s genocidal response, a military campaign that virtually destroyed Gazan society and killed over sixty times the number of Israelis and foreign nationals slain by Hamas, public support for these expenditures plummeted. As of October 2025, a plurality—41 percent of Americans—sought a reduction in military aid to Israel, while only 24 percent favored maintaining the current levels and 13 percent favored an increase. Despite shifting US public opinion about the largest recipient of military aid, efforts to further condition the use of American military aid to Israel have faced little success. One small effort, a February 2024 national security memo requiring recipients of US military aid to provide written assurance that they would observe international law in their use of such aid and facilitate “the transport or delivery of United States humanitarian assistance and United States Government–supported international efforts to provide humanitarian assistance” was rescinded by Trump in 2025.

Decisions by successive administrations to prioritize Israel’s interests—particularly in the form of record aid packages and diplomatic cover as Israel’s abuses of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza bring condemnation at the United Nations and the International Criminal Court—have triggered growing domestic political backlash. This illustrates a disconnect between the policies of

political elites and the preferences of their constituents. Closing this gap—or papering it over—has imposed new costs on Americans.

Beyond financial costs, we are now subjected to criminalization of criticism of Israel's policies, restrictions on speech on university campuses, and a dangerous defense of Israel that equates criticism of it with an attack on all Jews: a strategy eerily reflecting the historical antisemitic trope that those in the Jewish diaspora were disloyal citizens in the nations in which they resided. After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, this trope took on a nationalistic meaning, often emerging in claims that Jews had equal or greater loyalty to Israel than to any other states. In 2019, Trump gave this antisemitic canard new momentum when he attacked Jewish voters who vote Democratic as having “either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty” toward Israel.

Adding to these costs to our democracy back home are the geopolitical realities that US support for Israel requires. These include ongoing US military action in the Middle East, such as aircraft carrier deployments to the Red Sea to counter and deter Houthi missile launches at Israel, bombing of Houthi bases and weapons in Yemen, an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities followed by an all-out war, and weapons transfers to Israel at the expense of depletions of American munition stockpiles. This commitment to Israel and to acting as a safety net for the consequences of Israeli policies consumes resources, damages US leadership on the world stage, weakens American condemnation of Russian aggression in Ukraine, feeds suspicion about Washington's commitment to international law and multilateral institutions, and keeps the United States engaged in military conflicts in the Middle East despite signals by Presidents Obama, Biden, and Trump that they desired to pivot away from the region and refocus US resources on deterring a rising China. Indeed, a significant but unappreciated price that the United States has paid for its special relationship with Israel may be the opportunities missed and mistakes made across the globe because so much of the bandwidth of high-level policymakers is taken up by the wildly disproportionate amount of attention they are constrained to shower on one small country's behavior and concerns.

Israel's skill at securing record aid packages, political cover, and military backing from the United States demands an examination of how a small country

six thousand miles from Washington, DC, exercises so much political leverage and deploys so much influence within the US political system. Academics, analysts, and journalists frequently see it as a third rail of political science and journalism, and often avoid such an examination, in no small part due to the proximity of sensitive questions about antisemitism and the role of Jews in American politics.

To be clear, the overwhelming majority of Jewish Americans do not prioritize Israel's well-being or its interests at a meaningful level in determining their voting decisions. Israel ranked ninth out of eleven issues of importance for Jewish voters in the 2024 election. In short, the antisemitic trope of Jewish Americans displaying their true loyalties by voting as a pro-Israel bloc is exactly that: a trope.

Israel may be a low-salience issue for most Jewish voters; however, small but highly motivated segments of the community, led by an extremely wealthy group of Jewish donors who publicly acknowledge their prioritization of Israel's interests, play an outsized role in the American campaign finance and political advocacy ecosystem. Indeed, Jewish voters who prioritize Israel are so far from being the norm that one of the greatest frustrations for Israel-first donors and activists is their fellow Jews, many of whom are either indifferent to Israel's interests or critical of its government's policies.

The gap between pro-Israel political megadonors and the majority of Jewish Americans is, as Trump noted in his attack on Jewish voters, even more noticeable in the partisan division between them. While many of the biggest Jewish Republican donors are explicitly motivated by their support for Israel, their commitment to the Republican Party is not reflected within the broader Jewish community. In the 2024 presidential election, 69 percent of Jews voted for Kamala Harris and only 26 percent for Trump, consistent with previous elections where Jewish voters have heavily skewed toward Democratic candidates. Polling of Jewish voters from 1994 to 2023 reveals strikingly consistent Jewish-voter party affiliation, maintaining less fluctuation in party affiliation than Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, and religiously unaffiliated voters.

Democratic megadonor Haim Saban characterized Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), one of the highest-profile Jewish politicians in the country, as a “self-hating Jew” and an “Israel-hater” purely due to Sanders’s criticisms of Israel. The World Jewish Congress president, billionaire Ronald S. Lauder, complained, “Secular and Reform Jews in the Diaspora must show greater solidarity with Israel than to left-wing ideas. Believe me, socialism won’t save you from antisemitism, but Israel will.” And neoconservative columnist Bret Stephens was recorded on video complaining, “Thank God I was born a Jew because otherwise I’d be a raging anti-Semite... [be]cause I tear my hair out all the time at my fellow Jews.” Stephens later explained, “It is a scandal, it seems to me, if we fail to live up to the promise of our American citizenship to do all we can to assure the survival of the Jewish state and the Jewish people.”

While pro-Israel billionaires play an outsized role in the campaign finance of the Republican Party and play a significant role within the Democratic Party, their focus on Israel is not reflective of the voting priorities of Jewish Americans. It is highly misleading to describe the Adelsons, Saban, and Lauder as the “Jewish lobby” or to suggest that their political goals represent those of American Jews as a whole. They are, more accurately, Jewish individuals who help spearhead Israel’s Lobby. Indeed, Jews in America have been and are often deeply divided as to their feelings of connection to Israel and with regard to their substantive views about Israeli policies and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nor do Jewish Americans organize or operate, as a religion or a cultural group, in the systematic and highly focused, single-issue manner characteristic of political lobbies. It is also important to remember the close and substantial ties of Israel Lobby organizations to Christian evangelicals and, historically, to other streams within American politics, from trade unionism to neoconservatism.

The term “Israel’s Lobby” refers to a panoply of organizations, groups, and individuals (including Jews, Christians, and others) who advocate for American policies that favor the interests of Israel, or, as Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt put it in their pathbreaking 2007 book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, it is “the loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction.” For the most part, these groups work on behalf of policies and positions espoused by the

Israeli government, or somewhat to the right of it. In many instances, as we note throughout this book, the institutional and individual members of the Lobby publicly identify their intent of advancing Israel's interests. Members of the Lobby may act with or without regular instruction from Israel, but their motivations and actions are consistent with a group working in a concerted manner to promote an American foreign policy serving the interests of a foreign power.

A liberal democracy must always contend with threats arising from inequality, and no one can expect governments arising from the fierce competition that is natural in a pluralist republic to implement policies delicately attuned to the needs of the nation and to constantly shifting circumstances. So complaints that special interests have distorted US policy in unhelpful or costly ways are as common and as correct as they are unremarkable. But the threats posed by Israel's Lobby to American interests and freedoms are not ordinary; they are extraordinary and extraordinarily dangerous. The menace is sharpened by three transformations: in world politics, in Israeli politics, and in the political economy of American elections. Each increases the costs and risks to America of subordinating its priorities to those of Israel and magnifies the harmful impact of the Lobby and of the small group of superwealthy individuals who have come to dominate it.

Structural changes in global affairs have removed the Cold War discipline that the region-by-region competition with the Soviet Union placed on US foreign policy. This makes factional influence on our foreign policy decisions more dangerous than in the past.

The radicalization of Israel's domestic politics introduced a wildness into that government's policies that ensnares American presidents and destroys America's traditional soft-power advantages. By annihilating prospects for a negotiated two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, this radicalization also removed a fundamental element of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

The 2010 *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* Supreme Court decision, combined with a dramatic increase in the proportion of national

wealth controlled by the superrich, opened the floodgates for narrow special interests to invest unlimited money in the American campaign finance economy. This includes donations from pro-Israel Jewish and American-Israeli billionaires.

In combination with one another, these three factors pose unprecedented threats to our national security, to geopolitical competition in the Middle East, and to the very possibility of aligning Washington's foreign policy with American interests.

The Lobby's ascendancy has also produced a wave of repression and a constriction in the free speech rights of Americans unmatched since the anticommunist hysteria of the McCarthy period. From a successful participant in the parry and thrust of American political life, Israel's Lobby has become an out-of-control foreign influence operation, largely unrecognized as such, that channels some of the most extreme impulses of contemporary Israeli politics into the offices, corridors, and counsels of American leaders, imperiling both the lives and interests of their constituents and of the United States as a whole.

Questions about the role of the Lobby are appearing more and more frequently in the public discourse on both the left and right of the US political spectrum. Israel's devastation of Gaza opened the floodgates for young Americans, political pundits, and a growing number of politicians in both parties to question the largely unconditional aid and political support offered to Israel. Many of them seek answers to how a country with a population 97 percent smaller than that of the United States has so consistently bent American policy to its will.

These questions are sensitive. They frequently evoke impassioned responses and touch on issues that tear at our social fabric: antisemitism, the influence of Jewish and Israeli-American political donors, and the role of a country created in the aftermath of the Holocaust. But these questions also deserve answers. Ignoring them only gives oxygen to conspiracy theories detached from reality and sweeping generalizations about Jewish Americans. This book fuses geopolitical, legal, economic, historical, and political analysis with investigative journalism to show why and how America's disastrous Middle East policy has

been sustained despite generating spiraling national security and diplomatic risks and corroding democratic norms that once anchored US governance.

CHAPTER 1

A LOBBY LIKE NO OTHER

Until Abraham Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg, no American president's communication to the people was honored and cherished more than George Washington's 1796 Farewell Address, his advice to the nation upon completing his final term in office. Not known as an intellectual force among the luminaries who crafted the Declaration of Independence or the complex compromises that became the Constitution, Washington was yet unrivaled for the respect he enjoyed among virtually all factions. His understanding of the nature of the challenges facing the new state, the precedents of leadership it required, and the guiding principles that would allow it to prosper contributed as much as his command of the Revolutionary army to his renown as Father of His Country.

The strongest theme in the address took up eleven of its fifty paragraphs. It warned of the dangers that would flow from "passionate attachments" by American citizens, whether positive or negative, toward foreign countries. Washington foresaw a specific danger in the new constitutional system—not factionalism itself but a particular kind of faction. James Madison and the other framers accepted that factions, or groups pursuing their own interests, were inevitable. Their solution was to design institutions that allowed these groups to compete so that each would check the excesses of the others. In theory, every interest advancing its own cause would act as a watchdog, preventing any single faction from dominating the rest. By unleashing the aggrandizing self-regard that every group of citizens capable of political action would naturally pursue, a dynamic but reliable balance could be maintained among all the different interests aggregated within the new American polity. If, as a consequence, wise

policies based on foresight and shrewd calculation of collective interests were foregone, at least disastrous overcommitments to policies unlikely to serve the national interest would be prevented.

Washington accepted this reality but did not believe the mechanism of factional balancing would work to protect the country's foreign relations against a group of highly mobilized American citizens dedicated to the interests, or defeat, of another nation. Since few factions would be passionately and permanently committed to policies toward specific countries, if such a faction did arise, there would be no countervailing opposition to balance its influence over policy. It was therefore imperative for individual citizens to avoid attaching themselves to a foreign state, identifying with it, or, conversely, treating it with permanent hostility.

Washington's analysis was offered at a time when a faction of the American political elite that favored Revolutionary France and hated Britain was making its influence felt. While this made the outgoing president profoundly uncomfortable, his message to the new nation was much more than a comment on current events. Clearly, it was delivered with an eye to future generations. Drawing on his immense prestige, he sought to establish two principles to mitigate the threat that domestic political pressure could result in the interests of a foreign country being treated as those of the United States. Washington's first principle for the new nation was to avoid foreign entanglements. The other was the principle that rough-and-tumble American partisanship should stop at the water's edge. To be sure, in the twentieth century, the world became so small that maintaining a strict policy of neutrality in international affairs became impossible. Nevertheless, Washington's argument for why the institutions of American politics were dangerously vulnerable to citizens mobilized on behalf of a foreign power remains as compelling and as instructive now as in 1796.

Key passages in the address condemn both "inveterate antipathies against particular Nations and passionate attachments for others." The United States, argued Washington, should be open to good relations with all countries; but to avoid unnecessary conflicts and inadvisable entanglements, its citizens should eschew deep-rooted "animosity" or "affection" toward foreign countries:

Sympathy for the favourite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest, in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and Wars of the latter.... And it gives to ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favourite Nation) facility to betray, or sacrifice the interests of their own country, without odium, sometimes even with popularity; gilding with the appearances of a virtuous sense of obligation a commendable deference for public opinion, or a laudable zeal for public good, the base or foolish compliances of ambition, corruption or infatuation.

American policy toward Israel offers both a compelling corroboration of Washington's analysis and an extravagant contradiction of his advice. Whether marked by per capita amounts or absolute amounts of economic and military aid or the steadfastness and unconditionality of American protection extended to Israel in international forums, the US-Israel relationship is widely acknowledged as unprecedented in the annals of international politics. Indeed, the "specialness" of the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel is not just that it is more special than other special American relationships with other countries but that it is "the *most* atypical bilateral bond in inter-state relations."

We have already seen how American aid to Israel far exceeds that offered to any other country, but there are other ways to appreciate Israel's uniquely favored status. Since the State of Israel was created in 1948, foreign leaders have been asked to speak to a joint session of the US House and Senate seventy-nine times. On eight of those occasions, the leader was a president or prime minister of Israel. No other country has been honored so often in this manner. Considering only the period since 1995, the House and Senate have been jointly addressed by foreign leaders thirty-seven times—five of those times by Israeli leaders. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has addressed Congress four times, surpassing Winston Churchill, the only foreign leader to have spoken there on three occasions.

Of note is not simply the pomp and circumstance of Congress convening to hear repeatedly from leaders of one particular foreign country but the nature of the reception for those leaders. When Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed the US Congress on March 3, 2015, his forty-two-minute speech was interrupted thirty-eight times, twenty-three of them standing ovations. Indeed, more than one-quarter of his time at the rostrum consisted of applause by the congressional audience. One commentator described the scene on Capitol Hill as follows: “If there is one word to describe Congress’s response... it would be ‘ecstatic.’ In the drug-addled sense. A bit too ecstatic verging on the delirious. Maniacal, almost.” The reception was similar in 2024, though the number of Democrats present was significantly reduced, as many of them boycotted the address, reflecting partisan resentment at Netanyahu’s 2015 appearance. The prime minister’s speech of fifty-three minutes was interrupted no fewer than seventy-four times by applause, including fifty-three standing ovations, thus averaging more than one standing ovation every minute.

While the executive branch has primary responsibility for foreign policy, generous appropriations of aid and joint congressional sessions are not the only ways the House and the Senate have found to register publicly their support for Israel and Israeli governments. Between 1973 and 2013, 938 nonappropriation congressional bills and resolutions offered by senators and representatives were supportive of Israel. The number of these congressional actions taken on behalf of Israel exceeded the combined total of similar actions on behalf of the six other countries so honored: Egypt, Jordan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, India, and Japan. The topics vary. In July 2023, by a vote of 412 to 9, the House passed a resolution pledging continuing aid for Israel and declaring that the country was “neither racist nor an apartheid state.” In votes most noteworthy because there was meaningful opposition to the measures, the House in April 2024 passed a \$14.3 billion military aid bill for Israel by a vote of 366 to 58 and a resolution passed by a vote of 377 to 44 “condemning as antisemitic the phrase ‘from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.’”

Support for Israel by both Congress and the American presidency has, if anything, been even more overwhelming when it comes to the United Nations. That too reflects the Lobby’s political clout. In 2015, the Obama White House

trumpeted its protection of Israel at the UN as evidence of America having “led global efforts to defend Israel’s legitimacy on the world stage.” In May 2017, all one hundred senators signed a letter to the UN secretary general protesting that organization’s alleged antisemitism and its treatment of Israel.

What the UN does and what US diplomats do there are of little interest to Americans in general and American politicians in particular. Little notice is taken of American votes at the UN that typically align with our European and other allies, or indeed with most of the rest of the world. But when the issue at stake in UN deliberations concerns Israel, American politicians do pay attention, and that is when the votes of the United States radically diverge from those of its allies and from those of the vast majority of the world.

The pattern is strikingly similar to US voting on the issue of the embargo on Cuba. On October 27, 2015, in a vote almost identical to one taken annually at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), 191 delegations called for an end to the US embargo against Cuba. Only two countries voted in favor of the embargo—the United States and Israel. A month later, on November 24, 2015, the General Assembly voted 155 to 7 in favor of a resolution calling for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States and Israel were joined in their opposition to the resolution by three Micronesian states, Canada, and Australia. Substantively the two issues, Cuba and Israel, have virtually nothing in common. What they do share is the fact that there is a strategically positioned, extremely influential single-issue lobby active on each of these issues in Washington, a reality that has driven president after president to adopt policies toward Israel and Cuba that are, one can say, two to three standard deviations from the international mean.

Whenever Israel or perceived Israeli interests are at stake, the Lobby’s presence, its preferences, its explicit promises of rewards, and its (usually) implicit threats of punishment saturate the day-to-day experience of those engaged in the policy process. This includes political leaders, legislators, aides, bureaucrats, and commentators, the vast majority of whom operate, consciously and usually

meticulously, within a narrowing zone of politically necessary speech on the topic.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) was founded as the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs in the early 1950s to protect Israel from criticism arising from the bloody reprisal raids it conducted against Palestinian villages. In 1959, it changed its name and in the 1960s emerged as the dominant voice within what it refers to as the “pro-Israel community.” In 2025, it claimed a membership of 5 million. In 2009, the annual lobbying budget of AIPAC was nearly triple the combined amounts spent for that purpose by the next eight largest (Jewish) organizations involved in Israel advocacy. Historically, the concentrated attention paid by AIPAC to the voting records of US senators and members of Congress has been the single most important activity of Israel’s Lobby. It bears emphasis, however, that AIPAC is not coextensive with the Lobby.

George Shultz was secretary of state under President Ronald Reagan from 1982 to 1988. Looking back on his experience, Shultz described himself as having been “astonished and disheartened” at the extent of AIPAC’s influence in Congress, including its ability not just to prevent, but to prevent discussion of, any reduction of aid to Israel. Indeed, the literature on AIPAC’s political clout is extensive and widely available, and it impeccably documents the immense influence on national politics and foreign policy it has exercised in both the Congress and the executive branch. The testimony of those who have directly observed, felt, or exercised that influence and scholarly analysis of AIPAC’s objectives, resources, tactics, and activities make it clear why AIPAC is known in the world of lobbies and their targets as “the 800-pound gorilla.”

By 2002, AIPAC had already been “long regarded as the most effective foreign-policy lobby in Washington.” Indeed, there were only two other lobbies with which it seemed it could be compared. In a bipartisan 1997 poll by *Fortune* magazine of 2,200 Washington insiders (members of Congress, congressional staffers, and executive branch officials), AIPAC was ranked number two among influential lobbies, out of more than one hundred, its clout rated as exceeded only by that of the massive American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). Indeed this is AIPAC’s own depiction of itself. In its coverage of AIPAC’s 2005

annual conference, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency quoted AIPAC president, Bernice Manocherian, as having spoken “glowingly of [AIPAC’s] membership, comparing its political clout to that of the National Rifle Association, which has a much larger budget, and the AARP, which has five times as many members.”

Political scientist Kirk Beattie showed how the sausage is made in Congress when it comes to anything dealing with Israel in his 2015 book, *Congress and the Shaping of the Middle East*, based on more than a hundred personal interviews with both senior and junior staff members of senators and representatives. Beattie found that virtually every other week members of Congress faced an AIPAC litmus test in the form of voting on nonbinding resolutions; that “dark blues,” senators and representatives with exceptionally hardline views on Israel and generous financial support from right-wing pro-Israel donors, regularly dominate relevant subcommittees; that members of Congress often seethe in silence at the need to act and vote ludicrously and in contradiction to their beliefs and values; and that, despite some efforts by pro-Arab and dovishly inclined Jewish groups, the scale, sophistication, and omnipresence of Israel Lobby operatives creates an overwhelming imbalance in the pressures to which members of Congress are subjected on the issue. On the question of aid to Israel in the years prior to 2015, when his book was published, Beattie quoted a veteran Senate Appropriations Committee staffer: “No one is going to take money out of appropriations for Israel. No one is that suicidal.”

But AIPAC, and the much larger array of organizations and groups that compose Israel’s Lobby, is more than just an eight-hundred-pound gorilla. Unlike the AARP and the National Rifle Association, it is an eight-hundred-pound gorilla acting as the agent of a foreign power. For example, according to one Israeli diplomat’s account of Israel’s influence in the United States during Shultz’s tenure as secretary of state, the Israeli government at that time, knowing that Congress “embraced almost all the legislative initiatives suggested by the AIPAC lobby,” came up with the idea of “turning Israel into a Major Non-NATO Ally. We told AIPAC, which started rolling the idea up and down Capitol Hill corridors until it was accepted.”

In 2001, Benjamin Netanyahu made his vision of Israel’s influence over the United States crystal clear. During an informal meeting with Israeli right-wing

activists, Netanyahu explained how he planned to use overwhelming force to crush Palestinian resistance, end the Oslo process begun in 1993 to negotiate an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and implement effective Israeli control over the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip. When his listeners objected that the world, and in particular the United States, would not allow it, Netanyahu asked that the camera be turned off. Thinking it had been, he then replied, “The main thing, first of all, is to hit them [the Arabs]. Not just one blow, but blows that are so painful that the price will be too heavy to be borne—a broad attack on the Palestinian Authority. To bring them to the point of being afraid that everything is collapsing.” (Interlocutor: “Wait a moment, but then the world will say ‘How come you’re reoccupying?’”) “The world won’t say a thing,” retorted Netanyahu. “The world will say that we are defending ourselves. Especially today, with America. I know what America is. America is a thing you can move very easily, move it in the right direction. They won’t get in the way.”

Since the 1990s, AIPAC has become closely aligned with the policies of Netanyahu’s conservative Likud Party, making it the central address for the Lobby as a whole. The group’s core competence is its ability to convince legislators that if they toe the line, they will be rewarded with recognition as part of the “pro-Israel community,” and if they do not, their careers will suffer, if not come to an abrupt end. Its central role in Israel’s Lobby is evident in a dense pattern of interlocking directorates joining the chairs and members of AIPAC’s board of directors to the boards of many of the largest organizations in the Lobby, including the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Committee, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Middle East Forum, the American Israel Education Foundation, and the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces.

While AIPAC’s funding profile and *modus operandi* have changed significantly in the past decade, the traditional mainspring of its activities has always been to exert pressure on politicians and policymakers, using the fate of those it targets as unreliable as object lessons for others. The organization maintains careful records of behavior—who votes which way, who does or does not cosponsor bills, who backs AIPAC-sponsored resolutions, who uses AIPAC talking points when they comment on relevant issues, and who does not.

AIPAC then uses the scores of PACs it has helped, its own super PAC, and its well-organized networks of “bundlers” and donors to arrange financing for those whose loyalty has been proven while funding primary and electoral challenges against those who do not comply.

Tom Dine, who served as AIPAC executive director from 1980 to 1993, well understood the crucial role of political funding. In 1991, he was quoted by an Israeli journalist as having “divulged that the collective power of Israel’s friends in the United States stems not from ‘the Jewish vote,’ but from Jewish money. If that money flows, in the right amount and at the right time, it can determine the outcome of more than a few races for the Senate.” His goal was to establish a relationship with every member of Congress in both the House and the Senate. By his own account, in the 1980s and 1990s, AIPAC directed contributions amounting to “roughly 10 to 15% of a typical congressional campaign budget.” Respondents in 1997 to the Fortune 500 bipartisan poll cited above identified control over substantial contributions to politicians as *the* crucial lever of power that AIPAC used.

Misconceptions about the Lobby’s use of political donations include the idea that its power was and is concentrated in states or districts with unusually high proportions of Jews, or that it seeks to elect Jews to public office, or that it is committed primarily to electing politicians who, above all, care very deeply and genuinely about Israel. The reality is quite different. AIPAC has targeted and scored defeats of senators in states regardless of the size of their Jewish populations.

In 1986, the Washington Political Action Committee, headed by the former executive director of AIPAC, Morris Amitai, promised to punish two Jewish senators—Chic Hecht (R-NV), and Edward Zorinsky (D-NE)—for their insufficient support on “Israel-related issues.” Hecht was defeated in a primary in 1988. Zorinsky died of a heart attack in 1987 while fighting back against AIPAC’s campaign. In 2022, AIPAC poured millions of dollars into a successful primary campaign to unseat Democratic congressman Andy Levin of Detroit. Levin, a former president of his synagogue and lifetime Zionist, was targeted for criticizing the policies of Israel’s extreme right-wing government. In 2024, AIPAC affiliates spent a record \$45 million on House and Senate primaries and

elections. The funds were mostly devoted to campaigns to defeat Representatives Cori Bush (D-MO) and Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), progressives who had been early congressional voices calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The fact is that the Lobby has an easier time in poor districts and in states with fewer Jewish inhabitants, where Middle East issues are of even less interest to constituents than elsewhere. For example, Representative Ritchie Torres (D-NY), who represents the Bronx—the poorest district in the country—aligns himself completely with and is strongly supported by Israel’s Lobby.

Generally speaking, if a constituency cares little about the issue of Israel, a senator or representative from that state or district can have no expectation of being rewarded by voters for not signing an AIPAC petition, for asking telling questions about settlements in the West Bank during committee hearings, or for failing to cosponsor an AIPAC-supported list of sanctions against states hostile to Israel. Nevertheless, although their constituents may not care, AIPAC does. The organization’s response to signs of defiance is reliable and known to be such by every member of Congress: find and fund challengers in upcoming primary and election battles. The more sparsely populated the state, the cheaper it is for AIPAC to mount devastating challenges against targeted candidates.

This is not to say that powerful politicians representing populous states are not similarly targeted. The most important example is Charles Percy of Illinois, a two-term Republican senator who many considered a strong contender for the presidency. Percy was unseated in 1984 by a high-profile AIPAC campaign to punish him for his support in selling the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia. The Lobby opposed the sale of such an advanced weapon system to an Arab country and was incensed by Percy’s general independence on Israel-related issues. A reported \$1.8 million in direct Lobby contributions against Percy flowed into Illinois, an astounding sum at the time.

The campaign, including a series of attack ads, was waged by a Beverly Hills businessman and member of the National Council of AIPAC, whose success as a point man for the organization was subsequently alluded to on the floor of the Senate by Alan K. Simpson of Wyoming, who referred to the “awesome, mythical, metaphysical powers of some Californian named Michael Goland.” The larger success of this campaign in building the credibility of AIPAC in its

dealings with Congress is reflected in a *Washington Post* article four years later. The article focused on the influence of the “Percy factor”: the fate of Senator Percy having become shorthand for the ability of Israel’s Lobby to engineer the defeat of even well-established incumbents.

Pressure on senators and representatives is hardly the only way Israel’s Lobby has influenced American politics. Upstream, it focuses on elite recruitment and socialization, financing of think tanks, and enforcement of what is and is not reasonable to discuss in public about Israel. Downstream, it advises and often vetoes staff appointments in both the executive and legislative branches and drafts resolutions, policy statements, and even legislation. On October 22, 1992, the president of AIPAC, David Steiner, had a lengthy telephone conversation with a New York City businessman, Haim (Harry) Katz. Unbeknownst to Steiner, Katz recorded their conversation, sharing it subsequently with the *Washington Times*.

During the call, Steiner advised Katz to avoid legal difficulties by dividing his contribution to AIPAC-favored candidates via checks issued by his children, just as long as the children were not “one year old.” He also bragged to Katz about the network of AIPAC operatives embedded within the staffs of both the Bush administration and the Clinton campaign and of the influence he and the organization had and would have in the future over presidential appointments in both the Bush and (future) Clinton administrations, including, he emphasized, over who would serve as secretary of state and as national security adviser. Steiner shared AIPAC’s pride in being able to minutely manipulate the details of legislation related to Israel, including reducing to 4 percent the “scoring” rate for Israeli insurance payments against possible default (reduced from the 13 percent recommended by the Congressional Budget Office). “We’ve got the scoring arranged; it’s four and a half per cent. It’s all done.”

Pressed by Katz to explain why New York senator Alfonse D’Amato, a non-Jewish AIPAC loyalist, should be supported over his Jewish challenger, Charles Schumer, Steiner asserted the cardinal importance of the principle of Jewish loyalty to Jews but told Katz he should support D’Amato anyway. In the end,

said Steiner, “if someone has been good for Israel, no matter who, if my brother would run against him, I would support them because they’d been good to Israel because that’s an important message to people.” He assured Katz that the only criterion on which candidates are judged is whether they are loyal to AIPAC preferences on Israel. Senator D’Amato was therefore fully deserving of continued support because of the message it sent about how loyalty to AIPAC pays. As Steiner put it, “If I have a guy who is there and he’s doing it, then I don’t want to change.”

Steiner enticed Katz by identifying his ancestors as coming from the same part of Poland as Katz’s relatives, stressing AIPAC’s significance for Jews and Jewish survival. “If we had had AIPAC in the ’30s and ’40s we would have saved millions of Jews. We would have had political power. But Jews were afraid to open their mouths.” Katz was offered insider access to influential figures and a lesson in how strategically important campaign contributions can be both to reward allies and to punish opponents, especially in small states where even modest sums can have major political impact:

We need money, like we got a guy, Byron Dorgan, in North Dakota, who’s going to be very good for us and we need money to make sure he gets in. We’ve got people like that, because (unintelligible) [by context a reference to well-funded campaigns in large states], whatever you give them would be a tickle on the elephant’s behind. But when you give \$5,000 or \$20,000 to Bob Kasten [senator from Wisconsin] that’s very meaningful.

Publication of the transcript triggered AIPAC’s disavowal of Steiner and his resignation as president of the organization. Steiner issued an “apology” for saying things that, he explained, reflected his own poor judgment and not the usual practices or perspectives of AIPAC. Steiner fell on his sword for the organization, taking the rap for a *modus operandi* that is in fact standard.

In a similarly revealing episode twelve years later, the FBI caught Steven J. Rosen, head of AIPAC’s foreign policy unit and one of its best-known officials, along with another AIPAC employee, Keith Weissman, conspiring to give classified Defense Department information to Israeli officials. AIPAC quickly

fired Rosen and Weissman, condemning them for “conduct that was not part of their jobs and because this conduct did not comport with the standards that AIPAC expects of its employees,” even though just over a month earlier it had praised Rosen for “excellence in job performance” and rewarded him with a \$7,000 bonus.

Rosen was furious that AIPAC had thrown him under the bus and sued the organization and its leadership for defamation and \$21 million in damages. In voluminous affidavits and testimony provided over years of litigation, Rosen revealed that AIPAC leaders had had full knowledge of his activities and that acquisition and circulation of classified information was a standard and highly appreciated practice. AIPAC fought back hard. Its lawyers convinced the judge to substantially increase the bar for successful prosecution and accused Rosen of using AIPAC computers to view pornography. Rosen struck back in kind, accusing the president of AIPAC at that time, Howard Kohr, and others, of sexual misconduct at the workplace and of lying about what were standard procedures at the organization.

To an Israeli newspaper, Rosen explained why, against the political interests of the organization to whose purposes he was committed, he had decided to make his case public. “I believe that AIPAC should make a settlement with me. I was persecuted for five years. They sent me out to do a job, I did the job for 23 years. Trouble came—they have to sacrifice me to save the ship. I was a good soldier, for five years I was under a dark cloud.” According to Rosen, he was indicted “not because I violated AIPAC policies, but because I followed them.” AIPAC’s disavowal of Steiner’s comments to Katz can be considered no more convincing than its disavowal of Rosen. It seems obvious that both Steiner and Rosen operated fully within the culture and expectations established for its employees by AIPAC. It seems obvious that both the recorded phone call with Katz and the reams of documentation offered by Rosen in court provide unfiltered access to AIPAC’s role and its self-perception as a dominant player in Washington on the issue of Israel with the political clout required to expect and receive deference, if not obeisance.

After years of litigation the government abandoned its prosecution of Rosen, while court rulings particularly friendly to AIPAC made it impossible for Rosen

to continue his struggle. In the end, the lobbying organization dodged a legal bullet, thereby postponing the day when, as another former AIPAC employee, M. J. Rosenberg, put it, senators and representatives, forced to behave strictly in conformance with AIPAC's ruthless gaze while depicting themselves as gladly doing so could sing "Free at Last."

It is true, of course, that numerous senators and members of Congress, including conservative evangelicals, sincerely and even fervently support the kind of Israeli maximalism epitomized by Prime Minister Netanyahu's governments and supported by the mainstays of Israel's Lobby. Nevertheless, staffers, journalists, and other political insiders know how resentful and even humiliated most others privately feel about having to toe the AIPAC line in public. In 2007, for example, Representative Jim Moran, a veteran moderate Democrat from Northern Virginia and formerly mayor of Alexandria, resisted AIPAC's elaborate and detailed manipulation of the terms of a supplementary aid package to Israel. In an interview with *Tikkun* magazine, Moran explained why four hundred representatives had followed AIPAC's instructions compared to the thirty who resisted them:

If you cross AIPAC, AIPAC is unforgiving and will destroy you politically. Their means of communications, their ties to certain newspapers and magazines and individuals in the media are substantial and intimidating. Every member knows it's the best-organized national lobbying force.... Most people that are involved in foreign policy especially look at a broad range of issues and consider a person's entire voting record. AIPAC considers the voting record only as it applies to Israel.

Even the most plainspoken of politicians often wait until the end of their careers to express their true feelings about the Lobby and its influence on them and their colleagues. An excellent example is a valedictory address to the Senate of Ernest (Fritz) Hollings, who represented South Carolina in that body for thirty-nine years. Known as the "tartest tongue in the Senate," his frankness could be bracing. Hollings announced his retirement in 2004. Unafraid of

retaliation, he spoke about AIPAC. “You can’t have an Israel policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here,” he said.

I have followed them mostly in the main, but I have also resisted signing certain letters from time to time, to give the poor president a chance. I can tell you no president takes office, I don’t care whether it is a Republican or a Democrat, that all of a sudden AIPAC will tell him exactly what the policy is, and senators and members of Congress ought to sign letters.

AIPAC refused to comment, but others on Capitol Hill, unwilling to be quoted by name, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that “Sen. Hollings eloquently stated what many members of Congress believe but are too afraid to say.” Indeed, he echoed comments made by Senator Charles “Mac” Mathias of Maryland more than twenty years earlier. Noting that, beginning in the early 1960s, American presidents, but especially senators and congressmen, had been “responsive” to unrelenting pressures from Israel’s Lobby, Mathias gave as an example AIPAC’s 1975 campaign against a “reassessment” of US policy in the Middle East announced by President Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger:

[AIPAC] chose as its medium a letter from Senators strongly endorsing aid to Israel. Seventy-six of us promptly affixed our signatures although no hearings had been held, no debate conducted, nor had the Administration been invited to present its views. One Senator was reported to have candidly expressed a feeling that in fact was widespread: “The pressure was just too great. I caved.” Another was reported to have commented, “It’s easier to sign one letter than answer five thousand.”

In 2015, a national security official who served in both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations remarked that he didn’t “know what’s worse—working for an administration that enacts AIPAC’s policies enthusiastically, out of conviction, or working for one that does so grudgingly, out of fear.”

Mike Lofgren worked for twenty-eight years as a senior staffer on Capitol Hill, including sixteen years as a senior analyst on the Senate and House Budget

Committees. He started out as a self-described “mainstream Republican” but declared himself “non-partisan” following what he judged an extremist lurch of the Republican Party. Lofgren relates one particularly telling episode in 2014, at the height of Congress’s inability to act on almost any legislation, no matter how crucial. By contrast, he notes how, following the war in Gaza launched by Israel in 2014 as Operation Protective Edge Congress moved swiftly, on its own initiative, to add an extra \$225 million to Israel’s Iron Dome antimissile program. Comparing it to the dismal fate of measures such as those dealing with the Central American immigration crisis or repeal of the medical device tax, Lofgren comments that the Iron Dome initiative miraculously survived when the otherwise terminally dysfunctional Senate considered it. Acting in lockstep, senators rolled over the lone objector, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), who protested that the \$225 million for Iron Dome was not offset by spending reductions elsewhere. The bill cleared the chamber by unanimous consent.

Lofgren attributes this “miraculous” performance to Israel’s Lobby, quoting *Slate* journalist Jim Newell as guilty of only “minimal exaggeration” when he commented that when it came to Israel, “it doesn’t matter which Congress it is, or how dysfunctional things get. If there was another Civil War and a batch of states seceded from the union but Israel still needed its war money, the two sides would call a cease-fire, the seceding states would temporarily rejoin the union, go to Congress to pass the funding, and then re-secede and continue fighting.”

The influence of Israel’s Lobby, combined with the absence of anything approaching a potent political counterweight, accounts for the exaggerated support all recent American administrations have afforded the State of Israel, and the extraordinary restraint with which they have responded to Israeli government policies, even those directly contrary to American interests. Despite compelling evidence for this explanation for Washington’s embrace of, if not subservience to, Israeli priorities, it remains controversial. Historically, there have been three ways Israel advocates and scholars sympathetic to Israel have sought to explain US policy favoring Israel without relying on the embarrassing argument of political pressure.

The first accounts for America's lavish support for Israel by the contribution Israel makes to US national interests—a contribution, they say, that is more than worth the investment of aid and protection. The second contends that America's strong commitments to Israel stem from cultural affinities. The third argues that all US foreign policies are direct reflections of the specific beliefs and preferences of the president and his top advisers, which override whatever domestic political considerations may arise from time to time.

Israel lobbyists increasingly argue that Israel is America's crucial ally in its fateful struggle to defend "Western civilization," and the "Judeo-Christian values" it is said to represent, from radical Islam and neo-Marxism. The traditional and still commonly advanced version of this argument—that Israel has been and is a valuable American asset—focuses on Israel's contribution to American security. Whether by purchasing and testing weapon systems, sharing intelligence, or taking action against America's foes, Israel, say its advocates in the United States, more than compensates the country for its economic, military, and diplomatic support.

In 1990, A. F. K. Organski, a political science professor at the University of Michigan and a renowned scholar of international relations, made this argument in memorable and still impactful terms. To explain the scale of US generosity toward Israel, he called it "the \$36 billion bargain," resolutely rejecting the "prevailing wisdom" that US policy toward Israel had anything to do with domestic politics and asserting the cost-effectiveness of Israel as a geopolitical asset positioned to "repulse any expansion of Soviet power and influence in the Middle East." The massive levels of aid provided to Israel through the 1980s, according to Organski, reflected a hard-nosed calculation of costs and benefits. "Strategic security considerations," he concludes, "were critical, and lobbying efforts by American Jewry and their PACs played only a minimal supporting role."

Organski acknowledges that "everyone who has worked on U.S. foreign policy in the Arab-Israeli dispute has heard and read endless war stories about Jews' and AIPAC's influence on Congress. They are widespread and believed. But any knowledgeable researcher knows that anecdotal evidence is not acceptable to prove a point." While never challenging these "endless" stories, he

rejects the possibility of their importance, preferring instead to rely, especially, on data about patterns of US aid to Israel. As evidence, he points to sharp increases in American aid for Israel in the early 1970s explained by American government perceptions of a much larger threat of Soviet expansionism in the Middle East.

However, Organski ignores the fact that the years of dramatically increased aid to Israel were also those in which the post-Six-Day War upsurge in the strength of the Lobby began to be felt. Since both the increase in the Soviet threat and the increase in the Lobby's pressure occurred at the same time, the data he presents are just as supportive of the Lobby as causal argument than of a change in US assessments of Israel's importance in the confrontation with the Soviets.

At the end of his book, Organski tells his readers that his argument for the rationale of US aid to Israel would be disproven if levels of that aid remained constant even if "the USSR ceases to be perceived (and to act) as an expansionist power by top U.S. foreign policy elites, and/or the same elites cease to perceive the United States as obligated to repulse every action of the USSR that might lead to an extension of Russians [*sic*] influence and power."

Fortunately, and almost immediately after the book's publication, the USSR collapsed. In other words, the world performed a natural experiment to test Organski's hypothesis. If his explanation was correct—that US aid to Israel was a function of its value as an asset in Washington's death struggle with the Soviet Union—then the disappearance of the Soviet Union would occasion a dramatic decrease in levels of US aid. But if the Lobby's influence was the determining factor, then the collapse of the Soviet Union would have virtually no effect on the level of US support for Israel.

Instead of a drastic reduction in US aid to Israel, the end of the Soviet threat was followed by an amazingly steady allocation of military aid to Israel across the entire decade from 1988 to 1998, a period spanning the dissolution of the Soviet Union and US emergence as a superpower with no peer competitors. Indeed, the amount of military aid granted to Israel remained almost constant—over \$3 billion, except for one year when it exceeded \$4 billion—between 1991 and 1998. Only by appreciating the influence exercised by Israel's Lobby over US

politicians and decision-makers; and the habituation of senators and congressmen to automatically endorse vast levels of aid to Israel no matter what changes occur in the geostrategic domain; and the ambitions, priorities, and fears of American presidents can the “puzzle” of America’s immense “generosity” to Israel be explained.

Jonathan Rynhold is a professor at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. An expert on US foreign policy toward Israel, he has acknowledged that a “special relationship” between the United States and Israel produces a level of American support that “goes beyond an empirical calculation of U.S. interests.” His book on the subject, endorsed on its back cover by Israel’s former ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, argues that what explains US policy toward Israel is based on an affinity of values “grounded in deep cultural foundations.”

Rynhold admits that “pro-Israel groups constrain U.S policy” but suggests that this is only true with respect to “raising the political costs of pressuring Israel” rather than accounting for the vast and blanket support Israeli governments receive for policies and actions severely at odds with stated US foreign policy objectives. What influence Israel’s Lobby has, he argues, is due to “the resonance of Israel in American culture.” He ends his study wondering about whether this will remain the case if Israel does not moderate its policies but concludes that “the underlying cultural foundations of pro-Israel sentiment in America are so robust that the special relationship between Israel and the United States will remain virtually unbreakable.”

Instead of analyzing the record of AIPAC in manipulating, affecting, and even drafting legislation and congressional resolutions toward Israel, Rynhold performs a sleight of hand by focusing on Jews as an interest group whose ranks are divided. Treating “Jews” as if they are said to be the faction responsible for shaping US policy toward Israel, Rynhold sets up a straw man. By emphasizing pluralism and splits within the American Jewish community, Rynhold substitutes treatment of intra-Jewish politics for analysis of the influence of the network of Israel advocacy organizations.

To the extent that he does pay attention to AIPAC’s influence by citing the remarks of US policymakers, Rynhold cherry-picks from among scores of available quotations from veterans of US Middle East diplomacy arguing the

opposite of what he seeks to prove. Thus, Rynhold quotes former State Department official Aaron Miller as saying, “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.”

Even this carefully chosen quote, however, is taken out of context. Although Miller does say that the Lobby’s influence on the executive branch is not as strong as it is on Congress, Dan Fleshler, an American Jewish activist and analyst of AIPAC’s activities, also quotes him as emphasizing the role of the “anticipatory reflex,” a presidentially imposed requirement to anticipate how Israel’s Lobby might react to initiatives and adopt positions designed to avoid confrontations. Fleshler also quotes Samuel Lewis, who served for many years as ambassador to Israel and was known as unusually sympathetic to even right-wing Israeli points of view, as acknowledging that the Lobby “has the capacity to constrain the executive branch through Congress with public signals, and to some degree with direct intervention with people in the White House.... [Lobby activists] can and do set limits on the freedom of action that the White House feels like it has.”

With respect to AIPAC specifically, Rynhold’s crucial piece of evidence for the organization’s weakness and relative unimportance is that the Center for Responsive Politics, a watchdog group that monitors lobbying in Washington, “ranked the pro-Israel lobby’s effectiveness twenty-sixth out of forty industries lobbying Congress.” In fact, the Center for Responsive Politics did not rank Israel’s Lobby as less effective than twenty-five other “industries.” Indeed, the center does not and never has ranked the “effectiveness” of lobbies by industry or any other way. The only ranking it did provide was in regard to amounts of money officially spent on lobbying activities. These data refer to expenditures by entire industries, not by individual lobbying organizations. To compare expenditures of specific Israel advocacy organizations to the combined budgets of all the companies and organizations lobbying in Washington on behalf, for example, of “agribusiness” or “aerospace” is a silly but fundamentally misleading error.

In fact, even Rynhold seems unconvinced by his argument. After providing the quote from Miller about AIPAC’s ineffectiveness, he comments, “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.” So despite the overall claim and explicit purpose of the book, to advance culture as the driver of US policy toward Israel rather than the Lobby’s influence, Rynhold ends up acknowledging that the Lobby may well be the driver of US policy toward Israel, with cultural affinity being a necessary but clearly not sufficient condition for its effectiveness.

Steven Spiegel’s widely cited and influential 1985 book, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, contends that the personal preferences of presidents or their administrations’ perceptions of American national interests are what determine US foreign policy, including policy toward Israel. “The critical factors determining the content of American policy are: the basic assumptions of the president, the individuals on whom he relies for advice, and the resulting decision-making system which converts ideas into policies.”

This is what George Washington suggested ought to be true about the United States. It is also what standard studies of US foreign policymaking, such as Martin Indyk’s 2021 detailed account of Henry Kissinger’s Middle East diplomacy, imply is true by focusing primary attention on the skills, strategies, beliefs, and values of American presidents and their top advisers. In many, if not most, foreign policy arenas, and for many, if not most, American leaders, it may well be true that domestic politics plays only a small role in foreign policy decisions. But it is manifestly not the case when it comes to Arab-Israeli relations and presidents, including Truman, Ford, Carter, George H. W. Bush, and Obama, whose personal preferences about foreign policy and national security led directly toward criticism of and even confrontation with Israel.

Like Organski and Rynhold, Spiegel avoids direct engagement with the evidence in support of the Lobby’s influence over US foreign policy. By transforming the question from how powerful Israel’s Lobby has been to whether it is all-powerful, a straw man claim is established and easily rejected. Another tactic is to slant background narratives to conceal tensions between events and Spiegel’s claims about those events. When policies are adopted that do seem responsive to Lobby pressures, the incidents are treated as analytically irrelevant “errors.”

For example, Spiegel blamed Kissinger's "errors" (not what he acknowledges was President Ford's "fury") for pressures exerted on Israel by the Ford administration. Spiegel characterizes the 1975 committee of "Wise Men," convened by Kissinger and comprising former government officials who had served as pillars of the postwar US foreign policy establishment, not as the vehicle for mobilizing national interests and protecting presidential preferences from the pressure of Israel's Lobby that it was, but as an errant exercise of Kissingerian pique. Under tremendous pressure from Israel's Lobby, and worried about his chances in the upcoming presidential election, Ford rejected the recommendation of the Wise Men (with whom, he later said, he personally agreed) to directly pressure Israel into participating in an international conference and an American-Soviet-backed peace settlement. By treating the episode as an "error," Spiegel protects from dramatically contrary evidence his argument that presidential priorities and global and national interest considerations determine foreign policy.

Spiegel's conclusions were comforting to those seeking to minimize public impressions of the importance of Israel's Lobby. In 1986, he was honored by the Jewish Book Council with its Morris J. and Betty Kaplun Essay Contest for the best book on Israel. For decades, it was widely cited as a reliable scholarly account of presidential policies toward Israel, receiving dozens of citations annually even thirty years after its publication. However, with the exception of Dwight Eisenhower, whose actions to end the Suez War and achieve Israel's rapid evacuation of Sinai were a direct expression of his views and those of his top advisers—and, perhaps, Donald Trump, whose transactional and gyrating foreign policies cannot be traced to a coherent set of preferences—every American president has experienced substantial frustration in their attempts to follow an "evenhanded" or balanced approach toward Israel and the Arabs. Each one, to a greater or lesser extent, was stymied by Israel Lobby opposition.

The Lobby's enormous political influence in Congress and the strict limits it imposes on the executive branch are its most powerful accomplishments. But the scale and consequence of its exertions to control American civil society reflect its

widening ambitions and expanding capabilities. By the mid-1980s, the Lobby's influence had already spread far beyond the Beltway surrounding Washington, DC. It had become "a muscular behemoth with roots planted in all corners and all levels of U.S. society."

One measure of the Lobby's success is the degree to which its focus and resources have shifted from ensuring that policies accord with its view of Israel's interests (except in rare cases, that is a given) to controlling agendas, excluding potential question raisers from being recruited by the major parties as candidates for state or national office, and restricting the range of acceptable debate, the Overton window, on public discussion of Israel. This has led to a vast expansion of Lobby efforts to dominate debate about Israel within American civil society and restrict mobilization within it on behalf of Palestinians or in opposition to Israeli policies.

In the mainstream American media, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) is the most prominent American source for "talking head" comment on Israel and Arab-Israeli affairs as well as the home of numerous American officials with past and future assignments in government connected to Israel. An AIPAC staffer present at the meeting where the decision was taken to create WINEP reports that its purpose was to "disseminate the AIPAC line in a way that would disguise its connections." Another heavily called-on source for media interviews on Israel-Palestinian affairs is the Brookings Institution, where Martin Indyk served in various capacities from 2001 to 2018, including as director of foreign policy and executive vice president. Indyk was a high-ranking foreign policy official in the Clinton and Obama administrations who, among other posts, represented the United States as ambassador to Israel. He began his career in Washington working for AIPAC and later became the founding executive director of WINEP.

One reason for the prominence of friendly talking heads in the American news media has been the Lobby's success in constraining presidents to appoint strong Israel supporters to policy and analysis positions with direct responsibility for Israeli affairs. The media then turn to them, both during and after their time in office, for "expert" opinion. Indyk was but one example of these officials, as was Samuel Lewis, ambassador to Israel in the Carter and

Reagan administrations, and Elliott Abrams, special assistant to the president and senior director of the National Security Council for Near East and North African Affairs.

Dennis Ross, a senior fellow at WINEP and a frequent *New York Times* op-ed contributor, was director of Near East and South Asian Affairs for the National Security Council in the Reagan administration, special Middle East envoy in the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations, and special assistant to the president for the Central Region (including the Middle East) during the Obama presidency. He continues to be a talking head on NPR and cable news. After retiring from the Department of State, Aaron David Miller, a frequent CNN contributor who worked on Israeli issues for six different secretaries of state, publicly criticized American diplomats for operating under a “‘no surprises’ policy, under which we had to run everything by Israel first,” in the *Washington Post*.

The Lobby’s ambition, indeed, is much greater than to help shape American policy toward and debate on Israel. It is more accurately understood to be dedicated to establishing, and enforcing, strict limits on the range of opinion that can be publicly voiced by American politicians, journalists, and academics on topics pertaining to Israel and Palestine. This requires active and aggressive patrolling of the boundaries of discourse to exclude undesirable categories, questions, or comparisons.

Among the topics the Lobby aspires to insulate from public discussion are: levels of US aid to Israel, fealty to the idea of an American-Israeli “special relationship,” US commitments to Israeli national security, the scale of acceptable Israeli violence and collateral damage against all Arabs, Israel’s character as a Jewish and as a democratic state, implications for US law and policy of Israeli nuclear weapons, boycotts as a legitimate expression of political disapproval (if directed at Israel), and the status of Jerusalem as Israel’s “eternal and united” capital city. As seen dramatically during the ongoing genocide in Gaza, attempts to expand the range of debate on Israel-related issues are occasions for energetic and even furious mobilizations of outrage designed not

only to punish infractions but to deter others from crossing Lobby-patrolled discursive boundaries.

In spite of these efforts at censorship, it has often been observed that Israel's status in America is more similar to that of a state of the United States than to a foreign country. Yet it is difficult to imagine US politicians being as overwhelmingly enthusiastic in their praise for any one state in the union as they regularly are for Israel. We do not contend that the Lobby is successful in all it seeks to do. It has suffered some severe defeats. Among the most notable have been the 1981 AWACS deal made between the Reagan administration and Saudi Arabia; the George H. W. Bush administration's 1992 imposition of restrictions on loan guarantees to Israel in connection with housing construction in occupied territory; and implementation by the Obama administration in 2015 of the nuclear weapons agreement with Iran. But we learn less about the limits on the Lobby's clout from these dramatic failures than from their rarity and from the reminder they provide to all concerned of the price in political capital paid by US presidents and the members of Congress and senators who have supported them in what have usually been, from a political point of view, Pyrrhic victories.

Israeli government operatives do not control the organizations that comprise its Lobby in the United States. Israeli officials send signals that guide the behavior and the rhetoric of Lobby leaders and thousands of activists, and many within these organizations have loyalties to both Israel and the United States. Some, such as Jonathan Pollard, may even put Israel's interests above those of the United States. But the argument and evidence presented here are not an indictment of those American citizens whose passionate efforts and dedication to their beliefs have contributed to the Lobby's success. If blame is to be assigned, it must be directed at the founding fathers. The citizens active in Israel's Lobby have behaved exactly as the founding fathers expected them to behave: selfishly, strategically, and with a narrow vision of the problems confronted by the overall community.

Washington's Farewell Address treated the threat of "special attachment" and "excessive partiality" as particularly dangerous in the realm of foreign policy precisely because he so well understood the peculiar vulnerability of the country in this domain associated with the fundamental structure of the American constitutional order. The Lobby's dominant influence over foreign policy toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict is definitive proof not of its malevolence but of the compelling character of Washington's original analysis. We turn now to the consequences for America of ignoring our first president's warning.

CHAPTER 2

ISRAEL AND AMERICA IN A MESSY WORLD

In an article in the *New Yorker* in 2005, journalist Jeffrey Goldberg described AIPAC as a “leviathan among lobbies” and related a telling conversation with former AIPAC official Steven Rosen. Over dinner, Goldberg asked Rosen if the scandalous recording of David Steiner boasting about AIPAC’s power had diminished its influence in any way. Rosen’s response exceeded even Steiner’s braggadocio: “A half smile appeared on [Rosen’s] face, and he pushed a napkin across the table. ‘You see this napkin?’ he said. ‘In twenty-four hours, we could have the signatures of seventy senators on this napkin.’”

There is no doubt that Israel’s Lobby has been the most effective and successful foreign affairs lobby in American history. Had American leaders been able to operate without the need for its support and the fear of its wrath, US policies in the Middle East would have been very different. Responding to their own political instincts and to the advice of domestic affairs advisers, most presidents have regularly decided on policies preferred by Israeli governments and Israel advocates. Doing so, they have overridden strong and even passionate objections by their closest foreign policy and national security advisers. The result of this tension between domestic political pressures and national security and foreign policy priorities has been the repeated sacrifice of American national interests, repeated betrayals of traditional American values, and repeated exposure of the United States to risks of instability, war, and loss of influence in the international arena.

These sacrifices and risks were heavy and real during the three and a half decades following World War II, an era dominated by the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Each of these superpowers led a bloc of allies and clients. Each was determined to prevail in competition with the other. At the same time, each knew that the only mortal threat they faced was a direct military clash between them that might escalate into nuclear war. Above all, the United States and the Soviet Union sought to avoid crises or misunderstandings capable of leading to the use of atomic weapons.

Until the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1990, this bipolar struggle gave US policymakers a compelling framework for foreign policy and national security decision-making. Its stark simplicity undergirded a foreign policy doctrine attracting sustained bipartisan support, famously summed up by President Harry Truman's secretary of state Dean Acheson, as being "clearer than truth," making it both convenient and attractive as a basis for mobilizing sustained bipartisan support.

The grand strategy that informed US foreign policy in the decades after World War II was containment—the use of alliances, limited military interventions, and foreign economic assistance not to defeat or destroy the Soviet Union but to prevent the expansion of its influence. Advanced in its classic form by diplomat and historian George F. Kennan, the objective of containment was neither to accept the permanence of the Soviet-led communist bloc nor to make war upon it but to outcompete it over a long time frame, anticipating its eventual collapse due to internal stresses. Between Truman and George H. W. Bush, every American president during the Cold War adopted containment as their grand geopolitical strategy. This consensus did not result in a problem-free foreign policy, but containment did help prevent nuclear war, minimize strategic threats to the United States, and consolidate an economic and cultural position so dominant as to allow Washington to sustain the costs of suboptimal policies in many regions of the world, including needless wars and interventions in Southeast Asia (Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia), the Middle East (Iran, Syria, Lebanon), and Latin America (Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador).

Bending to the will of Israel's Lobby has now become much more consequential and dangerous than it was during the Cold War. The reasons for

this are rooted in the costs of American Middle East policies during the Cold War and in structural changes in international affairs. For at least the first four decades of Israel's existence, until the effective end of the Cold War, international affairs experts regularly observed that Washington had taken unwise risks in the Middle East, paid unnecessary costs, and missed significant opportunities because of its lopsided support for Israel and its priorities. Most critiques focused on risks of unwanted crises or wars with the Soviet Union and threats to oil supplies, on the risks of Arab and Muslim states aligning with Moscow, and on lost opportunities to achieve peace or strengthen containment efforts in the region.

Undoubtedly there have been and always will be disagreements about the extent to which US foreign policies were or are in the interests of the United States. Nor can anyone know for certain whether US interests would have been better served if policies less to the liking of Israel's Lobby had been adopted instead of those that were. And yet it is clear that the Lobby's influence has significantly damaged or seriously threatened those interests. For even if it is impossible to say with certainty what particular decision at what particular time would have been in the best interests of the country, one can learn a great deal if presidents have rejected the counsel of their savviest and most reliable advisers. The size of the gap between the decisions presidents actually took versus those they evidently wanted to take—and that were unanimously recommended by officials and advisers responsible for aligning foreign policy with the country's geopolitical and economic interests—can be used as a measure of the risks and damage to American national interests associated with policies adopted to appease Israel's Lobby.

When it comes to the Middle East, the size of that gap has been large and is now very large, imposing growing economic, security, and reputational costs on the United States. Because of the consensus associated with America's containment strategy against communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular, we can use decisions about Israel during the Cold War to see exactly how presidents coped when faced with choices pitting the united counsel of top foreign policy and national security advisers against the domestic political pressures brought to bear by Israel's Lobby. We begin with President Truman's

decision in May 1948 to recognize the State of Israel before it was officially established.

With the exception of George Washington, no diplomatic or military leader in American history has earned a reputation for patriotic virtue and skilled devotion to duty comparable to that of General George C. Marshall. In World War I, Marshall served as the right-hand man of General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in Europe. Having established his brilliance as an officer and his effectiveness as an organizer of massive logistical operations and troop movements on the Western Front, Marshall was named US Army chief of staff on September 1, 1939, the day Germany invaded Poland to begin World War II. In four years, he expanded the army from an organization with fewer personnel than in the army of Portugal to a fighting force of nearly 7 million.

President Roosevelt's regard for and reliance on Marshall were so great that he kept him away from the battlefield throughout the war, telling him, "I didn't feel I could sleep at ease if you were out of Washington." Roosevelt then asked Marshall for his choice of whom to appoint to oversee the Normandy invasion as Supreme Commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe. Having been excluded from that role by the president's insistence that he remain in Washington, Marshall chose Dwight D. Eisenhower. Marshall was then promoted to general of the army, a five-star rank earned by only a handful of other officers in American history. Winston Churchill called Marshall "the true organizer of victory." *Time* magazine twice named him Man of the Year.

Harry Truman, who became president after Roosevelt's death in 1945, was in awe of Marshall, casting him as the "architect of victory" and "the greatest military man that this country has ever produced." In 1947, he asked Marshall to serve as secretary of state, in which capacity Marshall conceived and launched the Marshall Plan, a far-seeing strategy to invest American resources in the protection and revitalization of West Germany and other European democracies, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In September 1950, with the nation at war in Korea, Truman again turned to Marshall,

appointing him secretary of defense and assigning him responsibility for remobilizing the American military.

Marshall was a famously disciplined and formal person, devoted to service and resistant to any suggestion that politics or personal preferences should play a role in decisions of national importance. In his first meeting with President Roosevelt, who referred to him as “George,” Marshall shocked his colleagues by disagreeing with the president’s proposals and making it clear he wanted FDR to refer to him only by his rank so as not to imply a false and inappropriate intimacy. Churchill, whose strategic advice Marshall often rejected, captured this aspect of Marshall’s attitude and aura by referring to him as “the noblest Roman of them all.”

In the mid-1940s, Marshall pushed quietly but steadily against Zionist proposals to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. He was concerned that American support would open opportunities for the Soviet Union to exploit Arab anger, put Middle Eastern oil supplies at risk in the event of a European conflict he feared might well be imminent, and require the deployment of (unavailable) American troops to prevent bloodshed and instability in Palestine. These were, indeed, the strongly held views of virtually all of Truman’s most important military and foreign policy advisers, including Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, and George Kennan, director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff.

Truman himself was torn on the question of Palestine. On the one hand, he had grown up in a traditionally antisemitic environment. But he had also developed genuine sympathy for the plight of Jews in the aftermath of the Nazi extermination campaign along with an inbred, Old Testament attraction to the Zionist idea of reestablishing the Holy Land as a Jewish country. He even once imagined himself as a modern-day Cyrus, the ancient Persian king who helped exiled Jews in Babylonia return to Jerusalem. But Truman was also irritated and at times furious at the constant hectoring to which he was subjected by Zionist lobbyists.

This relentless pressure by longtime World Zionist Organization president Chaim Weizmann, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, and a host of other Jewish delegations, friends, and politicians exasperated him. “I am not a New Yorker,”

he said after one particularly tense meeting. "All these people are pleading a special interest. I am an American." On another occasion, he wondered aloud how, if "Jesus Christ couldn't please them [the Jews] when he was on earth, so how could anyone expect that I would have any luck." Referring to British and American proposals in 1946 to establish Palestine as a binational federative state open to Jewish immigration but shared by Arabs and Jews, Truman, in October 1947, told Senator Claude Pepper of Florida that "had it not been for the unwarranted interference of the Zionists, we would have had the matter settled a year and a half ago. I received about 35,000 pieces of mail and propaganda from the Jews in this country while this matter was pending. I put it all in a pile and struck a match to it."

Despite Truman's personal frustration with the political pressures he was under, he could not ignore them. Coming in an election year that would pit him against Governor Thomas Dewey of New York, pressures from the Zionist lobby forced him into an excruciating and embarrassing position. Special pleading by a faction whose political support he needed ran directly against the advice of the national security and foreign policy officials for whom he had enormous respect and with whose views regarding the risks of American sponsorship of a Jewish state he shared. Truman waffled, and so did American policy.

In November 1947, the United States pressed countries such as Haiti and Liberia to vote in the United Nations so as to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority in favor of the partition of Palestine. By February 1948, however, the violence that Truman's advisers predicted had swept over the country. A fierce civil war erupted, featuring attacks and atrocities along roads stretching to Jerusalem and to Jewish settlements located in areas allocated to the Arab state and in cities left in chaos by uncoordinated departures of British security forces. Atrocities and counter-atrocities produced spirals of fear and flight. Unwilling to send sufficient forces to Palestine to keep the peace, the United States was also fearful of the chaos that was accompanying partition. Early in March, Truman's ambassador to the United Nations announced Washington was abandoning partition in favor of a trusteeship proposal that would have preserved Palestine as a single country with an Arab majority and a Jewish minority. The reaction of

Zionists around the world was furious, and Truman beat a hasty retreat, returning to what consequently appeared as a somewhat problematic commitment to Zionist aspirations.

The problem came to a head on May 12. With Palestine engulfed by civil war, Arab states threatening to invade, and the last British soldiers about to leave the country, Truman called a meeting of his top advisers. To the president's right were his top domestic political advisers, Clark Clifford and David Niles, a committed Zionist retained as an adviser from the Roosevelt administration. On Truman's left were Marshall, Undersecretary of State Lovett, and two other State Department officials.

Marshall and Lovett began the meeting by reporting the unwillingness of the Jewish Agency, which was in command of Zionist forces fighting in Palestine, to agree to a truce even though King Abdullah of Jordan had promised not to enter any territory allotted to the Jewish state by the United Nations. They worried about the implications of a wider war for both the security of Jews in Palestine and for American interests. Clifford responded with a detailed proposal for the immediate recognition of a Jewish state in Palestine—even before the Zionist leadership declared it. The proposal was based on memoranda drafted by Max Lowenthal, an Orthodox Jew with strong Zionist sympathies who became an unofficial member of Truman's staff. Clifford's justification for the proposal, backed by Niles, was strong and explicit: Truman needed to placate American Jews to ensure their votes for him in the upcoming election.

Clifford's presentation, made in his aristocratic, unhurried way, enraged the now red-faced Marshall. When Clifford finished, Lovett observed that he was making a "very transparent attempt to win the Jewish vote." Marshall was horrified by the explicit introduction of partisan politics into foreign policy and national security decision-making. Rejecting the proposal for immediate recognition on substantive grounds, he then turned to the premise of Clifford's argument. "Mr. President," said Marshall, "I thought this meeting was called to consider an important complicated problem in foreign policy. I don't even know why Clifford is here. He is a domestic advisor, and this is a foreign policy matter."

According to Marshall's own account of the meeting, he then said that the announcement Clifford was recommending to recognize the State of Israel before it was established, thereby ending efforts to bring about a solution that could avoid an all-out war, was a "transparent dodge to win a few votes," leaving the "great dignity of the office of the President... seriously diminished." Marshall then looked directly at the president, announcing that "if the President were to follow Clifford's advice, and if in the elections in November, he, Marshall, were to vote, he would vote against the President." Clifford later commented that coming from "'the great one of the age,' whose presence in his administration gave Truman such pride and feeling of confidence," this was the sharpest rebuke Truman had ever received.

The meeting ended in what Clifford remembered as shocked silence. All Truman said was that he was "inclined to agree with General Marshall, but thought it best they all sleep on the matter." Within a day, however, Truman made his decision to follow Clifford's advice and recognize Israel de facto before the Soviet Union could recognize it de jure. Marshall accepted the president's decision but never spoke to Clifford again.

Over twenty years later, President Gerald Ford launched what he referred to as a "reassessment" of US policy in the Middle East. The initiative had been advanced by Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, as a way to escape from two years of plodding, expensive, and embarrassing failures to move toward a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement. Such an agreement, it was hoped, would prevent recurrence of the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between Washington and Moscow during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war that featured Soviet threats of armed intervention against the Israeli army and American mobilization of nuclear forces targeting the Soviet Union.

Both Ford and Kissinger had become intensely dissatisfied with Israeli stonewalling. Kissinger described the Israelis as "unbelievable," complaining that it was "a monumental task getting them to agree to anything." Kissinger was not exaggerating. In 1975, one senior Israeli official described his government's "approach to negotiations" in this way:

We have been maneuvering since 1967 to gain time and to return as little as possible. The predominant government view has been that stalemates are to our advantage.... We realize that the entire world is against us on the issue of borders and that we are terribly dependent on one nation for sophisticated arms. Nevertheless, we have been successful for the past seven or eight years, and we may have to go on maneuvering [for] another ten.

President Ford made his irritation with the Israelis clear in March 1975 with a personal letter to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The letter registered Ford's "deep disappointment over the position taken by Israel during the course of the negotiations." Informing Rabin that he had "directed an immediate reassessment of U.S. policy in the area, including our relations with Israel," he added that Rabin would be informed of decisions reached as a result of the reassessment, decisions that would be guided by the need to ensure that "the overall interests of America in the Middle East and globally will be protected."

The reassessment was conducted by the committee of Wise Men convened by Kissinger: former government officials who had served as pillars of the postwar US foreign policy establishment. They included dominant figures in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, such as former defense secretary Robert McNamara, former treasury secretary Douglas Dillon, former secretary of state Dean Rusk, and former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy. Also included were men who had held sensitive high-level intelligence and diplomatic posts during World War II and in the first decades of the Cold War: Averell Harriman, former governor of New York, President Roosevelt's personal envoy to Great Britain, ambassador to the Soviet Union, and commerce secretary in the Truman administration; John McCloy, who served as assistant secretary of war during World War II, as high commissioner of Germany afterward, and as an adviser to every president, from Roosevelt to Reagan; and former undersecretary of state George Ball.

In a meeting on March 25, 1975, the committee considered three options. Option 1 would move directly to a reconvened Geneva Conference. Its one-week meeting in December 1973, helping to end the Yom Kippur War, was adjourned

but was still available as a platform for diplomacy. In this setting, the United States would cooperate with the Soviet Union to push hard for a comprehensive settlement based on near-total Israeli withdrawals on all fronts and official peace treaties between Israel and its neighbors. Option 2 would be to pursue a separate Israeli-Egyptian settlement. Option 3 would be to return to the “step-by-step” approach, meaning piecemeal agreements on demilitarization and/or partial withdrawals would be sought without treating them as steps in a process leading to a comprehensive peace settlement. The unanimous recommendation of the committee was option 1: pressure on Israel to withdraw in order to achieve a comprehensive peace, in cooperation with the Soviet Union.

Clear indications that President Ford intended to accept this recommendation triggered a powerful mobilization by Israel’s Lobby to prevent it. One feature of this campaign was to denounce Secretary of State Kissinger, who himself was Jewish with family members who had perished in the Holocaust, as a “traitor” who was using his Jewishness to hurt Israel. But the Lobby’s decisive achievement was a letter reportedly drafted by AIPAC and delivered to President Ford two months after the Wise Men committee had submitted their recommendation.

The letter was signed by seventy-six senators. It demanded that the president “make it clear... that the United States, acting in its own national interests, stands firmly with Israel in the search for peace in future negotiations, and that this premise is the basis of the current reassessment of U.S. policy in the Middle East.” Despite Ford being “mad as Hell” at the Israelis for their obstructionism, he was cowed. To protect his chances for election the following year, Ford abandoned option 1 and effectively adopted option 3, returning to the step-by-step process that had so infuriated him, a process of buying slices of the Sinai from Israel for increasing amounts of aid and then turning them over to Egypt. Indeed, this capitulation opened the floodgates. According to one Kissinger aide, the list of guarantees and aid demanded by the government of Yitzhak Rabin in return for Israel’s agreement to restore one-tenth of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt was “mind-boggling.”

To achieve the September 1975 “Sinai II” agreement while trying (unsuccessfully) to protect President Ford’s election campaign from accusations

that he was not sufficiently friendly toward Israel, Ford and Kissinger straitjacketed US policy in the Middle East for decades to come by signing a veritable “marriage contract” between the two countries. According to journalist Edward Sheehan and subsequent analysts, American commitments made to Israel at this time “amounted to a formal political and military alliance between Israel and the United States... [granting] Israel an outright veto over future American policy in the Middle East.” While annual subsidies granted to Israel secured the country against military and economic pressure, a sweeping collection of US political, economic, military, and diplomatic commitments removed almost any need for Israeli leaders to concern themselves with US or international efforts to move toward peace.

Most of these guarantees were made in a US-Israeli Memorandum of Agreement that, along with secret annexes, was signed on September 1, 1975, by Kissinger and Israeli foreign minister Yigal Allon. By meeting virtually all of Israel’s demands, this document registers that, in everything but name, the United States had decided to subordinate most of its interests in the Middle East to the preferences of the Israeli government. One Kissinger aide described the array of gifts and guarantees included in the memorandum as “simply incredible.” In his book about the Middle East negotiations led by Kissinger, Sheehan titled the chapter dealing with Washington’s response to Israeli demands in 1975 “Cornucopia.”

The Kissinger memorandum of 1975 bound the United States to supply advanced F-16 fighters to Israel and to consider the supply of surface-to-surface Pershing missiles. If at any time Israel found itself in need of oil, the United States promised to solve the problem by “promptly” selling and, if necessary, delivering necessary supplies. Anticipating Israeli needs in this regard, the United States agreed to fund creation of a large Israeli oil reserve storage capacity. Washington also promised not to try to persuade Israel to engage in subsequent interim agreements with Egypt or to join with other countries in any diplomatic activity “which it and Israel agree are detrimental to the interests of Israel.” If Israel were to be threatened by a “world power” (i.e., the Soviet Union), the United States promised to consult with Israel about how to provide it the required assistance and support and plan for the delivery of military supplies to

Israel with such a contingency in mind. The United States committed itself to insisting on Egyptian implementation of its commitments independent of whether Israel made progress toward peace or not with other Arab countries, renounced any further efforts to achieve a “disengagement agreement” between Israel and Jordan, and straitjacketed Washington on the Palestinian question. Even more important, the agreement stipulated that “the United States will continue to adhere to its present policy with respect to the Palestine Liberation Organization, whereby it will not recognize or negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization so long as the Palestine Liberation Organization does not recognize Israel’s right to exist and does not accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.”

Indeed, the United States promised to avoid taking substantial diplomatic initiatives toward the conflict that were not preapproved by the Israeli government. Thus, the memorandum held that “the Geneva peace conference will be reconvened at a time coordinated between the United States and Israel.” If and when convened, the United States promised to “consult fully and seek to concert its position and strategy... with Israel with regard to the participation of any other additional states... (or) any... group, or organization.” The United States also committed itself to support Israel’s demands for individual bilateral negotiations rather than a multilateral framework for talks, and it promised to “oppose and, if necessary, vote against any initiative in the Security Council to alter adversely the terms of reference of the Geneva peace conference or to change Resolutions 242 and 338” in ways “incompatible with their original purpose” (as determined, in effect, by Israel).

The following month, in October 1975, the mayor of New York, Abe Beame, refused to welcome Egyptian president Anwar Sadat when he visited the city. He did so, according to *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite, “out of deference to New York City’s large ethnic makeup.” In other words, Beame was reacting to the same political pressures that had forced President Ford to scuttle plans for achieving a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace. The depth of Ford’s discomfort with his decision to back away from the Wise Men’s recommendation for option 1 was reflected in the contrast between Beame’s snub of Sadat and the lavish reception the Egyptian leader received at the White

House. There, Sadat was greeted with a twenty-one-gun salute and a color guard of all the armed services. Knowing that Zane Grey was one of Sadat's favorite authors, an Old West-themed state dinner for one hundred guests was arranged, featuring Remington sculptures, Navajo textiles, and a performance by Johnny Cash.

Ford described the occasion as "really a great honor for me, personally, as well as President" to welcome the Egyptian president and praised his guest's "farsighted statesmanship and wisdom." Most telling was Ford's public criticism of the return to the step-by-step diplomacy he had been constrained to adopt as US policy along with a veiled reference to the Palestinian problem. In his toast to Sadat, Ford declared that "no step we have taken can be an end in itself. There can be no peace until the legitimate interests of all the people in the Middle East are taken fairly into account in a final peace settlement."

Both Ford and Kissinger had other, private thoughts about the Israelis. To his aides, the secretary of state referred to Israel's leaders as "the 'world's worst shits,' 'a bloody minded bunch,' and 'SOBs,' whose goal it was, he told Ford, to make sure the president did not win the 1976 election." Ford's own comments were more diplomatic. He told a closed meeting of Senate and House leaders that "they," referring to Israel's leaders, "are not the easiest people to deal with."

In his memoirs, Ford wrote bitterly about the AIPAC letter signed by three-quarters of the Senate that had ruined his diplomatic plans and cost him dearly in his losing election campaign. "It really bugged me. The senators claimed the letter was 'spontaneous,' but there was no doubt in my mind that it was inspired by Israel." In a personal letter to Sadat, Ford promised he would try again when his position with Israel and the Lobby was stronger. "Next year is a presidential election year," he told Sadat, "I can't do anything.... But when I'm re-elected, we're going to drop the step-by-step approach for a comprehensive settlement."

Gerald Ford lost the election, and Jimmy Carter became president. The Lobby had hoped Carter, who had won 71 percent of the Jewish vote, would abandon traditional US aspirations for a comprehensive Middle East peace. Carter was quick to disappoint. Anxious to establish his diplomacy as sincere and

transparent as both a substantive and stylistic break from the Metternichian style he attributed to Henry Kissinger, Carter set his sights on a reconvened Geneva Conference to achieve a peace treaty resolving the core issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict. His overall readiness to confront Israel was reflected in his first choice for secretary of state, George Ball, one of the Wise Men known for his argument of the need for American pressure if Israel were to be “saved from itself.” With high poll numbers and an American public that seemed ready for a commonsense, problem-solving president, Carter voiced his belief in March 1977 of the need for a “Palestinian homeland” as a key feature of the Middle East peace he wished to achieve.

In early April, Sadat visited the White House. He praised Carter as “a man of courage and vision” and expressed enthusiasm for his peacemaking initiative. Israel’s responses were less encouraging. Israel’s newly elected prime minister, the right-wing Likud Party leader Menachem Begin, was even more opposed to negotiating with the PLO (what he called the PDO, the “Palestine Destruction Organization”) than his predecessor Rabin and was ideologically committed to Israeli rule over all of the West Bank and Gaza and to the dense and expanding settlement of Israelis throughout these territories.

Meanwhile, Israel’s Lobby began its mobilization against Carter’s peace initiative, vehemently criticizing his public comments in favor of a Palestinian homeland. In a closely held fifty-page memorandum for the president in early June, Carter’s senior adviser, Hamilton Jordan, warned of the political costs Carter was paying and would pay for his Middle East policy. Carter was told that because of their 90 percent turnout rate, Jews “who comprise less than 3% of the population—cast almost 5% of the total vote.” He added that in New York, where Jews were 12 percent of the population, they cast about 28 percent of the votes in Democratic statewide primaries. (Senator Edward Kennedy would seriously challenge Carter in the New York and Connecticut primaries by hammering him on the Israel issue, as Jordan predicted.) Jordan went on to stress that Jewish contributions to political campaigns are “disproportionate nationally and in almost every area of the country.”

Carter was as yet undeterred. Offering frank and direct criticism of Prime Minister Rabin and then of Menachem Begin, Carter began intensive

communications with Egyptian, Syrian, and Palestinian leaders. In August, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance shuttled between countries, trying to advance the idea of a “transitional arrangement” for the West Bank and Gaza and searching for some way to escape the straitjacket that Kissinger and Ford had placed on US relations with the PLO by integrating it somehow into the negotiating process. In October, Vance issued a joint communiqué with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko committing the superpowers to achieving “as soon as possible a just and lasting settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.” The settlement was to be “comprehensive” and would include “the resolution of the Palestinian question, including ensuring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people.”

Though fully expecting, as Jordan’s analysis had warned, that Israel’s Lobby would fiercely oppose the president’s Middle East policy, the administration was stunned by the nearly apoplectic reaction to the US-Soviet statement by both the Israeli government and the Lobby. Senator Henry Jackson (D-WA), perhaps the Lobby’s most important asset on Capitol Hill and the political godfather of the neoconservative movement, was described as “livid.” Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan prepared a “media blitz” to be unleashed with the message that “the administration had reneged on its commitments to Israel.”

Profoundly concerned about the political damage he was enduring, Carter responded by requesting a meeting with the foreign minister in New York. With Secretary of State Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in attendance, the meeting lasted six and a half hours, from 7:00 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Exchanges were described as “unprecedented in terms of difficulty and rancor.” Dayan’s account of the extraordinary encounter describes a cruel and steely-eyed Carter, supported by Vance, boring in on Israeli intransigence in general and on settlements in the West Bank in particular. Carter himself told Dayan that in his eyes it was Israel more than the Arabs who “put obstacles on the path to peace.” According to Brzezinski, “Dayan in effect blackmailed the President by saying that unless he had assurances that we would oppose an independent West Bank and that we would give them economic and military aid, he would have to indicate our unwillingness in his public statements here in the United States.... ‘I can go,’ said Dayan, ‘to the American Jews.’”

Faced with this threat, Carter surrendered. The next day, Cyrus Vance and Moshe Dayan issued a joint statement summarizing an American-Israeli “working paper” prepared in the early hours of the morning. The statement affirmed “all the understandings and agreements between” Israel and the United States apropos the Geneva Conference “remain in force.” In his authoritative account, William Quandt notes, “The simple fact was that the United States and Israel entered the talks that night on the verge of a major confrontation and emerged seven hours later with an agreement in hand.... Both sensed that something important had happened and that Carter had backed down in the face of domestic and Israeli pressures.”

The “U.S.-Israeli Working Paper,” the document that Vance summarized and released a week later, committed the United States to Israel’s view of Geneva as a ceremonial gateway to bilateral negotiations between Israel and the neighboring states; effectively reaffirmed the 1975 commitments to Israel about nonrecognition of the PLO; and pointedly made no mention of the “legitimate rights” of the Palestinian people or of the principle of achieving a comprehensive settlement.

Hopes to reconvene the Geneva Conference were dashed along with the promise of the Vance-Gromyko communiqué, a move Sadat had celebrated as a “brilliant maneuver.” The Egyptian president was informed of Washington’s retreat in a plea for understanding from Carter, delivered to Sadat by courier. While claiming that the working paper was flexible enough for progress to be made, Carter confessed that his efforts had run up against “obstacles” he could not overcome and that at this “crucial moment” he was making “a personal appeal for your [i.e., Sadat’s] support.”

Sadat’s response in November was to plunge down a path toward a separate peace with Israel, negotiated outside of the Geneva framework. Carter was never convinced this was the proper course to take. But he knew he could not run the domestic political risks of confronting the Israeli government over the Palestinian question. Nor could he ignore the domestic political rewards of a foreign policy success achieved by pursuing an outcome favored by the Israeli government. In the months that followed, Carter reluctantly shifted his sights from the comprehensive peace under the auspices of the superpowers that had

been the long-standing objective of US foreign policy to a bilateral peace between Israel and Egypt that would isolate Egypt, endanger its president (Sadat was assassinated four years later), and consolidate Israel's hold over the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the large Palestinian populations they contained.

In these three dramatic decisions by American presidents, their own assessment of the nation's interests were supplanted, if not directly overwhelmed, by Israel and its domestic US Lobby. In May 1948, President Truman recognized the State of Israel prior to its establishment in whatever borders it would treat as its own. In August 1975, President Ford chose to return to a step-by-step process of Israeli-Egyptian negotiation while making commitments to Israel that ended his administration's efforts to achieve a comprehensive peace, straitjacketed American diplomacy in the future, and guaranteed vastly increased levels of American aid to Israel. In October 1977, President Carter abandoned his effort to reconvene the Geneva Conference under US-Soviet auspices to orchestrate a comprehensive end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, including establishment of a Palestinian homeland, pursuing instead a separate peace between Israel and Egypt. In each of these cases, the president's decision was contrary to his own instincts and policy preferences and was implemented against the strong and virtually unanimous opinions of his top advisers on matters of US foreign policy and national security.

Most analysts of America's role in the world, and virtually all of those not linked in some way to Israel's Lobby, agree that, during the Cold War, American national interests were substantially and negatively compromised by these and other decisions that prioritized the objectives of Israel advocates in the United States. Still, in the most dire of crises, presidents could invoke the country's vital interest in avoiding a nuclear war, or a confrontation with the Soviet Union that could risk nuclear war, to face down the Lobby and make decisions consistent with their fundamental beliefs and objectives and those of their advisers.

The usefulness of the confrontation with the Soviet Union as an invocable rationale for reining in Israel and defying its advocates in the United States was illustrated by President Eisenhower. In 1956, even while condemning bloody

Soviet repression in Hungary, Eisenhower's response was unequivocal. He joined Soviet leaders in calling for an immediate end to the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt and wrote a stern personal letter to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, forcing him to abandon his assertion of Israeli rights to permanently rule the Sinai Peninsula.

The same dynamic was apparent toward the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Defying a unanimous UN Security Council demand for a halt to the fighting, Israeli forces were advancing to destroy the Egyptian Third Army. Soviet threats to intervene militarily to stop the Israelis triggered a DEFCON (Defense Condition) 3 alert of American strategic nuclear forces, something that had occurred only once before, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and has happened only one time since then (as a brief response to the 9/11 attacks in 2001). That set the stage for President Nixon and Kissinger to issue an ultimatum to Israel, forcing it to stop its advance, accept a ceasefire, and agree to negotiations under United Nations and then US-Soviet auspices.

Of course, the United States has also benefited in some ways from its alliance with Israel. American defense industries have profited substantially by sales to Israel paid for by US taxpayers. Several generations of American weapon systems have been field-tested and refined by the Israeli military in repeated clashes with Arab adversaries armed with Soviet weaponry. Coordination of American and Israeli intelligence has also helped both countries track and target terrorist and other enemies. But the argument made by some that during the Cold War Israel served as an immensely useful, if unofficial, American military base in the Middle East—what Organski called a “\$36 billion bargain”—while a standard part of the Lobby's script, is hard to credit. The idea that the United States was efficiently investing aid to Israel and motivated to do so in order to achieve geopolitical aims against the Soviet Union is directly contradicted by the fact that immense levels of aid—approximately \$3 billion annually—continued to be delivered to Israel from the 1980s into the 1990s, even after the Cold War had ended and the Soviet Union had disappeared.

The striking point about how expensive America's special relationship with Israel was is how much damage, above and beyond expenditures on aid to Israel, US interests suffered as a result. From the late 1940s to the early 1990s, the

United States delivered tens of billions of dollars in aid to Israel even as it absorbed the embarrassments, compromised policies, and risks associated with Israel's diplomatic intransigence, the weaponization of its nuclear technology, its expanding settlement of the West Bank, and its regular use of grossly disproportionate violence against Palestinians and in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. Again, these costs were manageable because of America's immense military, economic, and diplomatic power and because, in a crunch, presidents could invoke the imperative to avoid nuclear war with the Soviet Union to put a limit on what Washington could be compelled to do for Israeli governments and the Lobby that acted on their behalf.

But in 1990 the Cold War ended, and in 1991 the Soviet Union disappeared—as the old order dissolved and the new one was still being born. In this world, American paramountcy has been challenged from multiple directions.

Before the Soviet Union was officially dissolved in December 1991, it had already lost the status of a superpower able to compete with the United States. In the decades that followed, change in the structure of international politics has substantially increased the costs and risks of unconditionally supporting Israel. The clearly organized bipolar world of direct and comprehensive superpower competition, bounded closely by a balance of nuclear terror, was replaced first by a nearly unipolar system of American predominance and then by a messy multipolar distribution of power. In these worlds, American presidents have no longer been able to invoke the overarching threat from the Soviet Union as an imperative with which to counter pressures from Israel's Lobby entailing risks of escalation and war.

Without a widely accepted geopolitical imperative to justify public American opposition to Israeli policies, US presidents were forced into pathetic personal battles with the Lobby. This is the context of President George H. W. Bush's famous public exclamation of lonely frustration when in September 1991 he tried nudging Israel toward serious negotiations by withholding loan guarantees in response to Israeli settlement construction. AIPAC had launched a blitzkrieg on Capitol Hill to oppose his peacemaking effort, prompting a question at a

news conference about congressional opposition to his policy. “We’re up against very strong and effective, sometimes, groups that go up to the Hill. I heard today there was something like a thousand lobbyists on the Hill working the other side of the question. We’ve got one lonely little guy down here doing it.”

The broader impact of the transformation in the structure of international politics was to increase, not decrease, the regularity of foreign military intervention by the United States. In the forty-four years of the Cold War, the Congressional Research Service listed 49 actions by the US military abroad, not counting covert operations, alliance-maintaining missions, or the routine stationing of forces on bases located outside the United States. In the thirty-two years between 1991 and 2023, that number soared to 263. Particularly prominent were US military operations in the Middle East, including two wars against Iraq. These wars highlight the risks and difficulties imposed on the United States by its association with Israel and its susceptibility to pressure from Israel advocates in America to use military force against Israel’s adversaries.

In August 1990, in response to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s invasion and occupation of Kuwait, the United States sent hundreds of thousands of troops into the Middle East without fear of clashing dangerously with a peer adversary. In the name of collective security principles and in defense of the inviolability of established borders, the United States led a coalition eventually comprising thirty-nine countries to defend Saudi Arabia and then liberate Kuwait from its Iraqi occupiers.

In that war, Israel figured heavily in American calculations, not as a member of the coalition or as a strategic or diplomatic asset, but as an albatross around the necks of both US diplomacy and military action. One White House adviser to President George H. W. Bush recalled that “[as for] the problem of keeping Israel out of the war, there were few things the President and his top aides worried about more.” It was crucial for Washington to enlist Arab participation in the effort, but Israeli policies toward Palestinians, with which the United States was closely associated, hampered that effort, requiring the country to exclude Israel from the anti-Saddam coalition and commit to achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement after the war.

Saddam's best hope lay in posing as a defender of the Arab nation against Israel and Western imperialism, and for that he needed Israel to attack Iraq. To provoke such an attack, he started firing missiles at Israel, forcing millions of Israelis into shelters, terrified that some might be carrying poison gas in their warheads. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's government mobilized to strike back but was ordered to stand down by the Bush administration. Israel complied but only after requiring American forces to make a costly diversion of resources from the protection of Saudi Arabia and the invasion of Kuwait to the exhaustive and exhausting scouring of desert areas in Iraq from which missile attacks against Israel could be launched.

Few other presidents had more foreign policy experience prior to taking office than George H. W. Bush, who served as United Nations ambassador in the Nixon administration, chief liaison to the People's Republic of China under President Ford, then director of the CIA, and subsequently vice president for the two terms of Ronald Reagan's presidency. Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, were personally cautious and unusually thoughtful about the complexities of international affairs and the downstream dangers of unintended consequences. They took pains to avoid overcommitment and to mount a serious diplomatic effort to protect and exploit American military success. Accordingly, they insisted on sticking to declared war aims, not seeking regime change in Baghdad, and legitimizing American leadership in the Middle East by promoting a "new world order" based on commitments to international institutions, international law, and the territorial integrity of sovereign states. The centerpiece of this effort would be a postwar diplomatic process to end the Arab-Israeli conflict, including resolution of the Palestinian question. Indeed, America's withdrawal of the huge army it had sent to the Gulf was as rapid as its deployment. In March 1991, an Arab-Israeli peace conference was convened in Madrid under the auspices of the United States and the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, despite the prudence of policies adopted to minimize risks of costly sequelae, the war left expensive and fateful legacies. Thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed, along with 20,000 to 35,000 Iraqi soldiers. Tens of thousands of American veterans of the war were diagnosed with Gulf War syndrome, believed to be linked to a nervous system inhibitor used to protect

them against possible chemical warfare attacks. When thousands of Shiites, whom President Bush had publicly encouraged to revolt, were being slaughtered by Saddam's helicopter gunships, appeals for American protection went unheeded. Some of the most ardent supporters of the war, including high-ranking officials within the Bush administration, were outraged by the president's refusal to force regime change in Baghdad, a refusal motivated by caution and, reportedly, by a desire to preserve the Sunni-dominated Iraqi regime as a counterweight to Shia Iran.

But the most disastrous spin-off of the Gulf War did not become apparent to most in Washington until September 11, 2001, when al-Qaeda attacked the United States, killing more than three thousand civilians in the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania.

The attack was mainly aimed at provoking an American invasion of Muslim lands that could infuriate their inhabitants and reverse the jihadist movement's plummeting fortunes. Reinforcing this objective was Osama bin Laden's personal fury at the United States for garrisoning hundreds of thousands of "infidel" troops in his country, Saudi Arabia, during the Gulf War. Of special significance, however, is that one of the jihadists' prime public justifications for the 9/11 attack—one chosen because of its resonance with Muslims all over the world, whom al-Qaeda sought to rally to its banner—was opposition to Israel. In August 1998, al-Qaeda had bombed two American embassies in Africa, killing 224 people. A communiqué justified the attack because "the Americans humiliate our people... occupy the Arabian peninsula... extract our riches... impose a blockade, and... support the Jews of Israel, our worst enemies, who occupy Al-Aqsa Mosque." Bin Laden's "Letter to the American People," issued after 9/11, concluded by identifying America's backing of Israel as its most egregious sin. America had lost its way, declared bin Laden, "the day you made the Jews victorious in occupying our land and killing our brothers in Palestine."

Bin Laden may not have rallied support at the levels he hoped, but the attacks did usher in the biggest American foreign policy blunder of the last half century: President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in March 2003. The war

thrilled those who had been angry at the elder Bush's failure to effect regime change in Baghdad in 1991. While reflecting the same post-Cold War freedom to deploy American military strength that emboldened Bush and Baker to launch the Gulf War, neither the decision in 2002 to lead the country toward war, nor the invasion of Iraq itself in March 2003, nor the policies of those in charge of the fighting bore signs of the elder Bush's sophistication or experience.

Standing amid the ruins of the World Trade Center, George W. Bush, who had come to office with virtually no experience in or knowledge of international affairs, vowed to strike back at the terrorists. His words unleashed a rally-round-the-flag effect that shot his approval ratings from 51 to 86 percent. The immensity of US military preponderance combined with the political attractions for the neoconservative-dominated Republican Party of a war waged, as it was said, to establish a "New American Century" shifted the balance of power in the ferocious struggle over foreign policy and national security underway since Bush II entered office. The struggle pitted cautious and pragmatic internationalists, led by Secretary of State Colin Powell and including the uniformed military and intelligence community, against hawkish, risk acceptant neoconservatives and American supremacists, whose leaders, inside the administration, were Vice President Richard Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Excited by his new "Churchillian" image, the president, after 9/11, embraced the supremacists' extravagant ambitions. These were expressed in a fateful shift of focus from defeating al-Qaeda in Afghanistan to declaration of a "Global War on Terror." This would entail overthrowing all regimes identified as members of the "axis of evil" (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea), thereby paving the way to accomplish the larger goals of the supremacists—a global "Pax Americana" that would reflect the "benevolent hegemony" of the United States in a world its military might would allow it to dominate.

Before September 2001, the supremacist faction of the administration had been unsuccessful in its efforts to push the president toward the Middle East policies it favored, both toward Iraq (where it wanted regime change) and toward Israel (for which it wanted an end to peace negotiations premised on territorial compromise). Repeatedly, the pragmatic internationalists had successfully thwarted the best efforts of these supremacists to launch a war to

“liberate” Iraq as the opening salvo in their grand strategy for establishing a new American empire. After 9/11, however, the supremacists took over, with both the president and his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, falling into line with their cataclysmic threat assessments, their advice, and their plans.

Relying on cooked intelligence reports prepared by the Office of the Vice President and a new Pentagon “Office of Special Plans” created by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Bush declared that everyone in the world would have to choose either to be “with us or against us.” Launching the war in Iraq as a follow-on to what was billed as a quick victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan, he then claimed: “Mission Accomplished.”

Victories in Afghanistan and Iraq were hailed as stepping stones toward achieving much grander objectives to use American military and economic power to build a neoliberal, democratic Middle East, rid the world of rogue states, and establish a world order based not on collective multilateralism but on American power and American policy.

Whatever grand visions of American global hegemony lay behind the George W. Bush administration’s “Global War on Terror,” what mattered to the Israeli government was how Washington’s crusade against terrorism could be used as a cover for using military force to crush Palestinian resistance and neutralize its leadership. This was Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s strategy in 2001 when he used his declaration of solidarity with Washington’s Global War on Terror to characterize Arafat and the Palestinian Authority as terrorist enemies to be treated as the United States had called on the world to treat terrorists. At the end of March 2002, following a particularly bloody attack on Israelis celebrating the holiday of Passover, Israel sent thirty thousand troops into the West Bank cities of Jenin, Tulkarm, Bethlehem, and Qalqilya, deploying tanks and helicopter gunships in what Sharon declared was Israel’s own “war on terrorism.”

What became known as the “Battle of Jenin” or the “Jenin massacre”—in which, during the “physical erasure” of much of the Jenin refugee camp, more than fifty Palestinians were killed—was defended by Israel as part of its “fight against terrorism” and as “an integral part of the international campaign against terrorism.” Sharon likely learned the tactic of using Great Power actions to Israeli advantage from his mentor, Moshe Dayan. As chief of staff of the Israeli

army in 1956, Dayan told his officers (Sharon was a general in that war, commanding the paratroop brigade) that Israel would exploit the British and French campaign to seize the Suez Canal for its own purposes: “We should behave like the cyclist who is riding uphill when a truck chances by and he grabs hold. We should get what help we can, hanging on to their vehicle and exploiting its movement as much as possible and only when our routes fork should we break off.”

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave Israel and its Lobby another opportunity to exploit Great Power foolishness. In 1996, a group of American neoconservative Israel boosters, including Richard Perle, David Wurmser, and Douglas Feith, who would later serve at the highest levels of the George W. Bush administration and who ardently advocated forced regime change in Iraq, submitted a memorandum to Benjamin Netanyahu to serve as the basis of his foreign policy. This “Clean Break” document, labeled “A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” advocated policies Netanyahu subsequently pursued, including ending the peace process, shelving attempts to solve the Palestinian problem, escalating Israel’s commitment to its Jewish nationalist mission, and ramping up its use of military force throughout the region to “manage” rather than end the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Indeed, a crucial if often hidden element in the supremacists’ agenda was a commitment to Israel and especially the maximalist goals entertained by Israel’s right-wing and religious-fundamentalist political parties. Early in 2003, one American government official described the predominance of neoconservatives in charge of American foreign and Middle East policy by using a Yiddish term referring to members of Netanyahu’s party: “The Likudniks are really in charge now.”

The supremacist vision of an American colossus benevolently enforcing a century-long Pax Americana vanished amid the smoke and ruin of the Iraq War. In its wake, the neoconservatives, the main architects and promoters of that war, have had to beat a retreat from the forefront of American foreign policy making. The Project for a New American Century, the vanguard, leading architect, and

proud champion of a globally dominant imperial America, disappeared along with its mouthpiece, the *Weekly Standard*. The once hawkish and interventionist Republican Party reversed course, moving sharply against foreign aid, foreign military adventures, and alliances that make demands on America. But the fervent commitment of the architects and promoters of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to Israel, and to American support for whatever policies Israeli governments pursue, lived on, posing a continuing threat to American foreign policy makers trying to adjust to a rapidly changing world.

The messy and predatory world of the twenty-first century is dangerous, featuring two peer competitors to the United States: Russia and China. It is a world that poses questions unasked for generations about the security of Europe and the capability of the United States to deter or win major wars with its most sophisticated adversaries. The dangers are particularly acute when America is led by presidents susceptible to the fantasies, accolades, and pressures of a passionate, relentless, and well-organized faction.

The changes in the global system—changes that removed many guardrails for the United States as the Cold War ended—would themselves have highlighted the reality that America’s special relationship with Israel had become not just an irritant but a major and dangerous liability. Intensifying this problem were drastic changes in Israeli politics and in the very nature of the Israeli state. From a state anchored in social democratic values and aspiring to regional harmony by trading occupied territories for peace, Israel has become a country whose behavior pushed it toward pariah status. Israel’s increasing isolation has had immense and costly consequences for American foreign policies that, as required by Israel’s Lobby, permitted “no daylight” to appear between Washington and Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 3

ISRAEL AS A “CRAZY STATE”

In July 2020, Aluf Benn, the editor of the *Haaretz* newspaper, interviewed a ninety-two-year-old retired Hebrew University professor, Yehezkel Dror. Benn described him as the “doyen of public policy experts in Israel.” A veteran of the RAND think tank, Dror’s self-characterization and citations suggest he fashioned himself after Herman Kahn, the American defense intellectual who made his name by “thinking the unthinkable”—how to fight a thermonuclear war. In 2005, Dror had won the coveted Israel Prize for his work on policy planning and strategic thinking.

Dror responded to Benn’s questions as a futurologist and expert with knowledge of the future gained by thinking rationally and ruthlessly about a world too complex for all but an elite class of geniuses to comprehend. Complimenting Israeli leaders for expelling as many Palestinians from the country as they did in 1948, Dror insisted on the correctness of his plan for an Israeli attack on Iran (to be coupled with a commitment to comprehensive peace) and praised President Trump’s 2020 peace plan—the so-called Deal of the Century. He also called for a world government run by modern philosopher kings, and in his 2020 book, *Steering Human Evolution*, he advocated settling a thousand fertile couples on Mars to ensure the human race would not become extinct.

Dror explained the tension in his thinking between rationalist universalism and a tribalist commitment to his own group, the Jews. Citing Zionism as the “core meaning of his life,” Dror emphasized the contribution he had made to “a

total revolution in the history of the Jewish people, on the path from Holocaust to resurgence.” The primacy of this latter commitment is clearly apparent in his book *Crazy States: A Counterconventional Strategic Problem*, published in 1971.

The topic of “craziness” as a descriptor of states was a familiar one in the 1960s when discussing nuclear deterrence. Academics Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn both explored how a state with a reputation for craziness could increase the credibility of otherwise unconvincing threats. The thrust of Dror’s book was different. Dror imagined how states with powerful modern weapons might act in ways radically contrary to accepted norms or expected calculations. Normal states would need to act differently toward adversaries deemed “crazy” by shifting strategies from deterrence and self-defense to destruction and preemptive attack. The not-so-hidden subtext of the argument was to brand all of Israel’s adversaries as “crazy,” thereby establishing justification for using any and all means, including subversion, preventive war, and even annihilation, against them.

Dror never defined precisely what he meant by “crazy,” preferring to list behaviors, practices, and beliefs associated with his image of craziness. His prototypical case, used repeatedly for illustration of his argument, was Nazi Germany. Dror began his book by offering the Third Reich to skeptical readers “as a striking and radical demonstration of the possibility of crazy states and their implications for the international order and the security of various countries.” The case study also made the point that nonstate movements or organizations, such as Hitler’s National Socialist Party, could be treated as crazy as well as states. This justified Dror’s inclusion of various Palestinian movements and groups affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization as “crazy” even though they weren’t states.

At the end of 1973, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) publishing house issued a Hebrew edition of Dror’s book with a new chapter, “The Question of ‘Crazy’ States and the State of Israel.” Written against the backdrop of the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, Dror described virtually all Arab states and movements, whether Muslim or Palestinian, as either crazy, partially crazy, or liable to become crazy. According to Dror, the purpose of this chapter (which never appeared in English) was to shape Israeli military doctrine and strategies to deal with the

craziness and potential for “extreme craziness” of Israel’s adversaries. What is striking is that fifty years later Dror’s account of craziness and the warning signs he suggested looking for apply more readily to Israel than to its Arab enemies.

Dror emphasized that the kind of craziness he had in mind, so dangerous to the world community that no measures to disrupt or destroy it should be ruled out, requires an ability to think clearly, plan systematically, and act effectively. He was thus careful to distinguish irrationality from craziness. To be classified as crazy, a state or movement must not only have the means to project its power with devastating effect; it must also demonstrate a capacity for calculated action so that it can learn from mistakes and devise better and more successful techniques for achieving its (crazy) purposes.

A useful list of the features Dror set forth to identify a state as crazy appeared in a positive review of his book: aggressive pursuit of far-reaching goals harmful to others; radical and intense commitments to achieve those goals; and adoption of a morally superior posture even while grossly contradicting international norms, both ethical and legal. Using these measures—goals, means, and public posture—we can ask whether Israel itself is crazy. If it is, then for Israel’s Lobby to be successful, US policies toward Israel and the Middle East must themselves be crazy and therefore dangerous to American interests and to the world.

Israeli politics revolve around its party system. That system has undergone two fundamental transformations: from one-party dominance to an even rivalry between two parties and then a return to dominance by the former opposition party. For almost three decades, the social democratic Labor Party dominated Israeli elections, with the right-wing parties in opposition. While never securing a majority of seats, in the 1960s and 1970s, Labor did relegate the right-wing Herut (Freedom) Party of Menachem Begin to the political wilderness. As David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first and (until Netanyahu) longest-serving prime minister, frequently declared, Labor would accept any party as a coalition partner except those occupying the extremes of the political spectrum: the communists and Herut. Begin, he once wrote, was “a Hitlerist type: a racist, willing to destroy all the Arabs for the sake of Greater Israel.”

After the June 1967 war, the Labor Party favored withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territories in return for peace, though it avoided specifying what territories could be relinquished or under what circumstances. The party that Begin led in 1967 was Gahal, a combination of Herut and the Liberal Party. In 1973, it became the cornerstone of the Likud. Like Herut, Gahal and then Likud opposed territorial withdrawal from any part of the West Bank and Gaza, rejected the principle of trading land for peace, favored settlement of Jews throughout the territories, and looked forward to their permanent absorption into the State of Israel.

The “earthquake,” Likud’s victory in the 1977 elections, temporarily ended single-party dominance in Israel. Subsequently, two rival blocs—one led by the Likud and the other by one or another version of the Labor Party—battled each other in seesaw fashion. But since the 2013 elections, the right-wing bloc, with the Likud forming the core of governing coalitions, has dominated Israeli politics.

The sharpness of Israel’s shift to the right is evident in the changing ideological complexion of members of its 120-seat parliament, the Knesset. Israeli parties have always differed on a variety of social and economic questions. But by far the two most important markers of a party’s location on the spectrum of Israeli politics are its position on Israel’s borders and the intensity of its commitment to an exclusivist Jewish mission for the state.

Before the 1967 war, the issue of the country’s borders was not particularly salient in Israeli politics. Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip reopened the question of expanding the state’s boundaries, polarizing the political system, and triggering a sharp rise in both hawkish and dovish positions on these questions. After the Six-Day War, average left-wing representation in the Knesset increased by approximately two-thirds compared to what it was before 1967. But right-wing representation in the Knesset tripled. In the 2000s, the right-wing bloc’s representation has grown rapidly, while the left-wing bloc has shrunk drastically. Since the 2003 election, the first following the second Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, average representation of right-wing views has been twice that associated with the left. In the most recent elections, actual majorities of Knesset members have been affiliated with political programs

advanced before 1967 only by a small and extreme minority. Meanwhile, the number of Knesset members espousing concessions capable of attracting even minimal Palestinian interest has dwindled. Following the 2022 election, sixty-three members of the Knesset identified with what were originally only extreme far-right views on the nation's borders, while only fourteen supported a two-state solution. Of the latter, ten were Arabs and only four were Jews.

Israeli public opinion has also shifted strongly toward the extreme right. Intensive polling done between 2022 and 2024 showed that four to five times as many Jewish Israelis identified themselves as “right-wing” than as “left-wing.” The rightward shift is more extreme than it seems from this data because what it means to be *yemini* (right-wing) has itself changed. Much more than in the past, it is associated with commitments to overt discrimination against Palestinian citizens, annexation measures that would exclude Palestinians from citizenship, use of extrajudicial punishment against Arabs, and preference for military action over negotiation for advancing Israeli interests in the region.

Along with the rightward extremization of the Jewish public has been an escalating propensity for Israeli leaders to aggressively pursue expansive goals, leading to military actions, assassinations, and spectacular acts of sabotage—from the West Bank and Gaza to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Qatar, and Iran—that have stunned the world. The Netanyahu government inaugurated in 2022 stands out more strongly than any other in this regard, but the increased inclination of Israeli leaders to engage in reckless, risky, and norm-busting behavior was apparent earlier.

Israel's official foreign policy objectives in the 1950s and 1960s were to achieve peace and security through negotiated agreements with its neighbors based on the 1949 Armistice Lines, also known as the “Green Line,” which separated Israeli-controlled territory from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, Egypt, and the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip. Yet, less than a decade after Israel's establishment, Ben-Gurion, leader of the “left,” embarked on precisely the sort of risk-acceptant, transformational, and ruthless military adventure Dror labeled as crazy.

At a secret meeting in Sèvres, France, on October 22, 1956, Ben-Gurion and his acolyte, Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, met with British and French leaders and proposed a joint attack on Egypt that would not only secure Israel's southern border and end Palestinian attacks from the Gaza Strip but reorganize the Middle East. Their plan was for Israel to expand its territory north to Lebanon's Litani River, turning Lebanon into a Christian-controlled ally. Jordan would be removed from the map, its territory to be divided between Israel and Iraq, with the latter agreeing to resettle Palestinian refugees. Israel would take over most of the Sinai Peninsula, including the Straits of Tiran. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser would be overthrown, the Algerian Revolution would be defeated, and the British and French would resume the roles they played in the region during the imperialist era.

The first part of the plan went well. Israel overran most of Sinai and occupied the Gaza Strip. The British and the French protected Israeli cities from attack by Egyptian bombers and declared that the fighting threatened the Suez Canal, thereby requiring an invasion of Egypt to preserve the vital shipping lane and, in the process, topple the Nasser regime.

But British and French troops met significant Egyptian resistance. Moscow threatened Britain, France, and Israel with rocket attacks. Embarrassed by the neo-imperialist behavior of its allies, President Eisenhower insisted on an end to hostilities, forcing Ben-Gurion to withdraw from both the Sinai and the Gaza Strip by threatening to bar US ships from visiting the port of Eilat and to end the tax deductibility of American Jewish contributions to Israel. Overcoming objections from his generals, Ben-Gurion accepted the American ultimatum and never repeated his flush-of-victory declaration that Israel had returned to the site of its national birth at Mount Sinai and would never leave.

The potential for Israel's leaders to entertain aggressive and extravagant goals was also apparent after the signing of a peace treaty with President Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1979. No longer concerned with threats from Egypt during a war on another front, the Begin government turned its attention to the north. In 1981, it extended Israeli "law, jurisdiction, and administration" to the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967. But more dramatic action was directed against Lebanon. Begin, his powerful defense minister, Ariel Sharon, and his

ultranationalist chief of staff, Rafael Eitan, resented the ceasefire agreement Israel had reached with the Palestine Liberation Organization forces there. They were also committed to rapidly expanding settlement in the West Bank to achieve the permanent, if de facto, incorporation of “Judea and Samaria” into Israel. By destroying the PLO in Lebanon, the Begin-Sharon-Eitan triumvirate sought to remove the Palestine question from the agenda of international politics and end resistance to Israel’s rule over the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

That required a war. On June 3, 1982, a Palestinian faction opposed to the PLO attacked and seriously wounded Israel’s ambassador to the United Kingdom. This was the occasion, or better the pretext, for Operation Peace for the Galilee, launched three days later. Sharon had drawn up the plan for the operation, only some of which was shared with Prime Minister Begin, to serve his larger vision. Set forth publicly in 1981, it featured Israel as a regional superpower and a player on the world stage whose strategic interests and domain of action reached into the Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Persian Gulf.

Expanding Israel’s incursion into Lebanon beyond limits set by the cabinet, Sharon forced the IDF to engage Syrian forces, then demanded an attack on PLO strongholds in Beirut as an operational necessity. The bombing campaign that pulverized much of the Lebanese capital was followed by a ground invasion enabling Israel to replace the Lebanese government with one led by a handpicked collaborator, Bachir Gemayel, leader of the Phalange, a fascistic Christian militia.

As with Suez, the war was a military success and a political disaster. While the PLO was forced to relocate to Tunis, it was not destroyed. Neither was the Palestinian movement sidelined. Indeed, a Christian Lebanese militia’s massacre of more than 750 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, with Israeli support, triggered world outrage. Mass-casualty events inflicted on American troops deployed in Beirut to calm the situation forced the United States to retreat. Gemayel was assassinated and replaced by his brother, Amin, who refused to cooperate with Israel.

The war became exceedingly unpopular in Israel itself. Massive demonstrations led to fatal Jew-on-Jew violence. Sharon was investigated and

dismissed as defense minister. Prime Minister Begin sank into a deep depression and resigned. Israeli forces suffered painful casualties while stuck in the “Lebanese muck” for eighteen years.

During Ariel Sharon’s tenure as defense minister, from 1981 to 1983, Israel’s potential for the kind of reckless but “rational” behavior that Dror labeled as crazy was also manifest in his policies toward the superpowers. Jonathan Pollard, the Jewish American intelligence officer who transferred thousands of pages of sensitive classified information to Israel, was run as an agent out of an office reporting directly to Sharon. Generations of American intelligence and national security officials were furious at Pollard’s betrayal and by the extraordinarily damaging way Israel used the information he stole. According to widely accepted reports, Israel not only gave away US advantages in electronic countermeasures by prematurely using them against the Syrian air force; it also shared information with Moscow about US nuclear targeting on the Soviet Union in an effort to boost Israel’s credibility and prestige with the Soviets.

In the 1990s, Benjamin Netanyahu began his rise to power, not as a right-wing firebrand but as a silver-tongued defender of Israel against international criticism with strong right-wing views coupled with opportunism and an aversion to making risky decisions. Having climbed the greasy pole to take control of the Likud Party in 1996, Netanyahu went on to become Israel’s longest-serving prime minister. Following Hamas’s attack on Israeli communities on October 7, 2023, however, Netanyahu’s *modus operandi* changed. His judgments that the Gaza Strip could be kept indefinitely in a state of economic immiseration and political limbo and that Hamas would not and could not mount a large-scale attack were crucial contributions to the most severe shock Israelis have ever experienced. Fearing public investigation of his failure to protect the country, Netanyahu transformed himself into the epitome of Israeli craziness.

The levels of violence he authorized against Palestinians in Gaza shocked the world. His endorsement of transferring the entire population of Gaza out of Palestine, the bloody attacks he unleashed against Hezbollah and civilian neighborhoods in Lebanon, the wars he launched against Iran, and his attempt to assassinate Hamas negotiators in Doha, Qatar, all reflect much more far-

reaching goals for Israel than that of recognition, peace, and security as one nation among others in a stable Middle East. In this way, Netanyahu is not just following in the footsteps of predecessors prepared to take risks for ambitious gains; he has made the craziness that has occasionally marked Israeli policies into a dominant trait.

Efraim Inbar is among Israel's most influential national security analysts. Longtime director of Bar-Ilan University's Begin-Sadat Center, he subsequently founded and directed the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies. His voluminous scholarly and journalistic publications have been a reliable index of the assumptions, expectations, and policy preferences of Likud governments in general and those led by Benjamin Netanyahu in particular. When pressed to articulate his long-term goals for the State of Israel, Inbar wrote, "Fortunately, Jewish history presents the Zionist movement another alternative: the Davidic option of building a Jewish commonwealth in the midst of an idolatrous world. The House of David ruled the Land of Israel for over four hundred years, playing a balance of power politics in our region." From year to year, problem to problem, threat to threat, Inbar's recommendation has almost always been the same: reject available compromises, accept international isolation, and use preemptive war to inflict more pain and damage on adversaries than they are willing to tolerate. As if channeling Inbar's thinking, Netanyahu gave a speech in September 2025 calling for Israel to expect and accept international isolation, adapt its economy toward autarchy, and see itself as a twenty-first-century Sparta.

Israelis are familiar with the Jerusalem syndrome, a tendency for susceptible individuals visiting the country to experience delusional psychoses with religious or apocalyptic themes. It is also true that spectacular visions—of an unfolding, divinely guided, and Israel-centric redemption process; of the settlement in the West Bank as a crucial step in the bringing of the Messiah; and of Jewish rule over virtually the entire Fertile Crescent—have long animated the private thinking of the activists and architects behind the vast settlement project in the occupied territories.

What is striking is that such thinking has moved from the private worlds of dedicated ideologues and activists and from the margins of respectable political discourse toward the center of Israeli politics and policymaking. Ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich have both advocated for the rebuilding of the ancient Jewish Temple in the Old City of Jerusalem. Daniella Weiss, Ben-Gvir, and many others have called for the entire Gaza Strip to be emptied of Arabs and resettled by Jews. What were the outlandish ambitions of some marginal intellectuals, extreme rabbis, and retired generals in the 1960s and 1970s are now the goals pursued by leading government ministers, senior security service officials, and settlement leaders, including the rebuilding of the Temple on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the resumption of sacrifices, and the evacuation and repopulation of Gaza.

Such grandiose ideas provide no guidelines for practical strategic thinking about Israel's future or rationales for creative diplomacy. The result is that Israeli leaders focus on imminent security threats and diplomatic challenges but neither entertain nor pursue long-term goals. That is to say that those who govern the country imagine no stable future that is both satisfying and possible enough to shape policy decisions and actions. The goal of Israel's foreign and security policy therefore becomes simple if outlandish: to establish itself as the regional hegemon, possessing the only nuclear arsenal in the Middle East, equipped with sufficient conventional military power to operate throughout the region at minimal risk, and poised to crush any combination of opponents.

This region-shaping ambition was evident in Israel's June 2025 attack on Iran. An IDF poster, in Farsi, of what Israel dubbed Operation Rising Lion featured a majestic lion on his hind legs next to a brightly shining sun, symbols of ancient Persia. The idea of transforming the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Muslim-majority country of 93 million, into an ally and returning it to a non-Islamic imperial past was advanced in an Instagram post two weeks into the war by Sara Netanyahu, the prime minister's influential wife. It depicted two lions leaning against each other and gazing into the future, one wrapped in the flag of Israel, the other in the flag of the Pahlavi shahs—a dynasty founded in 1925 in the wake of a military coup led by a brigade commander named Reza Khan.

The grand scale of such ambitions, consistent with the unattainability of the goals crazy states set for themselves, was also evident when, in the midst of Israel's bombardment of Iran and before the intervention of the United States, Prime Minister Netanyahu calmly told an Israeli interviewer, "We are changing, and I said this on the second day of the [Gaza] war, I said that we're changing the face of the Middle East. And now I say to you and also to our viewers, we're changing the face of the world. I have determined that we will achieve all our goals."

Following Israeli and American attacks on Iran, the Israeli defense minister, Israel Katz, advised that "the defanged head of the snake in Tehran [to] understand and beware: Operation Rising Lion was only the preview of a new Israeli policy, after October 7, immunity is over." This statement was coupled with an announcement of orders to the IDF to implement a long-term plan to prevent Iran from attempting to rebuild its antiaircraft defenses. Katz's expanded depiction of Israel's security requirements was seconded by the head of Israel's air force, Major General Tomer Bar: "If you ask me: 'Commander, what is the decisive element of victory?'... It is aircraft over Tehran whenever we choose... And if you ask me what will bring us to that point, it's only one thing: superiority, superiority, and once again, superiority."

That objective represents extension to Iran—a country bigger than France, Spain, and Germany combined—of the zone within which Israel demands acceptance of its effective control of the airspace, a zone that it has previously asserted over Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Thus have Israel's goals with respect to its neighbors and the greater Middle Eastern region become both extreme and damaging to others.

On May 29, 1967, just a week before Israel's preemptive attack on Egypt and Syria that became the Six-Day War, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol laid out Israel's objectives in a speech to the Knesset: free passage of Israeli ships through the Tiran Straits and withdrawal of Egyptian military formations from the Sinai. He repeatedly endorsed the imperative of peace and made explicit commitments to the territorial status quo in personal messages to the American president,

Lyndon Johnson, and the Soviet prime minister, Alexei Kosygin. Even as Israel launched its decisive strike against the Egyptian air force, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan told Israel's soldiers that the war was designed to break the "ring of blockade" the Arabs had erected around the country, adding that "we have no aims of conquest." Foreign Minister Abba Eban repeated this message at a press conference: "The policy of Israel's government does not include any intention of conquest."

Soon after the fighting began, however, Israeli officials stopped "eschewing all claims on their new acquisitions." Some mentioned East Jerusalem, others the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, or parts of the Sinai Peninsula as territories Israel should insist on keeping. A cabinet resolution on June 19 endorsed the return of territory to Syria and Egypt after negotiations but stipulated that the Gaza Strip would remain within the State of Israel while deferring "discussion of the position regarding Jordan."

A week later, the cabinet and the Knesset promulgated regulations, maps, and legislation that changed the borders of the city of Jerusalem to incorporate all of the Jordanian municipality and a substantial chunk of the West Bank within the "law, jurisdiction and administration" of the State of Israel. After six more months, during a meeting with President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk asked Eshkol, "What kind of an Israel do you want the Arabs to live with, and what kind of an Israel do you want the American people to support?" Without saying which areas or how much territory Israel would insist on keeping, Eshkol acknowledged that Israel's ambitions had changed: "The only answer I can presently give is an Israel whose map will be different from the one on the eve of the Six Day War.... Please understand, we did not want that June war. We could have lived indefinitely within the old pre-1967 armistice lines. But now that there has been a war, we cannot return to those old, vulnerable frontiers."

Publicly, the postwar governments of Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, and Yitzhak Rabin, from 1967 to 1977, adopted a politically convenient decision not to decide which territories occupied in June 1967 might be traded for peace agreements. To avoid making decisions that would threaten the integrity of ruling coalitions, these governments rejected opportunities between 1967 and

1973 to negotiate with West Bank Palestinians, King Hussein of Jordan, and Anwar Sadat of Egypt and even shelved a proposal from the Israeli military itself for a comprehensive peace in return for virtually complete withdrawal from the territories.

In July 1969, Moshe Dayan famously remarked that he preferred Israeli rule of Sharm -el-Sheikh, the southeastern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, to peace. In August 1973, Golda Meir's cabinet approved the Galili Plan, inspired by Dayan's ambition to increase settlement and absorb the territories and their Arab populations without announcing that as the government's goal. All of this amounted to a policy of letting the relationship between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza drift toward permanent incorporation.

This nondecision of de facto annexation became the unmistakable policy of the government following Menachem Begin's rise to the premiership in 1977. Appointing Ariel Sharon (nicknamed "the Bulldozer") as agriculture minister and minister in charge of settlements, Begin sought to transfer as much land to Israeli control and build as many Jewish settlements as possible in densely populated Arab areas of what all government officials were now required to refer to as "Judea and Samaria." The campaign was accompanied by propaganda to change Israeli and international perceptions of the territory, revival of irredentist ambitions that had for generations fired the imagination of the right wing of the Zionist movement, and rejection of the idea of peace based on creation of a Palestinian state. A new movement of religious zealots, Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), was encouraged to establish dozens of new settlements under its slogan: "The Land of Israel, for the people of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel." Gush Emunim's thousands of fundamentalist activists made it the most important and most powerful social movement in Israel's history.

The damage to Palestinian society and to the inhabitants of the occupied territories has been extreme and unrelenting from the start. With large-scale land expropriations, expansive closed military zones, disguised land purchases, and numerous "nature preserves," successive governments have transferred more than 40 percent of the area of the West Bank to Israeli control from which Palestinians are excluded, including portions of the West Bank that Israel attached to the Israeli municipality of Yerushalayim (Jerusalem); as of 2026,

781,000 Israeli Jews live there. Dozens of checkpoints have confined the West Bank's 3.3 million Palestinians within an archipelago of ghettos and strangled their economy. Tens of thousands of Palestinian structures have been demolished. With the effective abrogation of Israel's commitments under the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 to respect Palestinian Authority rule of West Bank and Gaza cities while sharing rule of other areas in the territories occupied in 1967, and with the Israeli military discouraged from arresting Jews, West Bank Palestinians have been subjected to constant threat of attack by extremist settlers and to nightly IDF raids in their cities, towns, and villages to arrest or kill "wanted men." It is estimated that four out of every ten Palestinian males have spent time in Israeli jails, one of the highest, if not the highest, incarceration rate in the world.

Combined with political and ideological changes in Israel necessary to support them, systematic policies of settlement and repression accomplished their purpose: to seal the fate of the West Bank as an inseparable part of the State of Israel. For decades, die-hard Israeli advocates of territorial compromise struggled to preserve beliefs that the settlements could be evacuated or finessed to make room for some sort of Palestinian state, but it has been many years since anyone has been able to advance plausible scenarios for how that might be achieved. It is true that Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005 entailed the evacuation of eight thousand settlers from the Strip. Nevertheless, Israel maintained control over what was in essence a ghetto, preventing free entry and exit, strictly overseeing access to the sea, maintaining constant surveillance, and launching regular raids and invasions.

As Israel's territorial ambitions expanded, contradicting and rendering fantastical the idea of establishing two states for two peoples, they ignited a series of wars and uprisings (1982, 1987–1993, 2000–2003, 2006, 2008–2009, 2014, and 2023–2025). These cycles of terror, bloody retribution, oppression, and vengeance left much of Lebanon in ruins and plunged West Bank and Gaza Palestinians into desperation and despair. A new level of savagery was reached with the October 2023 rampage of Hamas in Israeli communities near Gaza and Israel's virtual obliteration of society in the Gaza Strip, including the killing (up to October 2025) of more than 71,000 Palestinians, the wounding of another

171,000, and the destruction of or serious damage to 83 percent of croplands, 81 percent of all roads, and 70 percent of all structures, including 90 percent of all residences and infrastructure.

So, yes, Israel's policies toward the Palestinian territories it captured in 1967 are crazy. They are as disruptive in the scale of goals being pursued and as reckless in their disregard for others as the policies Israel came to adopt toward the region as a whole.

As Israel's goals have expanded, the delicate commitments to democracy and human rights limiting their ruthless pursuit have largely been abandoned. This has transformed how Israelis think about their relationship with the West Bank and Gaza Strip and their Palestinian inhabitants.

For four decades following the 1967 war, Israel was split between doves and hawks. The doves, who favored territorial compromise, or "land for peace," described the problem as a trilemma. Jewish Israelis wanted Israel to be Jewish, large, and democratic. Given demographic realities, they could have any two of these, but not all three. If Israel relinquished the territories, the state would be small, but democratic and Jewish. If the annexed populations were enfranchised, it would be large and democratic but not Jewish. If Israel kept the territories but Palestinian inhabitants were not enfranchised, Israel would be large and Jewish but not democratic. Israel could be predominantly Jewish and reasonably democratic, they argued, only if it withdrew from most or all the territories.

The trilemma formula was compelling because it assumed commitment to liberal democracy. Israel's Declaration of Independence promised "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex," adding that the state would also "guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture." While the Labor Party was in power, mainstream political discourse in Israel remained consistent with the declaration, excluding contemplation of a future based on permanent oppression of masses of noncitizens.

In 1972, nearly two hundred leaders and activists in the Labor Party met to debate the future of relations with the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza. Zionist

arguments for a Jewish state were advanced that condemned processes of integration featuring a flood of Palestinian Arab laborers into the Israeli economy. How could Israel remain a state ruled by Jews and based on equality if most of the work and eventually half the population were Arabs? Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Culture Yigal Allon, along with the powerful minister of finance Pinchas Sapir, favored relinquishing heavily populated Palestinian areas rather than granting their inhabitants citizenship rights in Israel. They decried Moshe Dayan's vision of incorporating the territories and their populations as minorities living in a Jewish state. Shimon Peres, speaking on Dayan's behalf, berated his critics for failing to have the kind of faith Zionism demanded that waves of Jewish immigration would provide the demographic means to maintain control of the state even when the Arab population gained political rights.

Broad acceptance of the principle of equality before the law for all inhabitants hearkened to the principle of "nondomination" repeatedly endorsed by Zionist spokesmen during the British mandate. Jews would never accept domination by Arabs, but neither would Jews ever dominate Arabs. The revisionist Zionist movement, the right-wing faction founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky in the 1920s and led by Menachem Begin until the early 1980s, was even more committed to the principle of equal rights for Arabs than were the socialist Zionist parties. In December 1977, when Begin first proposed autonomy for "Arabs of the Land of Israel living in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza," he included Israeli citizenship as an option.

The first, mostly nonviolent Palestinian Intifada erupted in December 1987. The mobilization of nearly an entire society over several years convinced military elites and many ordinary Israelis that the status quo in the territories was no longer sustainable. The result was a narrow-coalition government in 1992, led by Yitzhak Rabin, committed to some form of territorial compromise with the PLO as a road to peace, to be made in Oslo, Norway, in January of the following year. But the success of the peace process depended on an extremely thin parliamentary margin. As the fury of the opposition to Oslo mounted in both Israel and among the Palestinians, negotiations stalled. Cycles of terrorism and targeted killings, combined with the clumsiness of US diplomacy, the

assassination of Rabin, the timidity of his successor (Shimon Peres), the purposeful sabotage of negotiations by Netanyahu's first government (1996–1999), and the hubristic blunders of his successor, Ehud Barak, sealed Oslo's doom. The failure of the process set the stage for the Second Intifada, which rekindled the conviction among a decisive plurality of Israeli Jews that the status quo, with its drift toward permanent rule of the territories, was the only, if not the best, future they could hope for.

The boundaries of mainstream Israeli political discourse changed radically after the Second Intifada. Permanent repression of Palestinians and their exclusion from Israeli citizenship became acceptable possibilities for more and more Israeli Jews. Despite roughly equal numbers of Jewish and Arab inhabitants between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River—or, more precisely, because of it—the government implemented a flurry of explicit measures to elevate the Jewish character of the state above democracy.

In 2018, the Knesset prevented discussion of a bill endorsing Israel as a “state for all its citizens.” According to the Speaker of the Knesset, Yuli Edelstein, the bill was condemned for challenging the “foundations of the state” by contradicting the principle that Israel was the “state of the Jewish people.” “This is a preposterous bill that any intelligent person can see must be blocked immediately.” For most Knesset deputies, this ruling was not enough. Six weeks later, they enacted the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People. It removed Arabic as an official language of the state; declared that only Jews had rights to self-determination in their “historical homeland,” the Land of Israel; declared Jewish settlement as a “national value”; and avoided any mention of democracy or any commitment to equality or nondiscrimination.

The Basic Law reflects escalation in the willingness of Israeli governments to embrace a version of apartheid increasingly reliant on the use of official and legal means rather than administratively concealed or indirect techniques of control to enforce Jewish privileges and the subordination of non-Jews. In Israel's first five years, eleven discriminatory laws were passed, including those establishing the right only of Jews, or those related to Jews, to immigrate into the country as citizens and property laws that transferred Arab-owned lands to Jewish or state control. In each of the following nine five-year periods, approximately two

discriminatory laws were passed. Since 2008, however, the number of such laws jumped to twenty-one between 2008 and 2013, ten between 2014 and 2019, and five between 2020 and 2025.

The growing acceptability of apartheidist thinking encouraged Israeli politicians, activists, and policymakers to resurrect visions of annexation and the formal assertion of Israeli sovereignty in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. In the past, such talk ran aground on the assumption that formal incorporation of the territories would flood the Israeli electorate with masses of Arabs. That is no longer an assumption most Israelis make, either because they find permanent political exclusion acceptable or because they imagine large-scale transfers of non-Jews out of the country. Of the dozens of bills introduced in the Knesset to annex areas or impose Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank, none have included provisions for extending Israeli citizenship to Palestinian Arab inhabitants.

Thus has the trilemma, based on the unacceptability of permanent domination of masses of Arabs, disappeared from Israeli discourse, and with it almost all debate over the political future of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. Israel is to be large, and it is to be Jewish, but it is not, at least for the foreseeable future, to be democratic. In this context, high-profile campaigns by government ministers, members of Knesset, and extraparlimentary movements to annex most or all of the West Bank—often accompanied, after October 7, 2023, by demands for the resettlement and annexation of the Gaza Strip—are possible because images of millions of their Palestinian inhabitants becoming citizens of Israel have been replaced by visions of their permanent subordination, exclusion from political life, or transfer out of the country.

It is seldom appreciated how correct Zionism was about what it called the “Arab Problem” and how reasonable and humane, from its point of view, was its attempted solution to it. As early as the 1890s, but certainly by the 1930s, the Zionist leadership in Palestine understood that there was no possibility of negotiating an agreement with the Arabs of Palestine. No attainable agreement with them could satisfy minimum Zionist aspirations to transform much of the country into a Jewish-majority and Jewish-controlled state. The movement’s

public line was that the Arabs would benefit from and eventually agree to the Zionist project. But this was only propaganda, disingenuously offered as testimony before American, British, Anglo-American, and United Nations commissions.

Precisely because Zionist official positions on the Arab question were known by those who articulated them to be pure dissimulation, the formulations they used could not guide actual Zionist policies in the region. Those policies resolved into the “strategy of the Iron Wall”—the preparation and exercise of coercive capacities to decisively defeat all Arab attacks and, when the time was right, to wrest control of the country from both internal and external adversaries. By crushing repeated Arab attempts to destroy the Zionist project, it was calculated that Palestinian opposition to “alien settlers,” which was seen as both natural and unsatisfiable, would eventually weaken. Moderates among the Arabs of Palestine would lose hope in their ability to prevent or destroy the Jewish polity in their country and come to the negotiating table ready to find ways to live in peace.

The Iron Wall itself was composed of paramilitary organizations that protected Jewish settlements, attacked Arabs, and later mounted operations against the British. These included the Haganah and its strike force; the Palmach, under the control of the Labor Zionist movement; and right-wing guerrilla and terrorist organizations the Irgun and Lehi. In 1948, these were dissolved or integrated into the IDF.

The theory and strategy of the Iron Wall was set forth in 1923 by Vladimir Jabotinsky, an Odessa Jew who was a journalist, ideologue, and leader of the right-wing and maximalist Revisionist Zionist movement. But his thinking was effectively, if not officially, embraced by Ben-Gurion and the vast majority of Labor Zionists. The Iron Wall emerged as the only genuine strategy for achieving the peace that in the long run most Zionist leaders believed was necessary, though unattainable for decades or even generations. Both before and after 1948, the strategy achieved its preliminary objectives. Arab adversaries were repeatedly and decisively defeated, and by 1967 many if not most of Israel’s immediate neighbors had given up hope of violently eliminating the “Zionist entity.” But under the siege conditions created by the Iron Wall strategy itself,

Israeli goals rapidly expanded. Under these conditions, dovish leaders anxious to consummate peace by taking advantage of the success of the Iron Wall were regularly defeated by those ready to exploit Arab weakness to expand Israel's territory and prevent any return of Palestinian refugees.

The Iron Wall strategy demanded more than that repeated victories over Arab adversaries be decisive and painful. The victories needed to be accomplished in ways that would encourage the defeated enemy to see the Jewish victors as reasonable and humane and therefore as potential partners for peace. During the British mandate, the Haganah actively promoted the principles of *havlaga*, using force only in self-defense, and *tohar haneshek*, "purity of arms," the idea that Jews should shed the blood of only armed adversaries, not innocent civilians, political officials, or bystanders.

The abandonment of the Iron Wall strategy, with its norms to treat Arab adversaries as having legitimate political rights and aspirations and to use force in careful and deliberate ways, set the stage for Israeli craziness. To be sure, the norms against brutality and excessive violence were never adhered to closely. But the intensity of debate over them between the Haganah and the Irgun, and tensions within the Haganah over the limits they placed on operations, shows they did have some real consequence. In the first weeks of the occupation, many West Bank Palestinians were stunned to find that Israeli soldiers were not the evil barbarians they had expected to encounter. Even in 2016, after fifty years of brutal treatment of Palestinians, the Israeli chief of staff could still issue an appeal to his troops not to forget the principle of *tohar haneshek*. At the very least, the reputation of the IDF as honoring the principle contributed to the belief in Israel and its supporters that the IDF is the "most moral army in the world."

But the actual weakness of Zionist commitments to restraint were apparent as early as the winter of 1947–48. Following the United Nations partition resolution, which divided Palestine into separate but intertwined Jewish and Arab states, civil war erupted between the country's Jews and Palestinians. Attacks on civilians, harsh retaliations, and collective punishment led to massacres on both sides. The most famous of these was conducted by the Irgun (but with Haganah knowledge and support) in the village of Deir Yassin, near

Jerusalem. It resulted in the deaths of more than a hundred Palestinian civilians. Together with more massacres, threats of massacres, abrogation of nonbelligerence agreements with many Palestinian villages, and mass expulsions of men, women, and children from cities and settlements through the country, the 1948 war changed norms and expectations within the Jewish, now Israeli, armed forces.

Still, many Israelis reacted with shock and alarm at accounts of their soldiers' mistreatment of Palestinians and of the pillaging of Palestinian property. In the 1950s, Ariel Sharon's Unit 101 carried out vicious reprisal raids to try to stop infiltration of refugees and saboteurs. In October 1953, it dynamited dozens of homes in the controlled West Bank village of Qibya. Under explicit orders to "maximize casualties," the soldiers killed sixty-nine Palestinian civilians, mostly women and children. To placate domestic as well as international opinion, Ben-Gurion denied it was done by the army, blaming the outrages on emotionally unstable Holocaust survivors.

The Israeli tradition of "shoot and cry," of conducting painful introspections after the use of force against Arab enemies, was still in full force in 1967 but faded during the prolonged occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This was reflected in an unwillingness or inability to consider Palestinian resistance as anything but terrorism, no matter if the targets were soldiers or civilians and no matter if the ammunition was Molotov cocktails, bullets, bombs, stones, or only, eventually, words. There was controversy and criticism in 1968 when Dayan introduced the destruction of whole neighborhoods as punishment for acts of armed resistance within them. But soon collective punishment became a thoroughly acceptable norm, implemented over weeks or months of village-, town-, and city-wide curfews; checkpoints designed to slow social and economic interaction to the point of paralysis; home demolitions to punish families of Palestinian perpetrators; and rapidly growing numbers of Palestinian casualties deemed acceptable as "collateral damage" when hunting, "liquidating," "neutralizing," or "eliminating" "wanted men."

Such policies contradicted the measured use of force required by the Iron Wall strategy if peace was eventually to be achieved. In effect, Israel abandoned the long-term rationale for the Iron Wall, retaining only the idea of coercive domination. Instead of seeing Arabs as respected adversaries with understandable motivations to oppose Zionism, all Palestinian resistance was understood as illegitimate, evidence of intransigence, and, often, as akin to Nazi antisemitism. Palestinian enmity came to be understood as pathological, ineradicable, and unresponsive to humane treatment. This bred a mindset justifying mass imprisonment and savage tactics, such as breaking the arms of protesting children, torture of prisoners, extrajudicial killings, and deliberately intrusive surveillance, including nighttime search, disturb and disrupt raids in Palestinian camps, towns, and cities.

Israeli military doctrine changed as well, prioritizing the use of force to destroy the adversary's capability to resist—what Israeli spokespersons call the “infrastructure of terror”—while accepting rather than trying to reduce its motivation to resist. During the Second Lebanon War in 2006, the Israeli chief of staff introduced the Dahiya doctrine, named after an entire upscale neighborhood in Beirut obliterated by the Israeli Air Force. This shift in doctrine to focus on destroying both military and civilian capacities rather than changing minds produced immense numbers of casualties and devastating “collateral damage” that was no longer actually collateral but intended. Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims might come to see Israelis as monsters, but they would be impotent to act on those perceptions.

A new metaphor replaced that of the Iron Wall: “mowing the grass.” The phrase came into public view in 2013 as part of informal Israeli army lingo regarding the purpose of operations in Gaza and the West Bank to temporarily reduce or destroy Palestinian resistance. Seeing and treating an adversary's resistance as grass that always grows, as inevitably recurring, implies measures not to change what the grass “wants” but to cut it down to size by regularly mowing the lawn—that is, by destroying enough facilities, killing enough operatives, and terrifying enough of the population so as to achieve some months or years in which attacks on Israelis are reduced to a tolerable level, all the while knowing the grass will grow back and again require cutting.

Israel's radical, risk-acceptant craziness is readily if distastefully measurable in the effects of this doctrinal shift. The average ratio of Arab-to-Israeli deaths in the 1967 war; the 1969–1970 War of Attrition that involved fighting between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; and the 1973 Yom Kippur War was seven to one. Across nine different major operations and wars between Israel and the Palestinians between 1967 and 2005, the ratio was nine to one. A dramatic change occurred after the Iron Wall policy was effectively abandoned in favor of mowing the grass. From 2008 to 2020, violence between Palestinians and Israelis, including violence not part of specific Israeli campaigns or operations, resulted in a fatality ratio of twenty-two to one. If we focus specifically on wars or major operations in and around the Gaza Strip, including in 2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2023–2025, the average ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths was forty-four to one.

According to classified estimates by the Israeli military between October 8, 2023, and May 2025, 83 percent of the Palestinians killed by Israeli forces were civilians. Because of the ferocity of Israeli operations in Gaza, sterilized kill ratios are inadequate indicators of how radical and how intense—how crazy, in other words—they were. For that, we must compare the results of Israeli behavior in Gaza to wars elsewhere and look, at least briefly, at the mechanisms that produced what the vast majority of experts have labeled as a genocidal campaign.

In May 2025, ten burned and dismembered brothers and sisters, all younger than twelve years old, were pulled from the rubble of their home in Khan Younis, in the Gaza Strip. All were dead except for one with critical injuries. They were among the fifty thousand children who had been killed or injured by the IDF since the beginning of Israel's retaliation for the Hamas attacks on Israeli communities and military bases twenty months earlier, a mowing-the-grass campaign that destroyed not only the tunnels and armories used by Hamas and Islamic Jihad but virtually all of Gaza's hospitals, schools, power stations, civic institutions, and sewage and water systems, along with the vast majority of residences.

Only three months after the war began, Oxfam reported that the daily death rate of Palestinians in Gaza, 250, was higher than in any other conflict in the twenty-first century. Similarly, the United Nations calculated that the number of children killed up to that point, 12,300, was greater than the total number of children killed in conflicts anywhere in the world since the turn of the century. After one year of war, Oxfam reported that “in Gaza more women and children have been killed than in a single year in any other conflict in the last twenty years.”

Every war is hell. Atrocities are always committed, and stories of individual soldiers acting barbarously, displaying flagrant disregard for the lives and property of innocents, or of combatants acting sadistically are horrifyingly easy to collect. That is true of the Palestinian attacks on Israelis on October 7, 2023, and it is true of what is happening to Palestinians at the hands of Israelis since October 8, 2023. Accordingly, what we consider proof of how radically Israel’s tactics have changed is not the gruesomeness or number of individual war crimes or of “crimes against humanity” Israeli forces have committed but the radical change in the standard operating procedures and routines the IDF adopted that produced such catastrophic results.

Consider the matter of housing demolition. When Israel initiated its policy of demolishing the family homes of Palestinians who attacked Israelis, the rules governing demolitions were strict. Demolition orders against a home could not be issued without the “personal authorization of the Defense Minister.” Nor could even he issue such an order without receiving from both local commanders and the Shin Bet (Israel’s domestic security service) a “detailed recommendation... which would include all information about the terrorist activity of the subject whose home was to be destroyed, the owners of the building and the building itself, as well as possible damages to adjacent buildings.”

In the decades that followed, these procedures vanished and the concerns and thinking behind them faded. After twenty years, the defense minister’s authorization was no longer required for an area commander to decide to demolish homes. Immediately after the October 7 attacks, Israeli chief of staff Herzi Halevi described to the cabinet the air force’s attack on fifteen hundred

targets in Gaza. He emphasized how huge a number it was, which required “exceptional intelligence and operational capabilities.” When Prime Minister Netanyahu angrily demanded to know why five thousand structures hadn’t been targeted, he was told that there weren’t that many “approved targets.” Netanyahu’s response demonstrated the radicalization of Israeli policies toward the destruction of Palestinian property: “I’m not interested in targets. Take down houses, bomb with everything you have.” Orders to soldiers during Operation Gideon’s Chariots, in the early summer of 2025, were to destroy all buildings in the entire Beit Hanoun area of the Gaza Strip—to turn it into a “city of rubble.”

Consistent with Netanyahu’s exhortation, the IDF launched Operation Iron Wall in the West Bank, which early in 2025 demolished 250 homes and other buildings in West Bank refugee camps. In the Gaza Strip, as of January 2025, Doctors Without Borders reported that 92 percent of all housing units had been destroyed or damaged. The extreme results of this loosening of restrictions on home demolitions became apparent in mid-2025 when, on multiple occasions, hungry Palestinians, trying to access humanitarian deliveries of food, were killed by Israeli soldiers. Aside from orders of engagement that actually encouraged Israeli troops to fire at unarmed civilians, it became evident that contractors, who were being paid fifteen hundred dollars for every Palestinian home they could demolish, deliberately created conditions to justify Israeli fire on the Palestinians so as to create zones for them to expand their operations.

The radicalization of Israeli policies is even more spectacular when we move from the destruction of property to assassinations or targeted killings, whether of agitators, commanders, scientists, journalists, or political leaders. In the parlance of the Israeli media and of the military, the result of such operations is described as “liquidation,” “elimination,” or “neutralization,” along with the “collateral damage” deemed acceptable in connection with the extrajudicial killing of specific individuals. These terms, along with the obsessive use of “terrorist” as an adjective attached to any Palestinian of any age who resists or insults Israeli forces in any manner, are an Orwellian blanket of euphemisms designed to obscure the pervasive brutality used against non-Jews, whether Palestinians, Lebanese, Iranians, or Yemenis. The policies reflected in this

institutionalized rhetorical discrimination include how differently murderous attacks on Jews are treated versus such attacks on non-Jews. Israel's policy is to destroy homes of the families of non-Jews suspected of fatal attacks on Jews. Despite the killing of more than one hundred Palestinians by Jewish settlers and other extremist Israelis, not once has the IDF demolished the family home of a Jewish attacker in response to their crime.

Occasionally the euphemisms are cast aside. In 2004, the Haifa University demographer Arnon Soffer offered a prescient and unusually explicit description of what Israel's policies would become. Fourteen years before Israeli soldiers killed or maimed thousands of unarmed Palestinians as they approached the fence surrounding Gaza during the 2018 symbolic March of Return and nineteen years before the Gaza War, Soffer predicted that Israel's siege of Gaza would produce "a human catastrophe" that would turn Gazans into "even bigger animals than they are today.... The pressure at the border will be awful. It's going to be a terrible war. So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day."

Israel's wars in Gaza showed just how accurate Soffer's brutal forecast was, a fulfillment of his dark vision brought about by new rules of engagement. Key among these was a general authorization to strike high-rise apartment complexes and private homes, and reliance on an artificial intelligence system named Habsora (the Gospel) to automatically generate targets based on nothing more than some personal or theoretical relationship between a Hamas operative and the target. Programmed in that way, Habsora generated hundreds of targets a day, no matter how many had already been destroyed. This solved the problem that had arisen in previous mow-the-grass operations in Gaza that Israeli artillery and aircraft would stop attacking because they had simply run out of things they were authorized to destroy.

The Habsora solution was spectacularly evident from the beginning of the Gaza War. In its first thirty-five days, Israel attacked fifteen thousand targets—an average of over 400 a day, compared to an average daily rate of 150 targets per day during Operation Protective Edge in 2014. In a detailed report, cleared by Israeli military censors, intelligence officers explained that it was fully understood that loosened rules fed into Habsora to generate "power targets"

(those with no military value), along with ending or greatly reducing warnings of attacks by phone calls or “roof-knocking,” would result in massive civilian casualties, including the eradication of whole families. Crucially, this was understood as serving the purposes of the operation. Instead of rules imposed on military action to reduce civilian casualties, a sharp increase in civilian deaths and injuries was to be achieved by using the rules as excuses to attack living quarters that had previously been off-limits. “We are asked,” said one informant, who had been active in previous Gaza operations, “to look for high-rise buildings with half a floor that can be attributed to Hamas. Sometimes it is a militant group’s spokesperson’s office, or a point where operatives meet. I understood that the floor is an excuse that allows the army to cause a lot of destruction in Gaza. That is what they told us.”

Overall, the pitilessness of the onslaught was meant to deliver a powerful shock to all Gazans, to turn them against Hamas, and to give evidence to Israelis of how much suffering the IDF was inflicting on Palestinians. For Major General (Ret.) Giora Eiland, former head of Israel’s National Security Council, this meant abandoning even the pretense of avoiding harm to noncombatants. Arguing that Israel should allow no aid into the Gaza Strip that could “provide the other side with any capability [that] prolongs its life,” he explained:

Who are the “poor” women of Gaza? They are all the mothers, sisters, or wives of Hamas murderers. On the one hand, they are part of the infrastructure that supports the organization, and on other hand, if they experience a humanitarian disaster, then it can be assumed that some of the Hamas fighters and the more junior commanders will begin to understand that the war is futile and that it is better to prevent irreversible harm to their families.

The IDF’s new standard operating procedures were not only a product of change in military doctrine; they also expressed the personal fury of the country’s leaders. Major General Yoav Gallant was defense minister when Israel began its retaliation against Gaza for the October 7 attacks. On October 9, he met with soldiers and made no distinction between combatants and

noncombatants: “I have ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip. There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”

The deputy Speaker of the Knesset, Nissim Vaturi, called for Israel to “wipe Gaza off the face of the earth.... Gaza must be burned.... It is better to burn down buildings rather than have [Israeli] soldiers harmed. There are no innocents there.” As the war progressed, other cabinet ministers and government leaders used even more extreme language, often invoking the commandment in the Bible that Jews should remember their archenemy, Amalek, and their responsibility, in every generation, to kill every surviving Amalekite man, woman, and child—“to blot out the memory of Amalek.”

Yair Golan, a former deputy chief of staff and leader of the opposition “Democratic Party,” denounced Netanyahu’s government as “vengeful, unintelligent, and immoral” and questioned its sanity. “A sane state,” said Golan, “does not wage war against civilians, does not kill babies as a hobby, and does not set goals for itself like the expulsion of a population.” In a videotaped interview with a British journalist, one Israeli reservist, who had served three tours of duty in Gaza, reported that individual commanders encouraged soldiers to view all Gazans as terrorists by setting rules for opening fire on anyone without regard to whether they posed a threat, creating “Wild West” conditions rife with war crimes. In another video, a masked soldier later identified as Rabbi Hiya Ben Hamu told of his departure from the Gaza city of Khan Yunis, where, he said, “we killed them, tens of thousands of Amalekites.”

In 1947, the Jews of Palestine greeted the United Nations General Assembly’s passage of the partition resolution with tears of joy and dancing in the streets. The new state’s Declaration of Independence hailed the UN’s action as “irrevocable” recognition of Jewish rights to a state in the Land of Israel. Over the years, however, different branches of the UN have passed innumerable resolutions criticizing or condemning Israeli actions or violations, leading to very different Israeli attitudes. A 2016 survey showed more Israelis have “no trust at

all in the United Nations” than do citizens of any of the other seventeen countries surveyed, including Russia.

On September 22, 2016, Netanyahu told the United Nations General Assembly that the UN Human Rights Council was a “joke,” that the twenty resolutions the General Assembly had passed that year critical of Israel were a “disgrace,” and that the UN itself, which had “begun as a moral force, has become a moral farce.” But the thrust of his speech was that Israel’s isolation was ending. “Everything will change and a lot sooner than you think.” In Africa, China, India, Russia, Japan, and even the Arab world, countries “recognize that Israel is their ally” in the fight against terrorism and instability. Within ten years, he declared, he would be proven right. “I predict,” he said, “that a decade from now an Israeli prime minister will stand right here where I am standing and actually applaud the UN.”

But eight years later, in 2024, when Netanyahu addressed the UN General Assembly, he described the organization as “contemptible in the eyes of decent people everywhere” and as a “swamp of antisemitic bile.” In the midst of the Gaza War and with Israel even more deeply isolated than it was in 2016, he compared Hamas to the Nazis, condemned Hezbollah and Iran, and called on the countries of the world to take Israel’s side in what he said was a “battle between good and evil.” Israel, he complained, was being “falsely accused of genocide,” dismissing as “absurd” the International Criminal Court prosecutor’s accusation that Israel was “deliberately starving Palestinians in Gaza.”

What Dror calls the “style” exhibited by a crazy state includes “strong ritualistic-dogmatic fixation” in the demands it makes and the depictions of the world it offers, a propensity to break taboos in the methods it uses, and “extreme deviation” from international morality, and can include “genocide... mass assassination of leaders... systematic sabotage of civilian peaceful facilities, countervalue terror against schools, hospitals, recreation areas, civil transportation, etc.” Following Dror’s analysis and keeping in mind the astounding levels of violence and destruction perpetrated by Israeli forces against Gazans for years, Netanyahu’s rhetoric at the UN is quintessentially that of a leader of a crazy state: defiant self-righteousness accompanied by utter contempt

for world opinion. As Dror's book points out, crazy states standardly exhibit "a pervasive sense of moral superiority over others, despite a willingness to act immorally within the normal international framework."

Israel is now widely viewed as wild and dangerous, but unusually negative perceptions of the country have been present for decades. In 2006, a global marketing firm surveyed over twenty-five thousand consumers across thirty-five countries to create a National Brands Index (NBI). Seventeen of the countries surveyed were European. Others included the United States, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, China, India, Russia, Egypt, and South Korea. The author of the study reported that "Israel's brand is by a considerable margin the most negative we have ever measured in the NBI, and comes at the bottom of the ranking on almost every question." He added that Israel came in last on each of the six scored dimensions, that respondents were less interested in visiting Israel than any other country, and that Israeli people were seen as "the most unwelcoming in the world."

In that same year, the BBC asked 28,000 people in twenty-seven countries whether they thought particular countries exerted a "mainly positive" or "mainly negative" influence in the world. Three states were at the bottom. Forty-eight percent of respondents viewed North Korea's influence as mainly negative and 54 percent said that about Iran. Israel was at the bottom, with 56 percent. In 2009, the BBC reported another poll of 13,500 respondents in twenty-one countries who ranked Iran, Pakistan, and Israel as the three most negatively rated states. Repeating the poll three years later, of 24,000 people in twenty-two countries, the BBC found the same thing. Across Spain, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the average proportion of respondents with a negative perception of Israel was 69 percent.

The intensity and prevalence of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiment have increased enormously as a result of Israel's intransigence on the Palestinian issue and its conduct in Gaza. In 2025, the Pew Research Center's survey of opinion in twenty-four countries found "international views of Israel and of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are much more negative than positive" and had

intensified recently. Even in the United States, 59 percent of respondents to a Pew survey, published in October 2025, said they held an “unfavorable opinion of the Israeli government”; 55 percent said they were extremely or very concerned about starvation among Gaza Palestinians; and only 56 percent said they “view the Israeli people positively... down from 64% a year and a half ago.”

For at least fifteen years, Israelis have been aware their country has been, in the words of Israeli journalist and author Ari Shavit, poised to be a “leper state.” Articles in the Israeli press regularly warn the country is being consigned to the pariah status South Africa suffered before the end of apartheid. Widespread public disgust and hostility toward Israel in the wake of its destruction of Gaza have been directly experienced by Israelis traveling abroad. Pew’s 2025 polling of Israelis showed that only 39 percent thought their country was “respected globally.”

Even before the Gaza War, the country’s Jewish population was in crisis, angrily divided over the Netanyahu government’s attempt to “reform the judiciary,” measures that centrist and left-leaning Israelis called a “coup” to strip Jews of protection under the law and institutionalize authoritarian populism. Yet, for most Israeli Jews, Zionism remains a unifying ideology—the context within which ambitious Jewish politicians operate and the regularly invoked justification for whatever positions they take.

But when it came to the relationship between Jews and the non-Jewish world, the Zionist movement itself, as a Palestine-centric expression of Jewish nationalism, was always torn between two principles. One was a commitment to “normalize” Jews—to build an ordinary country within which Jews would be ordinary, in the famous Hebrew phrase: *goy kekol hagoyim*, a nation like any other nation. But an opposing view was also strong: that Jews were by their nature, by the judgment of history, and/or the will of God a people that “will dwell alone, and will not be reckoned among the nations.” From this point of view, Zionism and the State of Israel are vehicles for an intrinsically peculiar people to pursue its unique mission in an inevitably hostile world, suffering isolation and injustice but with faith in eventual redemption and universal recognition of Jewish specialness.

Since the collapse of the Oslo peace process, the Second Intifada that followed, and the obloquy that Israel's subsequent radicalization has occasioned, it is this second understanding of Zionism that has come to dominate the thinking of most Jewish Israelis and Israel's supporters abroad. This kind of belief functions not just to reassure Israelis unable to describe a future that is both satisfying and possible but to justify distrust of gentiles and hostility toward Arabs and Muslims. Israel, as former chief of staff and prime minister Ehud Barak famously put it, is a "villa in the jungle." One American Jewish commentator, Rami Chris Robbins, in an article published in Jewish Federation newspapers and in Israel, hailed the mass walkout protesting Netanyahu's 2025 speech at the UN General Assembly and the isolation it registered as a badge of honor: "If our destiny is to dwell alone, as an unappreciated bulwark defending what's left of Western civilization, sign me up."

In her analysis of the rhetoric of politicians, school curricula, and polling data, political psychologist Neta Oren shows how the image of Israel surrounded by barbarism, hatred, and danger came to define Israeli Jewish views of the entire outside world. Polls taken between 1986 and 2016 show that, in 2016, 51 percent of Jewish Israeli respondents agreed with the statement that "the whole world is against us," 71 percent agreed that "Israel is and continues to be 'a people dwelling alone,'" and 74 percent agreed that "world criticism of Israel stems from anti-Semitism." Oren's analysis emphasizes the pervasiveness of Holocaust tropes in Israeli consciousness. A "Holocaustia" worldview, which considers all gentiles as potential Nazis, interprets all threats to Jews as evidence of latent Nazism, and sanctions any steps deemed necessary to thwart those who might act as Nazis was in the 1980s already more prominent in Israeli political culture than any other collective memory of the destruction of European Jewry.

To illustrate her argument, Oren quotes both Prime Minister Netanyahu and the head of the Yesh Atid opposition party, Yair Lapid. In 2013, Netanyahu paraphrased the Passover seder liturgy commanding all Jews to see themselves as having been personally redeemed from slavery in Egypt: "In every generation we must see ourselves as if we have survived the Holocaust and founded this country." Denouncing criticism from abroad of the high casualty rate among Palestinians during Israel's 2014 operation in the Gaza Strip, Lapid told Israelis

that critics did not “accept the pure evil of the Nazi-like Hamas” and that therefore “we stand in the right place from which to say to the entire world: We will not board the train again. We will protect ourselves from evil.”

In sum, it was not the particular trauma of October 7, 2023, that produced Israel’s radical view of itself and the rest of the world. What the Hamas attack did is bring into full and florid view how intense are the fears of so many Israeli Jews, how radical are their beliefs, and how ready they are to accept savagery as a standard solution to the problems they see themselves as facing.

For two years following the attacks on October 7, Israeli political discourse was saturated with slogans, news stories, and images of Jews defiantly faithful to their country even while surrounded by enemies and mistreated by an intrinsically hostile world. Two slogans were everywhere: *B’yachad Nenatze’ach* (Together we will win!) and *B’Ezrat HaShem, Nenatze’ach* (With the help of God we will be victorious). A sympathetic study of the Israeli media’s coverage of the war in its first months emphasized its wholehearted and effective commitment to the war effort. Israeli broadcasting “position[ed] itself as a refuge,” shielding Israelis from graphic images “of children being harmed and of women and families becoming refugees.” What Israelis saw of Gaza was viewed through the body cameras and rifle sights of their soldiers as they moved through bombed-out buildings, alert to the danger of “terrorists” attacking at any moment and from any angle. Pictures of Gaza devastation that were shown “were typically framed within the context of being Hamas ‘propaganda.’”

In April 2025, cabinet minister Orit Strook described Israel as at war simultaneously on nine fronts, with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, the Shi’ites in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, terrorists in Judea-Samaria, and Iraq, but also with the whole panoply of international organizations, centered at the UN, and finally with Arabs in the West Bank stealing “parcels of land in our homeland.”

There are, of course, liberal Zionists who cherish universal values as authentically Jewish and perfectly consistent with the national commitments. But their numbers are small and shrinking. The extremism of successive Netanyahu governments, a media space Israeli progressives experience as more like a solipsistic trance than a window on the world, and the horrors and risks of wars they oppose have combined to sharply increase emigration rates of young

Israeli professionals among whom these views predominate. Among those who remain in Israel, two reactions are common. Prominent and formerly left-of-center intellectuals, such as Benny Morris and Gadi Taub, proclaim that their eyes have been opened to the bitter truth that the Right was correct: that Israel will never be accepted among the nations, that peace is impossible, and that Israel must and will live forever by the sword. Others, such as the author and post-Zionist scholar and journalist Tom Segev and the veteran Zionist theoretician Hillel Halkin, describe the end of the Israel they knew, or at least thought they knew.

In addition to the internal roots of Israeli craziness, the country's lurch to the extreme right and the reckless use of violence were also fostered by virtually unconditional and unlimited American military, economic, diplomatic, and political support. Over time, the protective cocoon the United States spun around the Israeli polity doomed the careers of moderate Israeli politicians. Repeatedly, they predicted American punishment if Israeli governments rejected opportunities to secure peace based on negotiated compromise. Repeatedly, they were proved wrong. With Israelis assured of American largesse no matter what, moderate Israeli candidates for prime minister, such as Yossi Sarid, Shulamit Aloni, Yossi Beilin, and Haim Ramon, who advocated paying a price and taking risks for peace, could not win elections against right-wing maximalists who assured the Israeli public it could have the whole Land of Israel, treat Palestinians as irrelevant, and still enjoy unending American support.

Thus must we understand American domestic politics as one of the biggest problems in the Middle East. For decades, the Lobby's clout distorted US Middle East policy in ways that have helped radicalize Israeli politics and extremized its leadership, thereby acting as a driver of Israeli craziness and the global isolation associated with it.

As Netanyahu noted in 2016, Israel's isolation has long been on vivid display at the United Nations. From its founding in 1945 through October 2025, the United States cast ninety-five vetoes of draft Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. A majority of these American vetoes, fifty-two out of ninety-five,

were against draft resolutions that criticized Israeli policies. In recent decades, the pattern has become even more extreme. Between 1995 and 2017, the United States cast sixteen negative votes against draft UNSC resolutions. All but two of these were critical of Israel for its policies toward Palestinians. In each case, the United States was the sole vote in opposition to the resolution and therefore the only factor preventing its adoption. In 2024 and 2025, the United States vetoed eight draft resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The singularity of American adherence to Israeli positions is just as apparent in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Beginning in the mid-1970s, there was a sharp decline in coincidence voting in the General Assembly between Israel and most other countries. This trend accelerated in the 1990s. Meanwhile, Washington dramatically increased the rate of its alignment with Israeli UNGA votes. In 2023, for example, the United States voted with Israel in that body 94 percent of the time, aligning itself with Israel more often than with any other country.

Indeed, it was at the opening of the eightieth session of the UNGA, in September 2025, that both the United States and Israel came face-to-face with the latter's pariah status. As Netanyahu prepared to speak, nearly all delegates left the hall. Apart from Israelis, members of the American delegation were among the only diplomats applauding the appearance of the Israeli leader. The image epitomized the reality of an American foreign policy yoked to almost anything Israeli governments say or do, even if that means isolating the United States from world opinion, defying US allies, dragging the US into Israel's wars, and exposing it to charges of flagrant hypocrisy.

This sets the stage for our examination of how Israel's Lobby in America enforces this bizarrely and destructively special relationship and how, amid the complexity of world affairs and the extremism of Israeli policies, its techniques have become more ruthless and its influence more dangerous.

CHAPTER 4

AMERICA ON THE WAY TO PLUTOCRACY

“The masters of the universe are Jews!” declared Republican Jewish Coalition chairman, Republican fundraiser, registered Saudi Arabia lobbyist, and former senator Norm Coleman (R-MN). He continued:

We’ve got [Sam] Altman, we got [Mark] Zuckerberg, we got Sergey Brin, we got a whole group across the board, Jan Koum, founded WhatsApp. It’s us! And we have to figure out a way to win the digital battle.... We gotta get our digital sneakers on so that the truth can prevail over the lies. And when we do that the future of Israel will be stronger because a majority of all Americans will support Israel. We’ll make that happen.

Coleman’s claims that Jews run the world, that Jewish billionaires automatically owe allegiance to Israel, and that pro-Israel policies are manufactured through “our” media campaigns could find a warm welcome at a neo-Nazi gathering. But his remarks were delivered to approving applause in Jerusalem at the 2025 annual conference of the Jewish News Syndicate (JNS), a US news service dedicated to providing “an alternative to both anti-Israel media and progressive Jewish media.” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later made a pointedly partisan joke, an unusual and undiplomatic decision for a foreign head of state, while emphasizing his chummy relationship with Coleman: “I asked you a question my dear friend from Minnesota. How come there are so many liberals in Minnesota?” The audience laughed, in on the punch line that

the Israeli prime minister shared their frustration with starkly declining pro-Israel sentiments, particularly on the left wing of the American political spectrum.

Coleman's embrace of extreme, often antisemitic caricatures of the loyalties of Jewish Americans and Netanyahu's nakedly partisan rhetoric did not characterize the tone or strategy undergirding the Lobby's strength in the past. Bipartisan support was evident in the early 2000s. High-ranking Republican and Democratic members of Congress spoke annually at AIPAC's massive and flashy policy conference. In the 1990s, these conferences attracted two thousand attendees, but before 2021, when the COVID pandemic forced their cancellation, attendance was averaging between fifteen thousand and eighteen thousand. As American aid for Israel's rapidly developing economy tapered off, US military aid to Israel began a steady uptick. With strong and reliable support from Republicans and Democrats, both those calling themselves conservatives and those calling themselves liberals, Israel's Lobby succeeded in maintaining Israel's position as the world's top recipient of US assistance. But largely under-the-surface political and economic trends were quietly reshaping the power balance in American politics. Combined with Israel's lurch to the extreme right, these changes presented a new challenge for the Lobby.

In the early 2000s, America witnessed monumental political transformations in the form of growing political polarization, expanding income inequality, and the lifting of most caps on megadonors' political contributions. These developments forced the Lobby to shed its dependence on a broad coalition of pro-Israel voters across both political parties and to make drastic changes in both its messaging and its methods.

Israel's Lobby was not unique in adapting to the new political realities, but these trends had particularly beneficial impact in a period in which grassroots support for pro-Israel policies split more and more frequently along partisan lines. The failure of the 2000 Camp David Summit to reach a final agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the ensuing Second Intifada effectively ended forward momentum toward resolving the conflict through the Oslo Accords. In particular, the Lobby's shift away from nominally promoting a two-state solution and peaceful relations between Israel and its neighbors posed a serious

change of direction. Over the years, as AIPAC's leadership and messaging, in sync with political developments in Israel, moved increasingly to the right, some veteran employees found themselves no longer aligned with the group they had helped lead. "The whole idea that peace, the threat of peace, was a mortal threat... eventually I was shoved out because I was seen as too much pro-peace," said former AIPAC political director Douglas Bloomfield, who left the group in 1988.

The collapse of the Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada were quickly followed by 9/11 and the Iraq War, a war Netanyahu urged the United States to undertake in his 2002 congressional testimony. AIPAC denied pushing for the invasion of Iraq, but records show the pro-Israel group spread falsehoods about Iraq's role in 9/11 and seemingly endorsed regime change in Baghdad in talking points circulated to Hill staff starting in 2001.

"As long as Saddam Hussein is in power, any containment of Iraq will only be temporary until the next crisis or act of aggression," an AIPAC briefing book warned, providing talking points for its membership and members of Congress. AIPAC's newsletter, *Near East Report*, amplified Israeli concerns in an "editor's comment," repeating claims that "Iraq is maintaining contact with the vile perpetrators of 9/11," while Congress was in the midst of debating the "Authorization of Use of Military Force" against Iraq. That claim was false. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, the official US government record on the events leading up to the attacks, found that there was no "evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States."

The Iraq War quickly split public support along partisan lines and, alongside the very public death of the last US push for a two-state solution, challenged the Lobby's vestiges of bipartisanship and support for the peace process, two critical elements for maintaining Democratic and liberal Zionist support for the Lobby's agenda. President George W. Bush's opinion polls were driven to a low of 25 percent in the weeks before the 2008 election, in no small part a result of the financial crisis that year as well as the deeply unpopular war in Iraq grinding into its fifth year.

Obama's election offered an outlet for dissenting liberal Zionist Democrats to split from the mainstream Israel Lobby groups and pin their hopes, and financial support, on the upstart J Street, a liberal Zionist group dedicated to strengthening Israeli democracy and promoting the two-state solution—and Obama's campaign platform supporting a renewed push for a two-state solution. The fact that the Democratic base welcomed these positions—a sharp departure from the George W. Bush era “regime change” oriented, and neoconservative led, foreign policy—led many observers, most notably John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, to express hope for meaningful reforms within the Lobby, concluding that the Lobby's power was waning and the bipartisan consensus of carte blanche support for Israel was destined for the history books. “Policy positions espoused by the most influential groups in the lobby do not represent the views of all (or even most) diaspora Jews, and they give reason to hope that many groups within the lobby might eventually bring their influence to bear in more constructive ways,” they wrote.

As president, Obama espoused a vision of US foreign policy in the Middle East centered on diplomacy, resolving conflicts with historical enemies, and openly rejecting the Lobby's long-standing position that Israeli and US interests—and resulting policies—should be synonymous. In July 2009, Obama made this position crystal clear, telling pro-Israel Jewish groups visiting the White House “I disagree” when faced with the suggestion that there should be no daylight between the United States and Israel.

The start of the Obama presidency coincided with a growing split between Democrats and Republicans along starkly ideological lines. A 2014 study by the Pew Research Center on political polarization found that “partisan antipathy” was reaching unprecedented heights, with ideological identities among poll respondents doubling over the previous two decades. In 1994, only 10 percent of respondents identified as consistently liberal or conservative. By 2014, that had doubled to 21 percent. At the same time, there was less space for compromise between Republicans and Democrats. Pew researchers found that

“92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.”

Outright animosity was also on the rise, with 27 percent of Democrats describing Republicans as “a threat to the well-being of the country” and 38 percent holding a very unfavorable view of Republicans. Republicans were even higher, with 36 percent saying Democrats posed such a threat and 43 percent holding a very unfavorable view of Democrats. Twenty years earlier, only 16 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans held a highly unfavorable view of the opposing party.

This increased polarization of society posed a challenge for fostering evidence-based discussion of issues, including foreign policy, and created greater space for rigidly partisan and ideological arguments that might otherwise fail to gain traction in the public discourse. Fragmentation of the media—particularly evidenced by the growing market share of partisan cable news channels Fox News and MSNBC in the early 2000s—fundamentally altered how political elites communicated with mass audiences.

Polarization scholar Matthew Levendusky observed that partisan media incentivize elites to cater to politically aligned audiences and reinforce messages and policies rooted in partisanship and unwillingness to compromise. Levendusky cited Obama’s 2009 speech at Cairo University as a useful example of polarized reactions to his presidency. The speech, in which the president laid out his vision for US relations with the Muslim world, evoked vitriol from Fox News’s Sean Hannity, who accused Obama of giving “9/11 sympathizers a voice on the world stage” by not singling out and more forcefully denouncing Islamic terrorism. On the left, MSNBC political analyst Howard Fineman said the speech was “really brilliantly done” and praised Obama for “successfully insert[ing] himself into the ongoing public conversations of the Islamic world.”

The enormous chasm between the left and right partisan outlets was part of what Levendusky characterized as “‘talk[ing] past’ each other in a fundamental way, focusing on separate aspects of the debate that suit their ideological predispositions.”

Israel’s Lobby quickly adapted to this fractured media environment. As Likud-friendly elements in the Lobby gained strength, they relished

opportunities to treat Obama and liberals as Netanyahu treated those derogatorily referred to as *smolanim* (leftists) in Israel. Some pro-Israel groups aligned themselves with virulent right-wing attacks on the president, such as Hannity's suggestion that Obama was aligned with Islamic terrorists or the conspiracy theory that he was a secret Muslim working to undermine Western democracy. Moving their communication strategies to the right, Israel advocates actively generated, amplified, and distributed these hyperpartisan and polarizing messages during Obama's candidacy and presidency.

In 2008, an Israel-based advocacy group partnered with US pro-Israel organizations and donors to spread an anti-Muslim conspiracy theory in what appeared to be an overt effort to harm Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. Before that year's election, a shadowy production company, the Clarion Fund, distributed a feature-length documentary to 28 million swing-state voters and to more than 20,000 members of the Republican Jewish Coalition. The film, *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West*, argues that tens of millions of Muslims worldwide, including many residing in Western Europe and the United States, were part of a vast plot to destroy Western civilization. Sowing the seeds of anti-Muslim sentiments during the 2008 election cycle was not an original idea, but the production company's ties to Israel—Clarion Fund was an offshoot of the Jerusalem-based Aish HaTorah, an Orthodox Jewish outreach program—were noteworthy. (The film was also personally distributed by Republican donor Sheldon Adelson to young Americans attending Birthright Israel trips—junkets for young Jews designed to encourage and intensify their identification with and attachment to Israel.)

The distribution to swing-state voters via DVDs inserted in newspapers was allegedly made possible by a \$17 million grant by Chicago businessman Barre Seid, an otherwise unknown figure in big-dollar political spending. Two years later, Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv recognized Seid's philanthropy with an award while providing unusually little information compared to the information provided about other awardees about what element(s) of his philanthropy earned him this honor. A 2010 announcement of Bar-Ilan honorary-doctorate recipients that included Seid simply stated, "His fervent commitment to setting forward a strong case for the State of Israel is evident in his support for programs

which help develop the ability of Israel's future leaders to persuasively communicate Israel's positions and concerns."

By 2010, only 37 percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of Islam, the lowest favorability level since 2001. Twenty-eight percent of voters did not believe Muslims should be eligible to sit on the Supreme Court, and nearly one-third of Americans thought Muslims should be banned from running for president. Israel's Lobby quietly exploited this polarized and conspiracy theory-laden far-right ecosystem, platforming and even funding some of the most outspoken anti-Muslim conspiracy theorists in the country.

Steven Emerson—a conspiracist whose demonstrably false claims include saying European "no-go zones" and the entire UK city of Birmingham were off-limits for non-Muslims and that the 1995 Oklahoma City federal building bombing bore a "Middle Eastern trait"—became a frequent speaker at AIPAC's annual policy conference in the 2010s.

AIPAC's opposition to Obama's signature second-term foreign policy initiative, the Iran nuclear deal, a multilateral deal to prevent Iran from constructing nuclear weapons in exchange for sanctions relief, led the lobby group to enlist the help of another fringe member of the anti-Muslim extreme right, defense policy analyst Frank Gaffney. He was a surprising ally for a group that had formerly prided itself on holding bipartisan support. Gaffney had pushed the conspiracy theories that Obama was a secret Muslim and that his administration was engaged in "clear-cut acts of submission to Shariah," including modifying the Missile Defense Agency logo "to reflect a morphing of the Islamic crescent and star with the Obama campaign logo." While Gaffney spearheaded conspiratorial and vitriolic attacks on the Obama administration, AIPAC was quietly funding his work, funneling \$60,000 to his group as part of an AIPAC-controlled advocacy campaign opposing the Iran nuclear deal in 2015.

In the aftermath of the 2012 election, the Obama administration, then in its second term, prioritized nuclear diplomacy with Iran. Negotiations between the P5+1—the five United Nations Security Council members (China, France,

Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Germany—and Iran made rapid progress, reaching a “Joint Plan of Action” with Iran. Obama quickly identified the initiative as part of his effort to advance US security interests through diplomacy, a clear break from the Global War on Terror’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that had defined the post-9/11 era. Obama heralded the necessity of diplomacy to address threats posed by Iran’s nuclear program on November 23, 2013, saying:

Ultimately, only diplomacy can bring about a durable solution to the challenge posed by Iran’s nuclear program. As President and Commander-in-Chief, I will do what is necessary to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. But I have a profound responsibility to try to resolve our differences peacefully, rather than rush toward conflict. Today, we have a real opportunity to achieve a comprehensive, peaceful settlement, and I believe we must test it.

Most pro-Israel groups in the United States, many of whom were briefed by the White House, initially offered cautious responses, avoiding outright criticism of Obama’s nuclear diplomacy with Israel’s regional rival, choosing instead to press for hard-line US negotiating terms. Israel took a more openly antagonistic approach to the president. Netanyahu called the agreement a “historic mistake” and, in a clear break with the White House, declared, “Today the world has become a much more dangerous place because the most dangerous regime in the world has taken a significant step toward attaining the most dangerous weapon in the world.”

Other groups bolstered Netanyahu’s denunciation of Obama’s nuclear diplomacy. The Republican Jewish Coalition, whose board included Sheldon Adelson and Home Depot cofounder Bernie Marcus, immediately attacked Obama as “misguided” and “giving cheer to Tehran’s rogue regime and causing alarm among our friends in the region, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and most other Gulf States.”

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), a heavy promoter of the Iraq War and the Global War on Terror before that, followed suit the next day,

opposing the proposed deal as “a gamble on Western optimism.” It was joined by a shadowy pressure group, United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI). “Tonight’s events are a disappointment for those of us who have worked to pressure Iran’s economy and impose the toughest sanctions in history on Iran—the same sanctions that brought the regime to the negotiating table,” its statement said. “Those touting this agreement do not appear to understand the fragility of sanctions, or the dangers of rolling them back and easing the economic pressure on Iran.”

This burgeoning opposition to Obama’s signature foreign policy initiative was funded by a small, overlapping set of donors with deep ties to Israel. Misfiled tax documents from both groups inadvertently revealed their top donors. UANI, according to a 2013 document, received \$500,000 from the Adelsons that year alone. Another \$843,000 was contributed by a series of trusts controlled by billionaire precious metals speculator Thomas Kaplan, a citizen of the United States, France, the Republic of the Seychelles, and the United Arab Emirates, and his wife, Daphne Recanati, the daughter of Israeli financier Leon Recanati. While the Adelsons, as well as Kaplan and Recanati, weren’t disclosed anywhere on the website, the group did little to hide its alignment with Israel. UANI’s advisory board even included former Mossad director Meir Dagan.

Promoting Israel’s interests isn’t part of UANI’s publicly stated mission, but Kaplan said as much in a 2010 email forwarded to former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, leaked following a hack of the PM’s email account. A nuclear Iran “represents a psychological threat that will have untold consequences on the Israeli economy and population flows,” wrote Kaplan, refuting Barak’s claims that an Iranian nuclear weapon would not pose an existential threat to Israel, as Iran’s leaders were rational and unlikely to use a nuclear weapon were they to acquire one.

Pressure built on AIPAC as the P5+1’s talks with Iran progressed, especially as Netanyahu and key pro-Israel political donors, including Haim Saban, Bernie Marcus, and Sheldon Adelson, lashed out at the potential for a nuclear deal with Iran. AIPAC historically avoided the appearance of partisanship or engaging in divisive public advocacy campaigns, rarely going on the record with journalists seeking to understand the group’s positions on US policy debates. Such efforts

to maintain a bipartisan consensus on matters relating to Israel became even more difficult, if not outright impossible, after Netanyahu's March 2015 speech to Congress in which he blasted a possible nuclear agreement as "a very bad deal," saying, "We're better off without it." The speech, conducted without consultation with the White House and at the invitation of the Republican leadership of Congress, was criticized by the Obama administration as a break from protocol. National Security Adviser Susan Rice attacked Netanyahu's speech for having "injected a degree of partisanship" that is "destructive [to] the fabric of the relationship."

Netanyahu's speech, with the Adelsons attending as honored guests and Republicans broadly praising the speech, set the stage for the most significant showdown between the Lobby and a sitting president since George H. W. Bush's 1991 decision to withhold loan guarantees for Israel. But nearly twenty-four years later, the Lobby's ballooning resources and its new appetite for partisan politics created a volatile and highly public conflict between it and the Democratic Party.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 was signed on July 14, 2015, building on the interim Joint Plan of Action to reach a comprehensive agreement about limitations on Iran's nuclear program, UN inspections, and sanctions rollbacks. Three days later, AIPAC formally launched a largely partisan advocacy campaign challenging the White House's diplomatic initiative during the sixty-day review period before a congressional vote on the deal. The newly formed AIPAC-controlled advocacy group Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran would go on to spend over \$27 million opposing the JCPOA, at least \$14.5 million of which was spent on a blitz of TV commercials during the sixty-day review. Advocacy groups aren't required to disclose their sources of funding and AIPAC did not voluntarily choose to disclose who was funding the campaign. The only donor linked to the campaign was a shadowy nonprofit, QXZ Inc, which contributed \$1.5 million to Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran as well as \$250,000 to the Emergency Committee for Israel, another anti-Iran deal group that accused Obama of "caving to Iran," and \$1.05 million to the Republican Jewish Coalition between 2018 and 2019. The next year, a Massachusetts disclosure of funders behind a charter school ballot

measure revealed Jeff Yass, the billionaire cofounder of the trading and technology firm Susquehanna International Group and an investor in TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, was a donor behind QXZ, Inc.

A spokesman for Yass told the *Guardian*, "Jeff Yass has never directed QXZ to fund any such groups and any statement otherwise is false" but refused to comment on the Pennsylvania billionaire's ties to QXZ.

Obama, eager to whip votes from congressional Democrats, attacked the anti-Iran deal campaign as an effort to oppose diplomacy and push the United States toward another disastrous foreign policy misstep comparable to the then-deeply-unpopular Iraq War. Without referring to them by name, the president clearly targeted AIPAC, the neoconservatives, and Netanyahu—who had testified before Congress about the imperative for US-led regime change in Iraq before the 2003 invasion—in an August 2015 speech, saying: "Between now and the congressional vote in September, you're going to hear a lot of arguments against this deal, backed by tens of millions of dollars in advertising. And if the rhetoric in these ads, and the accompanying commentary, sounds familiar, it should—for many of the same people who argued for the war in Iraq are now making the case against the Iran nuclear deal."

Besides clearly referencing AIPAC, another group made up of "the same people who argued for the war in Iraq" was FDD, formed originally in 2001 as Emet ("Truth" in Hebrew) with a mission that included "provid[ing] education to enhance Israel's image in North America." That name and mission, while submitted to the IRS in its founding documents, was nowhere to be found on its website. By the time the JCPOA debate was occurring, the group had also removed evidence of its advocacy for the Iraq War. Articles with statements including "that Saddam still has weapons of mass destruction cannot be seriously doubted" and language claiming "we know Saddam Hussein is making weapons of mass destruction" were long removed, focusing attention on the alleged threat posed by Iran instead.

Al Jazeera hidden cameras captured Sima Vaknin-Gil, the director general of Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs, speaking in blunt terms about Israel's relationship with the FDD. "We have FDD. We have others working on" projects including "data gathering, working on activist organizations, money

trail,” said Vaknin-Gil to an audience of American pro-Israel advocates in 2016. “This is something that only a country, with its resources, can do the best.”

The FDD wasn’t just a producer of research papers and op-eds advocating against the JCPOA and for more sanctions and military threats against Iran. It also served as an important element of an echo chamber informing the public and Congress about Middle East policy. Not so obvious at the time was that this echo chamber was paid for by the same people who heavily financed the political campaigns of members of Congress hearing testimony from the FDD. In an eighteen-month period preceding and immediately following the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, FDD staff and fellows provided congressional testimony opposing the deal seventeen times. While the group doesn’t release any information about its funding, a misfiled document revealed that Bernie Marcus contributed \$10.7 million, Paul Singer contributed \$3.6 million, and Sheldon Adelson contributed \$1.5 million in a five-year period ending in 2011. The three men were the three largest donors to the FDD in that time frame, the only period in which the group’s top donors have been disclosed.

The FDD’s donors closely overlapped with top donors to congressional Republicans in the two election cycles sandwiching the JCPOA and the 2014 and 2016 elections. In 2014, Singer was the largest single donor to Republicans, giving \$11.5 million, and Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, contributing \$6 million, were the fifth largest. In the 2016 election, the Adelsons were the largest donors to Republicans, contributing \$82.5 million; Paul Singer was second, contributing \$26 million; and Bernie Marcus and his wife were tenth, contributing \$13.3 million.

In total, the members of this small group of pro-Israel donors were both the biggest identified donors to the think tank that did the most focused and sustained work to oppose Obama’s nuclear diplomacy *and* contributed over \$139 million to supporting Republican political campaigns in the 2014 and 2016 elections. Those efforts, particularly within the Republican Party, appeared to pay off when all fifty-four Senate Republicans, joined by just four Democrats, supported a resolution of disapproval for the nuclear deal in a September 2015 vote. The vote fell two votes short of the sixty required to overcome a Democratic filibuster, handing a victory to Obama but underscoring how the

Republican Party, with the backing of billionaire donors and an advocacy and think tank echo chamber particularly focused on promoting Israel's interests, could mobilize every Republican senator in opposition to a US president and the work of American diplomats. At the same time, the Lobby's new modus operandi showed a significant shortcoming: most Democratic senators sided with the leader of their party over AIPAC and Netanyahu.

Critics of AIPAC's decision to follow Israel's lead in challenging the White House on its signature foreign policy initiative were quick to question the group's expenditures on the campaign and squandering of political capital. "When a president is dead set on a foreign policy initiative, it's virtually impossible to stop him, and the sophisticated people at AIPAC understand that," said Neal Sher, AIPAC's executive director from 1994 to 1996. "But the Netanyahu administration has come out so forcefully that I'm not sure AIPAC had that much of a choice."

"The limits to Israel's and AIPAC's influence have now been painfully exposed; an issue that Israel deemed existential was blithely ignored both by the administration and much of Congress," wrote former deputy Israeli national security adviser Chuck Freilich. "There was no moral victory as the premier's supporters sought to claim, no good fight, just a preordained trouncing. He who misuses AIPAC undermines Israel's national security."

"Where is the lobbying machine? What did all that money buy?" asked former AIPAC lobbyist Steven Rosen. "This is a very bad moment for AIPAC."

"The strength of any 800-pound gorilla lies in the perception that his power is so significant that no one challenges him," said Robert Wexler, a former Democratic congressman from Florida. "But if the 800-pound gorilla challenges and loses, then the deterrence factor is seriously weakened."

The Lobby's campaign opposing the JCPOA was a significant loss, revealing the limits of its influence in the US political system. But the Lobby's strategy of relying on a handful of mostly Republican megadonors to bankroll its advocacy efforts had taken a clear shape and focus.

At the same time, principals at Israel Lobby groups engaged in inflammatory and, in some cases, outright racist statements. Sheldon Adelson, then a member of the Republican Jewish Coalition's board and a seed funder of the Israeli-American Council—a group of Israeli Americans dedicated to strengthening “the bond between the peoples of the United States and the State of Israel”—shared the stage with Israeli-American billionaire and Democratic megadonor Haim Saban at the group's inaugural conference in 2014. “The Palestinians are an invented people,” said Adelson, adding that “the purpose of the existence of Palestinians is to destroy Israel.”

Not to be outdone by Adelson's headline-grabbing slurs against Palestinians, Saban announced that if he were Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he would act in a way that would directly undermine the nuclear diplomacy currently underway by the Obama administration. “I would bomb the living daylights out of these sons of bitches,” he raged.

In a polarized America, substantive debate was increasingly rare, but on no issue was there a more determined effort to prevent such discussion than by the Lobby on Israel and US-Israel relations. While doing all it could to prevent genuine debate about Israel and its policies, American aid, and American interests in the Middle East, Israel's Lobby was unrestrained in its effort to widen the Overton window of acceptable ideas, often veering into outright bigotry and conspiracy theories, about Muslims and Palestinians.

This strategy had its origins in Israel, where decisions were made to shift from countering arguments critical of Israel to treating them as motivated by antisemitism and therefore unworthy of response. This new strategy of avoiding substantive engagement or discussion of the rights and wrongs of Israel's behavior by delegitimizing criticism as antisemitic was epitomized by the “3 D's” formula offered by Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky in January 2005. By promoting the idea of a “new antisemitism” with anti-Zionism and anti-Israel sentiment as its markers, and by figuring Israel as the “collective Jew,” opposition to the “Jewish” state or its policies could be treated as antisemitism.

Sharansky was a hero of the Soviet dissident movement, a successful right-wing politician in Israel who held several senior ministerial positions from 1996 to 2005. In 2009, he became chairman of the World Zionist Organization's

“Jewish Agency executive.” But it was as minister for Jerusalem and diaspora affairs, a post to which he was appointed in 2003, that Sharansky launched his formula to treat most criticisms of Israel or Zionism as manifestations of antisemitism. By labeling as antisemitic any formulation that “demonized,” “delegitimated,” or subjected Israel to a “double standard,” Israel advocates could free themselves of the need to respond to any but the most anodyne critiques of Israeli leaders, policies, or actions. This was the “3 D’s” formula. Sharansky allowed that “criticism of an Israeli policy may not be antisemitic.” But the requirement that any criticism of Israel or the Zionism movement that created it be accompanied by equally strong criticism of other states guilty of similar offenses made it virtually impossible for critics of Israel to avoid accusations of an antisemitic “double standard.”

The 3 D’s technique for suppressing criticism of Israel had its origins in a six-day tour Sharansky took of American universities in 2003. In his report on that experience, Sharansky declared college campuses in the United States to be “hothouses of anti-Israel opinion” where Jewish students and advocates for Israel were under siege or in retreat. On that basis, he launched his campaign—which he said was central to his ministerial agenda—to “recapture the campus.” This was to be achieved by attacking the human rights records of Arab countries while using accusations of antisemitism to avoid engaging in substantive debate.

Sharansky’s 3 D’s slogan caught on, but for accusations of antisemitism to be effective, a much broader account of antisemitism was necessary, one that could replace the Jewish Agency’s traditional treatment of it as prejudice “toward Jews as Jews.” From this imperative grew the more than five-hundred-word “International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism” (IHRA) which lists types of antisemitic speech, most of which pertain to criticism of or attacks on Israel or Zionism.

What was called a “working definition of antisemitism” was drafted in 2004 by a collection of Israel advocates in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Europe. They engineered it as a response to an intensification of attacks on Israel as a racist and apartheid state, exemplified by condemnations of Israel that dominated the United Nations–sponsored conference against “Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance” held in Durban, South

Africa, in 2001. The working definition's main author was Kenneth Stern, an American lawyer who had long served as the "antisemitism expert" for the American Jewish Committee (AJC). His own account of the origins of this document, and the reports of others, clearly show that virtually all those consulted about the draft were already aligned with efforts to aggressively deploy theories of the "new antisemitism." Representing a wide array of Israeli and Israel advocacy groups, the consultants were determined to unite behind wording whose specific purpose was to classify speech and opinions critical of Israel as antisemitic and then push the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) to enforce it.

Because this so-called working definition became such an important weapon in the Lobby's arsenal of ways to suppress critical discussion of Israeli policies, it is important to look at it closely. Despite its prominence, what became known as the IHRA "working definition of antisemitism" is, quite simply, a hoax and can be resisted successfully only by understanding it as such. Though advanced as a definition, the odd but revealing thing about the draft is that it begins with a description of antisemitism that neither logically nor practically could be a definition of anything. The IHRA working definition is:

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

This is not a definition in any meaningful sense. A definition must specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion within a category. Setting aside the opaque claim that antisemitism is a "certain perception" rather than a prejudice or hostility, the formulation merely lists what *may* constitute antisemitism without establishing any boundaries on what does or does not qualify. It therefore places no limit on the term's application.

A proper definition must draw a clear line between what falls inside a category and what does not. Consider a triangle: it is defined as a two-

dimensional figure with exactly three sides. Triangles may vary in size or type, but if a figure lacks three sides or is not two-dimensional, it is not a triangle. That clarity allows meaningful discussion, shared understanding, and learning.

If instead we said that a triangle *may* have three sides, productive discussion would be impossible. Figures with three sides might be triangles but so might figures with four or five sides, since the “definition” would not require three sides, only suggest them. In the same way, a definition of antisemitism that relies on what *may* be included, rather than what *must* be present, fails to perform the basic function of a definition at all.

The operative portion of the working-definition document included a list of examples, several of which claimed to illustrate the ways in which antisemitism manifests itself regarding Israel. These include:

- ✦ Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, for example, by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavor
- ✦ Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation
- ✦ Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis
- ✦ Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis
- ✦ Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel

Although invoked by Lobby groups as valid because it has been widely adopted by governments and nongovernmental organizations, the endorsements the IHRA formulation has received are neither the result of, nor evidence for, its coherence, accuracy, or analytic integrity. Instead, the adoption of the IHRA language as a “guide” or “resource” has almost always been the result of political pressures by Israel advocates and defenders, and efforts by activists and politicians to build their reputations or smear opponents by using IHRA to brand their foes as antisemites.

In 2005, the Israeli government, Israel Lobby organizations in North America, and parallel groups in Britain, France, and Germany were furious that the EUMC had in the previous year issued a report on antisemitism in Europe that discussed in detail the question of how to define antisemitism, concluding with a definition of it as simply “attitudes and acts of prejudice and/or hostility against Jews (as Jews).” The report explicitly excluded criticism of Zionism, Israel, Israeli leaders, and Israeli policies from that category.

The success of this effort, signaled by the EUMC’s decision to issue a new report in 2005 embracing the draft, was proudly if euphemistically recorded in a 2021 AJC report describing how the “American Jewish Committee and other experts in the Jewish community stepped in” to provide assistance to European institutions faced with the difficulty of measuring the rise in antisemitism.

Working closely with the leadership of the EUMC, they drafted a comprehensive definition of antisemitism, including examples of the various forms it could take. “This included traditional tropes, the growing problem of Holocaust denial, and the new forms that related to Israel, such as demonizing the Jewish State or holding local Jewish communities responsible for its actions,” according to the AJC report.

Indeed, in 2005, the EUMC shelved the conclusions of its 2004 report and adopted the Israel advocates’ elaborate “working definition of antisemitism” formulation. But in 2009, when the EUMC was folded into the European Union’s Fundamental Rights Agency, the latter disowned the text of the Israel advocates, removing it from the organization’s website.

Still, the antisemitism working definition’s framers did not give up. In 2010, in a development that would years later have major consequences, the US State Department incorporated it along with the Sharansky 3 D’s in the annual report of its Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism. In 2018, the Department of Education officially adopted the State Department definition. This was crucial because the Education Department’s Civil Rights Office could determine, under Title VI, how to interpret and enforce antidiscrimination provisions in colleges and universities. In December 2019, President Trump reinforced this move to use IHRA as a weapon against his perceived enemies in American higher education. Executive Order 13899, “Combating Anti-

Semitism,” directed all federal agencies to consider the IHRA’s working definition of antisemitism when enforcing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, an array of Israel advocates approached the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, an obscure European organization dedicated to commemorating the Holocaust, and in 2016 convinced it to formally adopt the controversial text as its definition of antisemitism. Official adoptions, such as those by the US State Department and the IHRA, of an incoherent nondefinition of antisemitism that targeted potent criticisms of Israel were then used to argue that since many countries and agencies recognized or in some fashion endorsed the text, it must be acknowledged as valid and authoritative. Thus do Israeli government officials and the Lobby in North America and in Europe continue to celebrate it as “an internationally recognized instrument” officially relied on by scores of countries, dozens of American states, and, as characterized by the State Department, “hundreds of sub-national public authorities, universities, sports bodies, NGOs, and corporations.”

A key player among the scores of organizations, institutes, philanthropies, committees, PACs, and foundations that make up the Lobby is the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law. The center’s website describes the IHRA formulation as “a clear and widely accepted Definition of anti-Semitism, which can help institutions and organizations more effectively identify and combat anti-Semitic behavior. This is especially important for recognizing the many forms antisemitism can take.” Similar endorsements can be found on the websites of dozens of Lobby organizations, including the AMCHA Initiative, Tikvah, StandWithUs, Hillel, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). In 2023, a regional director of the AJC declared that without the IHRA definition “we cannot possibly fight antisemitism.” It had become the gold standard. Indeed, the IHRA formula became the most effective weapon in the arsenal of Israel Lobby organizations in their campaign to prevent public criticism or even discussion of Israel or Israeli policies.

Thus, despite the fact that the IHRA “working definition” is not a definition, despite the contradiction it contains by treating a double standard as antisemitic when discussing Israel while requiring a double standard to be used

to protect Israel from accusations of racism or apartheid, and despite the opposite conclusions of the EUMC's own careful analysis as contained in its 2004 report, what is now known as the "IHRA definition of antisemitism" has been formally adopted or recognized by thirty-five US states and forty-six countries. Just as its promoters had hoped it would, the IHRA, along with Sharansky's 3 D's, have served as devices for both governments and nongovernment organizations to shield Israel from attacks and punish its critics.

Despite its widespread adoption, the IHRA formulation was denounced by its lead author. In his 2020 book, in dramatic congressional testimony in 2024 and in a series of articles and interviews, Kenneth Stern denounced the formulation as harming the struggle against antisemitism by becoming, all too obviously, a weapon in the hands of those ready to deny freedom of speech to those offering or even tolerating criticism of Israel. Writing in the *Guardian* in 2019, Stern expressed concern about ways his work was actively being weaponized by "rightwing Jews" to stifle free speech and, particularly on American college campuses, use the coercive powers of the state to shut down criticism of Israel. "There's a debate inside the Jewish community whether being Jewish requires one to be a Zionist," he wrote. "I don't know if this question can be resolved, but it should frighten all Jews that the government is essentially defining the answer for us."

Stern's concerns were well placed, but his warnings did little to slow the weaponization of the formulation, particularly on college campuses. At the University of Kentucky, tenured law professor Ramsi Woodcock was removed from teaching duties in 2025 after the university invoked antidiscrimination policies that incorporated the IHRA formulation in response to Woodcock circulating an online petition calling for military action against Israel. At Columbia University that same year, professor emeritus Rashid Khalidi withdrew from teaching his course on Middle East history citing Columbia's adoption of the IHRA formulation. "Under this definition of antisemitism, which absurdly conflates criticism of a nation-state, Israel, and a political ideology, Zionism, with the ancient evil of Jew-hatred, it is impossible with any honesty to teach about topics such as the history of the creation of Israel, and the ongoing Palestinian Nakba, culminating in the genocide being perpetrated

by Israel in Gaza with the connivance and support of the US and much of western Europe,” Khalidi wrote in the *Guardian*.

The IHRA became a tool in campaigns to threaten reductions in federal funding of universities under the guise of arguments that universities tolerating free speech on Israel were engaged in antisemitic discrimination and in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

While the IHRA still claims the formulation is intended to be “nonlegally binding,” multiple attempts have been made to enshrine the definition into US law. In response to the pro-Palestinian protests engulfing college campuses in the wake of genocide in Gaza, the Antisemitism Awareness Act mandating the adoption of the IHRA definition by the Department of Education was introduced with bipartisan support in both the 2024 and 2025 Congresses, under Presidents Biden and Trump.

While political polarization and a deliberate campaign by Israel’s Lobby were limiting political debate in general and on anything pertaining to Israel and Palestine in particular, a twin transformation was occurring: an acceleration in economic inequality. The increase in wealth enjoyed by the ultra-rich drove high-end real estate markets and demands for private jets and yachts. Other, less conspicuous forms of spending increased as well, offering new avenues for the ultra-wealthy to influence public policy. One example was consolidation of media by the ultra-wealthy as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Time* magazine, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, and *Atlantic* were all acquired or majority-owned by billionaires. But another previously highly regulated space—political, lobbying, and advocacy campaigns—were increasingly funded by ultra-wealthy donors flush with appreciated wealth.

This shift in wealth and political power toward the ultra-rich has often been misidentified as an oligarchy, a small group of people having control of a country, organization, or institution. But when the small group holding political control includes some of the wealthiest Americans deriving their political power from their wealth, the country becomes, by definition, a plutocracy. The very rich have always held outsized political influence, but the intersection of political

polarization and growing wealth inequality allowed Israel's Lobby to gain even greater influence over US foreign policy even as the United States stumbled from one disastrous Middle East war to another and Israel's behavior consistently diverged from policy goals laid out by Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden.

All lobbies face significant costs and dependence on cash flows to pay staff, buy advertising, make campaign contributions, and lobby elected officials. The influence of various interest groups is to a large extent measured by the economic influence they can bring to bear. The financial scale of Israel's modern Lobby is enormous. Take AIPAC's growth as just one example. In the 2022 tax year, AIPAC's 501(c)(3) arm and primary fundraising vehicle, the American Israel Education Foundation (AIEF), had revenues of approximately \$69.9 million and held assets worth over \$186 million. The AIEF, which also funds and manages trips to Israel for up-and-coming political figures and Congress members and staff, transferred approximately \$52 million to AIPAC, and AIPAC, in turn, raised approximately \$27 million on its own through contributions, investments, and program service revenue. AIPAC, separately from the AIEF, also holds considerable assets totaling \$170 million. In that same time period, AIPAC's affiliated super PAC raised approximately \$22.2 million from sources other than AIPAC itself. In short, the largest Israel Lobby umbrella group had revenues of approximately \$119.1 million and held assets totaling over \$356 million.

AIPAC and the adjacent network of groups bring financial resources to bear in their mission of championing the US-Israel relationship, dwarfing any other lobbying efforts promoting bilateral ties between the United States and a foreign country. By point of comparison, the two largest foreign lobbies in the United States in 2022, China (147 times as populous as Israel) and South Korea (5 times as populous as Israel), respectively spent \$66.8 million and \$49.6 million on registered agents contracted to influence US policy.

The Lobby's financial resources dedicated to influencing US foreign policy haven't always been so large. In the 2000 tax year, the AIEF and AIPAC together raised only \$22.2 million and held \$19.5 million in assets. AIPAC enjoyed a fivefold growth in revenue between 2000 and 2022. The effect of polarization, and the Lobby's skill at harnessing extreme partisanship, are certainly

contributing factors to this fivefold fundraising increase. Since 2000, a host of organizations operating in the pro-Israel space enjoyed spectacular financial success. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy increased its contribution revenues by a factor of 5.2 (\$4.2 million to \$21.9 million) between 2001 and 2023. The Jewish Institute for National Security of America, a neoconservative think tank with a focus on strengthening support for Israel, increased its revenues by a factor of 4.01 (\$1.68 million to \$6.7 million) between 2000 and 2022. And the pro-Israel, neoconservative FDD, founded in 2001, increased its revenues by a factor of 15.9 (\$1.12 million to \$17.8 million) from 2001 to 2022.

Another, at least partial, explanation for the Lobby's overall growth is economic trends occurring over this time span that uniquely benefited the ultra-rich and entities sharing the 501(c)(3) tax status used by many advocacy and policy-focused nonprofit groups.

Considered more broadly, polarization, measured as increasing distance on a spectrum, wasn't limited to political and ideological spaces. The early 2000s, and particularly the Great Recession from 2007 to 2009, accelerated existing trends in income equality and wealth distribution. For Israel's Lobby, this coincided with enormous increases in funding. As the net worth of its wealthiest donors ballooned, they scaled up their philanthropic and political funding. In 1990, the wealthiest 0.1 percent of Americans held 8.7 percent of national wealth. By the end of 2024, the share of America's wealth in the hands of the top 0.1 percent jumped by nearly two-thirds to 14 percent.

The ultra-rich spent their money on many things, but charity, for altruistic, idealistic, and long-term tax minimization reasons, was a clear beneficiary as 501(c)(3) nonprofit groups swelled in size. In 2000, all 501(c)(3) groups held \$1.46 trillion in assets. By 2023, that number more than quadrupled to \$6.1 trillion. AIPAC and the AIEF enjoyed a seventeenfold increase in their assets, vastly outperforming the average nonprofit, and they did so with the help of the ultra-wealthy. AIPAC doesn't disclose its donors, but a misfiled tax form from the AIEF's fiscal year 2019 revealed in unprecedented and spectacular detail how extreme wealth now stands behind both AIPAC and the AIEF.

The \$256 million Koret Foundation, funded with some of the proceeds from the sale of a sportswear company to Levi Strauss & Co. in 1979, contributed \$5 million. The Jewish Communal Fund, a \$2.89 billion “donor-advised fund” designed to facilitate and anonymize charitable contributions, contributed \$3.5 million. Real estate tycoon Milton Cooper contributed \$2.475 million. The estate of Hedy Orden, whose company “became the largest private independent owner and operator of service stations on the West Coast,” according to her 2020 obituary, contributed \$1.6 million. A trust controlled by billionaire Lynn Schusterman contributed \$1.5 million. The \$220 million Swartz Foundation, founded by Timberland founder Sidney Swartz, whose family received \$150 million from the sale of the company in 2011, contributed \$1.45 million.

Foundations funded and controlled by hedge fund manager Jonathon Jacobson and Republican megadonor Paul Singer each contributed \$1.3 million and \$1.25 million, respectively. The snapshot of the AIEF’s finances revealed that only eight ultra-high-net-worth donors were responsible for nearly a third of the AIEF’s annual contributions. AIPAC’s fundraising appeal to these individual donors isn’t known, but a peek into their overall fundraising strategy was revealed in scripts for phone solicitation by Siegel Marketing Group, a marketing and fundraising firm. The drumbeat of imminent war, Israel under attack and facing existential threats from enemies on all sides, and outright falsehoods about those threats permeates the scripts approved for AIPAC’s telemarketers between 2009 and 2020. Moreover, the scripts make no appeals based on shared US and Israeli interests. Viewing these scripts as a peephole into AIPAC’s overall fundraising appeal and their donor rolls as an indicator of AIPAC’s dependence on ultra-high-net-worth donors, the group is financially dependent on extremely wealthy individuals who share a niche focus on the well-being of a country six thousand miles away.

While AIPAC publicly emphasizes its mission of maintaining a strong US-Israel relationship, the pitches to donors suggested AIPAC’s mission was to directly defend Israel’s security, not to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship. “I’m sure you are aware that today Israel is facing serious threats, and it is up to us to defend her right to self-defense against Hamas and other terrorists, even in the face of detractors from around the world,” said a 2009

script. The asks extended into soliciting support to push back against the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, known as the Goldstone Report, that found both Israeli and Palestinian groups committed war crimes and crimes against humanity during the Israeli invasion of Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009.

In 2010, AIPAC-contracted telemarketers were directed to say: “Iran is rejecting international calls to end its nuclear pursuit. And at the U.N., the Goldstone Report is attempting to delegitimize the Jewish state, by condemning Israel for taking action to defend its citizens from Hamas.”

By 2014, the emphasis had shifted to warning about Iranian president Rouhani’s diplomatic engagement with US and European diplomats. The script read: “Regional dangers continue to grow for Israel. In Iran, President Rouhani’s rhetoric continues to charm world leaders, while the regime has not slowed its nuclear pursuits. In Syria, continued fighting has brought more than 12,000 al-Qaeda affiliates just miles from Israel’s northern border. And inside Israel, a newly discovered tunnel stretching from Gaza to a kibbutz kindergarten shows Hamas plotting new attacks on Israelis.”

The threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon continued to appear in AIPAC’s fundraising scripts even as the group worked against the JCPOA—a joint agreement with the US and other world leaders that sought to limit Iran’s uranium encroachment with verifiable safeguards and put in place provisions to extend Iran’s breakout time to produce enough highly enriched uranium or plutonium for a nuclear weapon from two to three months to one year or more. The 2015 script read: “After enduring over 4,500 rocket attacks from Gaza this summer, Israel is now dealing with a rash of violent attacks across Jerusalem. Meanwhile, ISIS and other radical groups are committing atrocities across Israel’s borders, while Iran continues to pose a grave threat of attaining a nuclear weapons capability.”

After the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, the fundraising scripts became even more vivid in the violence and existential threats described and either ignored or stood in direct opposition to the foreign policy agenda undertaken by the Obama administration. The 2016 script read: “Innocent Israelis have been the victims of deadly stabbings, shootings, and car ramming attacks throughout

Israel. Incitement by Palestinian leaders has contributed to the violence. Meanwhile, the Islamic state (IS) continues to gain power, and Iran continues to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking the U.S.”

Iran had not in fact developed such a missile, but fundraising on fear, a skill that AIPAC had clearly mastered, was a time-honored tactic for the group. “What motivates people to get involved with AIPAC is the fear that if they don’t engage, bad things are going to happen and the hope that by becoming involved they can prevent those bad things from happening and make things better,” said Steven Rosen in an interview in the 2020 documentary *Kings of Capitol Hill*.

The strategies Rosen described were clearly still at play in scripts employed by AIPAC fundraisers after his employment there, but at a scale of success outstripping anything the organization had experienced in the past. Directly appealing to prospective donors’ interest in standing with Israel against various regional, and often exaggerated, threats positioned the Lobby in direct opposition to the Obama administration’s recent diplomatic achievement and ostensibly the US national interest.

Shifting political and economic conditions may have changed the scale and ways with which the Lobby could raise money in the 1990s and early 2000s, but campaign finance laws still severely restricted the influence that pro-Israel donors could have on elections, effectively capping the total amounts that individuals could donate.

AIPAC supporters have a long history of organizing fundraisers for candidates, but Federal Election Commission (FEC) laws limited the absolute amount any one donor could contribute to a candidate. From 1976 until 2002, the limit was \$1,000 with a slow increase over the years to \$3,300 in 2023. This severely limits the amount that any individual, or even any fundraiser organizer, could donate that would have an impact on a political race.

Those caps on individual donations to candidates became largely irrelevant, however, in the aftermath of two court rulings in 2010 that altered the path through which money could enter elections and opened the door to billionaire pro-Israel donors emerging as some of the biggest investors in the outcomes of

American presidential and congressional elections. The motivation of these mega-donors to influence US foreign policy in the Middle East is evidenced in the statements donors made as well as those made by politicians benefiting from the funding.

The first and most widely known 2010 court case undermining donor limits on campaign finance was *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, a case challenging whether campaign finance laws could prohibit a nonprofit from producing and distributing a film attacking a presidential candidate before an election. In its decision, the Supreme Court struck down laws restricting political spending by corporations and unions, effectively allowing these entities to spend unlimited funds on messages supporting or opposing candidates or issues as long as the expenditures weren't coordinated with candidates or political parties.

Two months later, the DC Circuit Court of Appeals decision in SpeechNow.org v. FEC, a case challenging campaign finance limits on contributions to nonprofits formed to raise and spend money on independent expenditures in elections, authorized the creation of super PACs, groups that can raise unlimited sums from a variety of sources and spend unlimited sums advocating for or against candidates while being prohibited from donating to or coordinating with campaigns. While super PACs must disclose their donors, they can receive money from opaque sources, particularly 501(c) nonprofits that do not disclose donors, effectively opening the door to unlimited dark money entering the US political system.

These decisions fed fears that corporations would pump virtually unlimited funds into US elections, posing a threat of corporate capture of politicians and elections. While a legitimate concern, the decade following *Citizens United* revealed that the biggest users of these new electioneering vehicles were not major corporations. Instead, some of the country's wealthiest individuals, particularly those with a self-stated interest in advancing Israel's interests, capitalized on the new frontier of unlimited political spending made possible by the courts.

Given the *Citizens United* decision striking down limits on independent expenditures by corporations and labor unions, "we must conclude that the

government has no anticorruption interest in limiting contributions to an independent expenditure group such as SpeechNow,” wrote Judge David Sentelle, writing for the court, in the *SpeechNow* decision. Legalizing unlimited contributions to super PACs may not have led to what Judge Sentelle and the Supreme Court considered outright “corruption,” but it did open the floodgates for the ultra-wealthy to make unparalleled investments in elections and install themselves as gatekeepers for candidates running for national political office, effectively installing a plutocracy.

Super PACs became the biggest spenders in the American campaign finance economy, and their growth has been monumental. In 2010, the year they were legalized, super PACs raised \$89 million. Fourteen years later, in 2024, super PACs raised \$5 billion, an increase of more than 5,500 percent.

Sheldon and Miriam Adelson were pioneers on this new frontier of plutocratic power. In 2012, the Adelsons were hardly unknown contributors to political campaigns. Between the mid-1980s and 2011, the couple had contributed less than \$2 million in reportable campaign contributions. But 2012 would be a year when their spending, and the face of campaign finance, would change forever. The Adelsons’ turn to super PACs and their explicit prioritization of Israel as the driving motivation for their political engagement established a game plan for ultra-rich pro-Israel megadonors in both political parties to hold sway in national political races in every future election cycle.

That year, the Adelsons surveyed the field of Republican presidential primary candidates and picked their favorite: former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. In just the first three and a half months of 2012, the Adelsons spent over ten times their lifetime political giving up to that point. In total, the couple spent \$20 million supporting Gingrich, and the former House Speaker, perhaps unaccustomed to the sensitivities that might emerge from this new world of unlimited political spending, was unusually frank about his billionaire donors’ largesse toward his campaign.

Gingrich ultimately lost the primary, but Americans and the media were curious about the huge sums of money the Adelsons spent on his campaign. Gingrich, speaking to NBC News’s Ted Koppel in January 2012, seemed unashamed to identify the role that a foreign country was playing in his

benefactors' motivations. When Koppel asked him what the Adelsons would expect to get out of their investment if he won, Gingrich replied, "I'm very pro-Israel. And that's the central value of [Sheldon's] life. I mean, he is very worried that Israel is going to not survive."

Sheldon Adelson, then the largest donor to the Republican Party through his contributions supporting Gingrich, was also transparent about his motivations. Andrew Abboud, the vice president of government relations at Las Vegas Sands, the casino company founded and, at the time, led by Adelson, told the *Wall Street Journal* later that month that his boss "wants to make sure we elect people who stand strong behind Israel."

At the end of January 2012, Adelson's camp lightly pushed back on the criticism that he was attempting to buy the presidency. But that effort made it sound as if that was precisely what Adelson was doing. "I don't think it's buying a presidency any more than it was when Joe Kennedy helped his son," Sig Rogich, a veteran Republican operative who served as Adelson's government affairs consultant, told NBC News's Michael Isikoff, alluding to the vast financial support, political connections in Illinois, and alleged Mafia ties in certain districts that may have helped John F. Kennedy win the 1960 presidential election.

Isikoff also reported on a 2010 video of Adelson speaking to an Israeli group in which he appeared to express regret for his own service in the US military, telling them, as NBC reported, "I am not Israeli. The uniform that I wore in the military, unfortunately, was not an Israeli uniform. It was an American uniform, although my wife was in the IDF and one of my daughters was in the IDF... [O]ur two little boys, one of whom will be bar mitzvahed tomorrow, hopefully he'll come back—his hobby is shooting—and he'll come back and be a sniper for the IDF." Toward the end of his talk, Adelson said, "All we care about is being good Zionists, being good citizens of Israel, because even though I am not Israeli born, Israel is in my heart."

Anxious to avoid evidence of dual or even uniloyalty, Rogich pushed back against the obvious interpretation of his boss's remarks: that Gingrich's biggest donor was claiming loyalty to a foreign country, Israel, and attempting to influence the election to the benefit of that foreign country. He told Isikoff, "No

one could possibly ever think that he is anything but a loyal American. He's shown that time and time again."

Despite his billionaire backing, Gingrich proved himself an unviable candidate, and Adelson, in a rambling interview filmed by the *Jewish Journal* inside Adelson's Venetian Resort and Casino, declared that Gingrich was "at the end of his line." Wearing a large "Obama Oy Vey" button, Adelson praised Gingrich's embrace of polarizing and bigoted language toward Muslims, making a demonstrably false claim about the relationship between Islam and terrorism. He said, "I'm in favor of Newt Gingrich, because I like people who make decisions. He's a decision-maker. You don't have to worry about using the word 'Islamofascism' or 'Islamoterrorist' when that's what they are. Not all Islamists are terrorists, but all the terrorists are Islamists."

Adelson went on to support former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney as the Republican nominee in the general election but not before gaining assurances that Romney, like Gingrich, would prioritize Israeli interests. "If Adelson was going to give a political campaign more money than anyone ever had, he wanted to be certain Romney would join him in steadfast support of Israel," reported the *Washington Post*, following Adelson's endorsement of Romney. "Israel is at the core of everything he does," Fred Zeidman, a friend of Adelson, confirmed to the *Post*.

By Election Day, the Adelsons' massive spending on the 2012 election, an amount that neared \$100 million, placed them as the largest donors in the entire cycle by a sizable margin. This did not go unnoticed by Democrats, but the Adelsons' role didn't lead to attacks on Romney as a candidate bankrolled by a newly minted plutocrat seeking to advance foreign interests. Quite the opposite.

That September, Israeli-American billionaire and Democratic megadonor Haim Saban took to the pages of the *New York Times* to explain his own motivation for supporting Obama and the Democratic Party with a \$1 million contribution. Saban praised military aid the Obama administration had provided to Israel and his willingness to bring military threats to bear against Iran. "He has directed the military to prepare options for confronting Iran and has positioned forces in the Persian Gulf to demonstrate his resolve," wrote Saban.

Despite providing a laundry list of ways in which the president had been a supporter of Israel, Saban laid blame at Obama's feet for failing to do more to allay concerns that his administration was insufficiently supportive of Israel. Saban wrote that it was true the president hadn't visited Israel since 2008 and that:

Yes, Mr. Obama should have gone there, especially after his 2009 speech in Cairo, addressed to the Arab world. He should have showered Israelis with more love and affection. He could have done more to allay Israel's worries that there might one day be an American president who would take a different approach to the Middle East in general, and Israel in particular; Mr. Obama should have made it clear he isn't that president.

Fifteen days later, apparently unafraid of the appearance of a quid pro quo for the \$1 million donation and a *New York Times* op-ed assuring voters that the incumbent presidential candidate was prepared to go to war for Israel and taking no offense at the criticism he should have "showered Israelis with more love and affection," Obama nominated Haim Saban's wife, Cheryl Saban, to represent the United States at the upcoming United Nations General Assembly.

By all outward appearances, election night on November 6, 2012, was a disappointment for the Adelsons, who by that point had spent \$92 million across a variety of largely losing campaigns. Their political spending included \$4 million on a failed effort by George Allen to win a Senate seat from Virginia and \$2 million on a failed effort by Connie Mack to win a Florida Senate seat. Democrats didn't just win the presidential race; they retained control of the Senate and gained seats in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

While the Adelsons no doubt would have preferred different election outcomes, their foray into post-*Citizens United* political spending set the precedent for how megadonors shape campaigns. The family forced the relatively niche issue of Israel into the Republican primary and general election political discourse and normalized the idea of political megadonors across party lines, no longer restricted by campaign finance laws, largely underwriting campaigns.

This was a very different outcome than what campaign finance experts had warned would emerge from the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision: that unchecked post-*Citizens United* and *SpeechNow* political spending would lead to corporations flooding the campaign finance economy. In fact, the unchecked political spending had largely come from some of the country's richest individuals, led by the Adelsons, whose combined largesse helped drive a 594 percent increase in independent expenditures between 2008 and 2012 with 60 percent of all super PAC donations coming from individuals.

The 2012 election was a precedent-setting event with multiple billionaires and ultra-wealthy individuals investing \$10 million or more in FEC-reportable election spending across both political parties. The Adelsons were joined by eight other donors—Harold and Annette Simmons, Bob and Doylene Perry, Fred Eychaner, Michael Bloomberg, and John and Marlene Ricketts—contributing \$10 million or more in the election cycle, the vast majority of which went to newly legal, unlimited outside spending.

The Adelsons, the largest donors by far, were largely silent in the wake of the election losses as pundits pointed to the couple's strategic error in having funded attack ads on Romney's career as a private equity investor, a line of criticism against Romney that ultimately served as a significant part of the Obama campaign's attacks on the Republican nominee during the general election. Heeding this lesson, the family avoided endorsing Republican presidential primary candidates in future election cycles. But their large-scale political giving with the expressed purpose of shaping US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction was only getting started.

The first decade of the new millennium brought enormous change. Meaningful US involvement in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy came to an end with the collapse of the Oslo Accords in 2000. The 9/11 attacks sent the United States spiraling into the Global War on Terror and two Middle East wars. Political polarization embittered American politics but also opened opportunities for radical critiques of traditional American policies. Indeed, growing discomfort with Israel's rightward political shift created cracks in the bipartisan pro-Israel

political consensus, opening new public space for criticism and questioning of the largely carte blanche support enjoyed by Israel. At the UN, the United States often found itself on its own, providing diplomatic cover for Israeli policies contrary to US interests and to the judgments and policies of its allies.

This brew of high-stakes domestic politics, ultra-partisan divisions, and the erasure of a plausible path for a two-state solution for Israel's Lobby to support might well have left the Lobby in a precarious position, pushed to the fringe margins of the national political discourse. Instead, its tiny but ultra-rich donor base adapted Lobby positions and tactics, leveraging a polarized political discourse to justify support for Israel based on anti-Muslim tropes, a clash-of-civilizations narrative tailored to Christian evangelicals, and crackdowns on political speech via a weaponized formulation of antisemitism twisted to deflect criticism of Israel. In the face of these changes, the Lobby pivoted to help influence the outcome of downticket primaries to enforce as broad and as extreme a pro-Israel consensus as possible and built out think tanks and media echo chambers tirelessly working to ensure that American policymakers would implement pro-Israel policies.

Public opinion would continue to drift away from the bipartisan support enjoyed by Israel through the 1990s, but the systems of political influence and control filled the gaps in grassroots support. Policymakers found themselves more frequently at odds with Israel's behavior and the high costs imposed by Israel on the United States, leading to a period, starting in 2012, of Israel's Lobby engaged in direct conflict with an emerging elite and a grassroots foreign policy trend supporting US retrenchment from the Middle East, winding down US wars in the region, pushing for a nuclear deal with Iran, and a rebalancing of the US-Israel relationship by removing Washington's blanket support for Israel.

In 2025, Republican Jewish Coalition CEO Matthew Brooks stood beside Norm Coleman at the conference. Brooks didn't denounce the antisemitic tropes espoused by Coleman. Instead, he doubled down on polarizing language about the dangers of speech critical of Israel, celebrated how Israeli flags "spontaneously" appeared at the 2024 Republican National Convention, and warned about a metastasizing "cancer" within both parties. "We have an obligation to be vigilant because the cancer that has taken over the Democratic

Party with the woke progressive left, with Bernie Sanders, AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez], Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and protesters on the college campuses, we're starting to see the beginning cells of that cancer take hold in the Republican Party and we cannot allow that to happen," said Brooks, who went on to attack critics of Israel within the Republican Party and concluded, "If you want to try and argue that Israel is not an ally and Israel is a liability well let me just tell you you're going to have to go through the Republican Jewish Coalition first."

The experience of the previous thirteen years no doubt had shaped Brooks's confidence. A virtually unlimited channel of funds to invest in campaigns and think tank and advocacy networks and a media echo chamber ready to amplify highly partisan and fringe justifications for supporting Israel had positioned Israel's Lobby to backfill its loss of grassroots support.

From 2012 to 2025, Israel's Lobby developed effective strategies for ensuring ongoing US support for Israel even as pro-Israel sentiments diminished and the reputational, geopolitical, and financial costs borne by the United States increased.

Following the *Citizens United* and *SpeechNow* decisions, a small set of megadonors joined the Adelsons, emerging as central figures in financing campaigns and enforcing, implicitly or explicitly, a pro-Israel consensus among the majority of policymakers in both parties. In total, nine donors, in some cases alongside their spouses, contributed over \$1.7 billion in disclosed political donations since 2012, an amount that doesn't include any "dark money" contributions that weren't transparently disclosed in FEC filings. All of them, through philanthropy or public statements or both, expressed a documentable preference for unconditional US support for Israel.

Leading the group were still the Adelsons, who contributed just over \$700 million. They were followed by billionaire businessman and politician Michael Bloomberg, who made \$406 million in disclosed contributions, a portion of which went to his failed 2020 presidential campaign. His other political contributions were directed to a variety of Democratic candidates and the Democratic Party-controlled House and Senate Majority PACs, super PACs that fund Democratic congressional candidates. As a presidential candidate,

Bloomberg advocated for no-strings-attached US support for Israel. “If I am elected president, I can promise you I will always have Israel’s back because Israel has a right to defend itself, by itself,” he told the crowd at the 2020 AIPAC annual conference. “And that means I will never impose conditions on military aid, no matter what government is in power.”

In the 2024 election cycle, Jeff Yass emerged as a major campaign financier, contributing over \$100 million to Republican candidates and super PACs as well as funding attack ads on critics of the US-Israel relationship. Yass gave over \$200 million in total since 2012 and hasn’t spoken publicly about foreign policy. Jeff Yass’s philanthropy, however, offers a strong indication of his foreign policy priorities. Sixteen million dollars in charitable contributions linked to Yass went to hard-line pro-Israel groups, including Friends of the IDF and the virulently anti-Muslim David Horowitz Freedom Center. Alongside his business partner, Arthur Dantchik, Yass reportedly provided a large portion of the funding supporting the Kohelet Policy Forum, an Israeli think tank supporting US legislation outlawing the boycott of settlements and Israel’s controversial nation-state law establishing Jewish people as having the sole right to self-determination. (A spokesman told *Haaretz* that Yass has never donated to Kohelet.)

Another billionaire, hedge fund manager Paul Singer, invests extensively in Israel and spent \$116 million backing Republican candidates from 2012 to 2024. Singer founded Startup Nation Central, a group promoting Israeli entrepreneurs and startups with a focus on companies in the aerospace and defense sectors. “I feel strongly that diaspora Jews need an economically and militarily strong Israel,” Singer told the Jewish Funders Network in 2018 in one of his few public explanations about the motivation for his philanthropy and political engagement. “The challenge for all Jews is to stay connected and committed. If we break our links with Israel and/or our Jewish traditions, diaspora Jews are at risk of walking down the path of complete assimilation, or worse.” Singer’s philanthropy has also supported the Philos Project, a group dedicated to fostering Christian support for Israel, and FDD.

Unlike Paul Singer, who rarely spoke publicly about his foreign policy views, Bernie Marcus was eager to share his black-and-white understanding of the world while making over \$77 million in political contributions, overwhelmingly

to Republicans, alongside his wife, Billi Marcus, since 2012. “There’s never going to be peace with the Palestinians because the Palestinians don’t want peace,” Marcus told the Jewish News Syndicate in 2023. Marcus coupled his assertion that “Palestinians want to kill every Israeli and they want to own the land” with other views such as describing Iran as “the devil” in a 2015 Fox Business interview and denouncing Jewish Americans who support universities and institutions that allow criticism of Israel, saying that Jews “are not the brightest people in the world.” Marcus also generously funded the AIEF, Christians United for Israel, FDD, the Zionist Organization of America, the Philos Project, and Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. Marcus died in 2024.

On the Democratic side, LinkedIn cofounder and venture capitalist Reid Hoffman contributed over \$74 million since 2012, largely supporting Democratic Party super PACs and individual campaigns, and in 2024 emerging as a key enforcer targeting critics of Israel in Democratic primary races. Speaking at the Aspen Security Forum in 2022, Hoffman declared that the United States needed a “digital ROTC” in the mold of the Israeli 8200 signal intelligence unit. Hoffman’s philanthropy directly supports former Israeli soldiers via the Hoffman Kofman Foundation. The foundation notes that it offers a “1-year full scholarship executive excellence program” that is “specially tailored for outstanding alumni of IDF Elite Units.”

Fellow tech billionaire Larry Ellison also spent over \$47 million, mostly supporting Republican campaigns, since 2012. Ellison briefly overtook Elon Musk as the world’s richest person in September 2025 and derives his wealth from cofounding Oracle Corporation. Adding to his election giving, Ellison funded a variety of causes in Israel, including over \$26 million in contributions to Friends of the IDF. Speaking to Israel’s Channel 10 in 2014, he said, “We love the country of Israel and we’ll do everything we can to support the country of Israel.”

Hollywood producer Haim Saban, alongside his wife, Cheryl, also have contributed over \$47 million to Democratic campaigns since 2012. Saban, an Israeli-American, is one of the most outspoken pro-Israel megadonors within the Democratic Party, denouncing the Biden administration’s 2024 threat to withhold bombs and artillery shells from Israel if it expanded the war in Gaza to

the population center of Rafah. “Bad... bad... bad decision on all levels,” he wrote in an email to Biden. “Pls reconsider.” In a thinly veiled threat, Saban warned Biden there are “more Jewish voters who care about Israel, than [Muslim] voters that care about Hamas.” A 2017 profile of Saban in *Variety* noted his central role in raising tens of millions of dollars for Friends of the IDF. “As an Israeli-American I am always concerned about the well-being of Israel,” he told the magazine. “Israel’s existence rests on two pillars. Pillar one is its relationship with the United States. Pillar two is its army because if Israel didn’t have the military power that it has, it would not exist.”

WhatsApp founder Jan Koum emerged as a significant donor only in 2021, contributing over \$30 million to Republican groups and candidates. He also contributed to pro-Israel stalwart Representative Ritchie Torres (D-NY) and AIPAC’s super PAC. Koum’s philanthropic foundation supports Friends of the IDF and the Miriam Adelson–led Maccabee Task Force, a group that targets critics of Israel on US college campuses. He also gave \$6 million to Elad NGO, a group that funds the expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem.

These donors form the backbone of an Israel-first movement that crosses party lines and shares a uniform goal of supporting politicians, outside organizations, and think tanks that provide research and analysis for members of Congress and the president. In essence, the donors are funding both the election of politicians as well as the research institutions shaping the worldview of these same elected officials, creating an echo chamber of pro-Israel talking points and policy recommendations for politicians already indebted to pro-Israel donors. This system often concealed its role through the formation of nondescript groups and public-facing materials that didn’t identify Israeli interests as a driving factor shaping the promoted policy recommendations.

The echo chamber became an influential element in policy debates about the US-Israel relationship, shaping the viewpoints of politicians and defining acceptable policy prescriptions, all largely funded by ultra-wealthy donors with radical views detached from the sentiments of either party’s base. It is this expansion of the Lobby that opened the door for pressures that spread from national to local elections and to American society as a whole.

CHAPTER 5

HOW THE MODERN LOBBY WORKS

In 2015, Donald Trump did not seem like the politician that Israel's Lobby would have picked. In fact, he was as far from a typical pro-Israel candidate as Israel and its supporters could imagine. The fact that his long-shot candidacy was gaining traction in the Republican primary races was a source of deep discomfort for pro-Israel Republican megadonors. Trump's candidacy was off message on core issues to Israel's Lobby: the recently implemented Iran nuclear deal and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

While every other candidate except Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) competing for the Republican nomination pledged to leave the JCPOA, Trump was a notable outlier. While he was still critical of the deal, Trump wasn't echoing the Lobby's misleading line that the JCPOA somehow made an Iranian nuclear weapon more likely and endangered Israel. Instead, he seemed bothered only by the lack of direct financial benefits to US companies now that Iranian assets were no longer frozen. "They bought 118 Airbus planes, not Boeing planes, they're spending all of their money in Europe. It's so unfair and so incompetent," Trump told CNN's Anderson Cooper in February 2016. "We're handing over \$150 billion. We get nothing."

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump went even further from the rest of the Republican field. When pressed at an MSNBC town hall that same February about whether the Israelis or Palestinians were more at fault in the conflict, Trump shot back, "Let me be sort of a neutral guy." He later added, "I don't want to say whose fault it is. I don't think it helps."

Later that month, Trump was pressed by debate moderator Wolf Blitzer about his insistence on taking a neutral position on the conflict. “I think it serves no purpose to say that you have a good guy and a bad guy,” said Trump:

Now, I may not be successful in doing it. It’s probably the toughest negotiation anywhere in the world of any kind. OK? But it doesn’t help if I start saying, “I am very pro-Israel, very pro, more than anybody on this stage.” But it doesn’t do any good to start demeaning the neighbors, because I would love to do something with regard to negotiating peace, finally, for Israel and for their neighbors. And I can’t do that as well as a negotiator, I cannot do that as well if I’m taking big, big sides. With that being said, I am totally pro-Israel.

Despite Trump’s insistence of his pro-Israel bona fides, Governor John Kasich (R-OH) and Senators Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) smelled blood and took turns attacking Trump for being insufficiently pro-Israel due to insistence on a neutral US position to advance hypothetical talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. As a primary candidate, Trump appeared to delight in separating himself from the field of Republican hopefuls all vying for the endorsement of the Republican Party’s biggest donors, even going so far as mocking the donors to their faces.

Speaking before the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), Trump taunted the group of megadonors: “Is there anybody that doesn’t renegotiate deals in this room?” asked Trump, before answering, “This room negotiates them—perhaps more than any other room I’ve ever spoken in.”

Seemingly embracing the dual-loyalty canard—the antisemitic trope that Jews are more loyal to Israel than their own nations—Trump quipped that Jews should support him because he’s “the best thing that could ever happen to Israel,” but they wouldn’t support him because he didn’t “want [their] money.” RJC spokesperson Mark McNulty downplayed the suggestion that Trump’s comments embraced Jewish stereotypes, saying, “Donald Trump is well aware of the composition of our board and our audience—one that includes many successful businessmen and women as well as deal makers like him.” That board

included Republican Party megadonors Adelson, Singer, and Marcus, three men who were uncomfortable with Trump's ascendancy within the primary field.

Trump's clearest and most unequivocal claim of the influence held by pro-Israel megadonors came early in his candidacy, in October 2015, when Politico reported that Sheldon Adelson was on the verge of endorsing Rubio and making a considerable political contribution supporting his campaign. The next day, Trump tweeted: "Sheldon Adelson is looking to give big dollars to Rubio because he feels he can mold him into his perfect little puppet. I agree!"

Adelson ultimately refrained from endorsing Rubio, but Singer, as part of an effort to collect opposition research on Republican primary candidates, funded the initial research by Fusion GPS into Donald Trump, research that continued as the Republican field whittled and Trump was on the verge of clinching the nomination. Fusion GPS's research into Trump continued under contract with the Hillary Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee. The firm ultimately produced the Steele dossier's thirty-five-page compilation of largely unverified allegations of illicit cooperation between Donald Trump's campaign and the Russian government.

Marcus, alongside his fellow RJC board members, was not supportive of Trump's upstart candidacy. The Home Depot founder first backed Governor Scott Walker (R-WI) and later Jeb Bush, offering unsolicited advice to Trump on Fox Business, urging him to "get his act together" and "start changing your tone and start trying to correct what you've done in the past that has alienated a lot of people."

All three men were quick to change their own tunes, or at least the flow of their money, once Trump clinched the nomination in late May 2016. Trump, for his part, showed that one could win the Republican nomination despite largely rejecting the pro-Israel talking points typically expected from presidential candidates from both parties. Trump performed well with evangelical Christian primary voters, defying conventional wisdom that pro-Israel positions were a requirement for any candidate seeking votes from the Christian Right.

Winning the nomination, however, is different from raising the necessary funds for a full presidential campaign. That level of fundraising would require the Republican Party's top megadonors to get behind Trump. In fact, Trump's

wooing of Adelson, particularly playing to the billionaire's fondness for Israel, started in the weeks after Trump's RJC appearance in December 2015, in which he had mocked the organization with a variety of Jewish stereotypes. Following a meeting between the two men in Las Vegas, Adelson said Trump was "very charming" and reported he had pushed back on Trump's openness to "dividing Jerusalem and Israel," a commonly understood requirement for a two-state solution with a divided Jerusalem as the capital of both Israel and Palestine. "I talked about Israel because with our newspaper, my wife being Israeli, we are the few who know more about Israel than people who don't," Adelson told Reuters after the meeting. Trump, referring to himself in the third person, told Reuters, "Sheldon knows that nobody will be more loyal to Israel than Donald Trump."

Signaling his impending endorsement of Trump in May 2016, Adelson told reporters that Trump "will be good for Israel." Trump's support for Israel was not mentioned in Adelson's endorsement of Trump later that month in a *Washington Post* op-ed. But he once again acknowledged the centrality of US policy in the Middle East as a driving motivation for his political engagement, characterizing himself as "hawkish on Israel" and having "waged battles" over the Iran nuclear deal, "an issue of paramount importance to me personally and to many others around the world."

In an email sent to fellow Republican Jewish leaders, Adelson urged them to support the presumptive nominee, saying he was convinced Trump would be a "tremendous president when it comes to the safety and security of Israel."

The Adelsons and Marcus quickly came around, donating \$25 million and \$7 million, respectively, to support Trump's general election candidacy. That flow of support from the pro-Israel billionaires came alongside a flurry of movement from the campaign to bring Trump's platform in line with that of his new biggest donors. Just before the July GOP convention and Trump's formal nomination, the Republican Platform Committee unanimously omitted any reference to a two-state solution from the party's Israel planks. Trump met with Netanyahu in September and promised that, if elected president, he would "recognize Jerusalem as the undivided capital of the State of Israel." The campaign reported that Trump agreed with Netanyahu that peace between

Israelis and Palestinians required “the Palestinians [to] renounce hatred and violence and accept Israel as a Jewish State.”

Six days before the election, Trump’s “Israel Advisory Committee” published a position paper proposing a break from the Israel policy of previous Republican and Democratic administrations, celebrating “the unbreakable bond between the United States and Israel” based on “shared values of democracy, freedom of speech, respect for minorities, cherishing life, and the opportunity for all citizens to pursue their dreams.”

For a campaign season mired in allegations, largely fueled by the Steele report, of foreign support for Trump’s campaign, the document received little media attention. But the contents were as clear an indication as any of the campaign’s unusually deep commitment to futherling a foreign nation’s—Israel’s, not Russia’s—political, economic, and military interests. Commitments included “maximum military, strategic and tactical cooperation from the United States,” vetoing any UN votes that “single out Israel,” cutting off funds from the UN Human Rights Council, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, and, in an early sign of how the Trump presidencies would seek to criminalize criticism of Israel, “ask[ing] the Justice Department to investigate coordinated attempts on college campuses to intimidate students who support Israel.”

That ultimately served as a useful guide for where Trump’s policy on Israel would lead. The commitments were a near-total walk back from Trump’s bravado as a primary candidate. Less than a year before, as a candidate, he had refused to grovel in front of the Republican Party’s biggest pro-Israel donors, commit to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, or unequivocally side with Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Days before Trump’s inauguration, Trump’s campaign CEO, Stephen Bannon, attended a dinner party with former Fox News chief Roger Ailes in Greenwich Village. Ailes reportedly asked Bannon whether Trump “gets it,” understood to be a question about whether Trump understood the populist right-wing agenda or a question about the enormity of the situation Trump now found himself in. Bannon either knowingly or unknowingly answered a different question about a different agenda. In his 2018 book, *Fire and Fury*, Michael Wolff wrote, “‘Really,’ Bannon said. ‘He’s on the program. It’s his

program.’ Pivoting from Trump himself, Bannon plunged in with the Trump agenda. ‘Day one we’re moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. Netanyahu’s all in. Sheldon’—Sheldon Adelson, the casino billionaire, far-right Israel defender, and Trump supporter—‘is all in. We know where we’re heading on this.’”

As for “never Trump” pro-Israel donors who held out on endorsing Trump, even Paul Singer, who had warned that Trump’s policies would lead to a “widespread global depression,” ultimately made amends with the new president-elect. Singer donated \$1 million to the president-elect’s inaugural committee.

Trump, in his first term, enacted a series of wish-list items for Israel, including a unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, recognition of Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and, at the repeated urging of the Adelsons, the promised move of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Ensuring that subsequent administrations could not easily move the embassy back to Tel Aviv, the United States sold the ambassador’s house, the most expensive single residence ever sold in Israel, to a buyer who could be trusted not to sell it back to the US government: the Adelsons. The family paid over \$67 million for the Herzliya beachfront compound.

Trump was a historically polarizing and erratic president in his first term. Interest groups and lobbies struggled to identify points of influence in his administration in the face of uncertainty about and unpredictability in the White House’s policymaking processes. In contrast, Israel’s Lobby, via a direct transactional approach, spearheaded by some of the biggest political donors in the United States, achieved a remarkable degree of success in advancing long-term Israeli policy objectives.

During his reelection campaign in 2024, Trump summarized his relationship with his biggest political donors at a 2024 Israeli-American Council summit: “You know, Miriam and Sheldon would come into the White House probably almost more than anybody outside of people that work there, and they were always after—as soon as I’d give them something—always for Israel. As soon as I’d give them something, they’d want something else. I’d say, ‘Give me a couple

of weeks, will you please?’ But I gave them the Golan Heights. And they never even asked for it.”

In his first term, Trump faced relatively little pushback for the unilateral decisions cheered on by Netanyahu and pro-Israel mega-donors. But he had another, less obvious ally in delivering a series of pro-Israel policy concessions: US public opinion. Americans’ sympathies for Israelis held between 59 and 64 percent during Trump’s first term, while sympathies for Palestinians hovered between 19 and 23 percent.

Then, on October 7, 2023, Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched a surprise attack on Israeli civilian settlements near the Gaza Strip, killing approximately twelve hundred people. Israel’s disproportionate response to the Hamas attack and the growing civilian death toll in Israel’s largely indiscriminate attacks on Palestinian civilians and civilian infrastructure drove a sharp shift in public opinion. Sympathy for Israel following the October 7 attack was quickly replaced by worldwide condemnation and protest. Across America, colleges and universities were the scene of mass protests against Israeli actions, demands for a ceasefire, encampments, teach-ins, demands for divestment from Israel, and confrontations with administrators. Particularly on the left, these protests and confrontations quickly evolved into demands that politicians call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and condition US weapons transfers to Israel on an end to attacks on Gazan civilians.

On August 21, 2024, attendees held their hands over their ears, refusing to listen to protesters reading out the names of children killed in Gaza as they entered Chicago’s United Center. This wasn’t the image that Vice President Kamala Harris wanted to define her foreign policy platform or the Democratic National Convention. The ongoing war in Gaza cast a cloud over the convention that would not lift and tested the limits of the Democratic Party’s ability to sustain support from its base and from undecided voters. The Biden administration had continued the flow of arms to Israel, a policy that grew more and more unpopular with likely Harris voters. The Democratic Party’s decision to prevent a Palestinian speaker from addressing the convention sent a clear message: dissent from the Biden administration’s support of Israel in spite of growing outrage from within the party was not permitted.

The Republican National Convention, held a month earlier, hadn't suffered from the same visible dissent. Attendees waved Israeli flags on the convention floor—a dissonant image, considering the Trump campaign's slogan of "Make America Great Again." At Milwaukee's Fiserv Forum, RJC chief executive officer Matt Brooks praised Trump's first-term accomplishments. Brooks thundered, "He moved the US embassy to Jerusalem; they said it couldn't be done: he weakened the Iranian regime; and they said it couldn't be done: he delivered the historic Abraham Accords bringing us closer to peace in the Middle East!" While he spoke, a large Israeli flag waved on the convention floor, another unusual decision in light of the "Russiagate" accusations—claiming that Trump was under the influence of a foreign country—that hung over Trump for much of his first term.

The 2024 national conventions—with Palestinians denied a speaking spot at the Democratic convention and Israeli flags on the floor of the Republican one—were both clear displays of force for Israel. The Lobby's efforts to hold the support of political elites and deny, quite literally, space for critics of Israel or proponents of Palestinian human rights had succeeded. That top-down, rather than grassroots, effort had come to define the functioning of Israel's Lobby: an effort financed by a handful of plutocrats to maintain *carte blanche* US support for Israel in the face of growing bipartisan opposition to the country's behavior.

Public opinion about the US-Israel relationship fundamentally changed during the Biden administration. In a dramatic shift from the long-standing sympathies with Israelis over Palestinians, Americans' support for Israel's war in Gaza quickly turned negative. Gallup polling on American attitudes toward the conflict revealed a slim margin of support, 50 percent of Americans approving and 45 percent disapproving of Israel's actions in Gaza in November 2023, followed in later years by periods of American disapproval with Israel's actions ranging between 48 and 60 percent and approval hovering between 32 and 42 percent.

This growing sentiment among voters was never expressed by either campaign, an outcome in no small part made possible by practically unlimited political spending uncorked just twelve years earlier, enabling, or forcing, both parties to ignore the shifting opinions of their respective bases. The massive

wealth released into the campaign finance ecosystem shifted the Lobby's center of power toward Israel-first billionaires, previously severely constrained by campaign finance laws. This also coincided with the emergence of cracks in the Lobby's ability to maintain bipartisan support for its policies.

Amid a sea change of public support for Israel, the 2024 election would also be the testing ground for a new, more politically hands-on Israel Lobby. In 2022, AIPAC launched the United Democracy Project (UDP) super PAC, an outside spending group that could use its considerable funds to support or oppose candidates. While AIPAC emphasizes the bipartisan nature of its work as well as the bipartisan support for Israel's annual aid package, the UDP had a clear focus during the 2024 election: attacking Democratic critics of Israel's war in Gaza. Twenty-three million dollars, over half of the \$37.8 million spent by the UDP during the entire 2024 election, went to funding attacks on two Democratic critics of Israel's war in Gaza and supporting their more fulsomely pro-Israel primary opponents. The group's biggest expenditures were ads attacking Representatives Cori Bush (D-MO) and Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), or supporting their opponents, in their respective primary races. The UDP spent \$14.59 million on successful efforts to defeat Bowman and \$8.59 million to defeat Bush, revealing the Lobby's high priority of making examples out of congressional critics of the US-Israel relationship.

Such a huge expenditure on Democratic primary races would usually reflect an intraparty conflict. But the majority of the UDP's largest donations did not come from within the Democratic Party. Ten donors contributed \$1 million or more. Six of those donors, a group contributing \$15 million, were Republicans.

Those donors included Jan Koum, who had supported only Republican candidates in the past and gave \$5 million to the UDP. Other GOP megadonors emerged as seven-figure donors to the UDP, including Bernie Marcus, who contributed \$3 million, and Paul Singer, who contributed \$2 million.

Republican megadonors spending tens of millions of dollars on two Democratic primary races wasn't the only unusual behavior from the UDP. For a super PAC whose mission statement is to "help elect candidates that share our vision and will be strong supporters of the US-Israel relationship in Congress," UDP ads for or against candidates, the group's major election-related activity,

were largely devoid of explicit praise or attacks on candidates due to their positions on US support for Israel. Money was spent opportunistically, focusing on issues perceived as vulnerabilities of the target candidates—issues such as gun control, abortion, education, drug costs, and the environment.

AIPAC's super PAC was a deception built on another: a vehicle funded by pro-Israel Republican billionaires to target critics of Israel in Democratic primaries, all while avoiding any mention of Israel itself. AIPAC had evidently concluded that financing its preferred candidates in Democratic races could not be accomplished solely through Democratic donors. Moreover, because US support for Israel held diminishing appeal and often negative connotations among Democratic primary voters, the organization may have determined that its mission was best advanced through concealment of rather than direct advocacy for its actual policy agenda.

Meanwhile, the Biden-Harris campaign was facing down tensions between its top donors and its political base. Polling in May 2024 offered an early indication of the emerging problem. Around 13 percent of voters who had voted for Biden in 2020 but weren't planning to vote for him that November were citing his handling of foreign policy and Israel's war in Gaza as the primary reason for their defection. Public support for Israel's war—and the political and military support provided by the Biden administration for Netanyahu's unachievable war goals of completely removing Hamas from Gaza—created a growing political problem for the Biden reelection campaign and Kamala Harris's 107-day presidential campaign after Biden withdrew from the race.

The number of Democratic voters defecting from supporting Biden-Harris, and later Harris-Waltz after Biden dropped out, only grew larger as the Democratic presidential candidates refused to condition, or commit to condition, US military aid to Israel to achieve a ceasefire. Another problem was that both Biden and Harris were unable or unwilling to express sufficient degrees of sympathy for Palestinians in Gaza, a problem that Harris identified in Biden. "I had pleaded with Joe [Biden], when he spoke publicly on this issue, to extend the same empathy he showed to the suffering of Ukrainians to the suffering of innocent Gazan civilians," Harris wrote in her memoir, published after the election in 2025. "But he couldn't do it: while he could passionately state, 'I am

a Zionist,' his remarks about innocent Palestinians came off as inadequate and forced."

Harris may have been aware of Biden's inability to express empathy for Palestinians facing Israeli blockades on food and medicine and heavy bombing and missile strikes from American-supplied weapons. But her awareness of the growing political liabilities was either insufficient or a problem she was unable to address as a candidate. At a rally in Michigan in August 2024, a state whose large Arab and Muslim population was particularly outraged by the White House's unconditional support for Israel's war in Gaza, Harris stared down protesters who interrupted her chanting, "Kamala, Kamala, you can't hide, we won't vote for genocide." Harris, in a widely publicized video, snapped, "You know what? If you want Donald Trump to win, then say that. Otherwise, I'm speaking."

Two weeks later, Harris was formally nominated as the Democratic presidential candidate at a convention where the war was visible in both what was allowed and prohibited on the convention floor. Protests both outside and inside the convention hall called attention to the more than forty thousand Palestinian deaths in Gaza recorded by the time of the August convention. Biden acknowledged the protesters outside in his speech endorsing Harris, but fell short of acknowledging the lopsided death toll and Israel's targeting of Palestinian civilians and infrastructure in Gaza. "A lot of innocent people are being killed, on both sides," he said.

Harris, in accepting the nomination and laying out her platform, appeared to double down on the administration's commitment to providing Israel with weapons it was using to execute its war on Gaza, saying, "I will always ensure Israel has the ability to defend itself because the people of Israel must never again face the horror that a terrorist organization called Hamas caused on October 7, including unspeakable sexual violence and the massacre of young people at a music festival." While making no acknowledgment of the calls for conditioning aid to Israel or using other forms of leverage to bring Israel to the negotiating table for a ceasefire, she insisted "President Biden and I are working to end this war." The one-sided message about the US role in the conflict extended to the DNC giving a speaking spot to the parents of one of the Israeli hostages held by Hamas while denying a spot to a Palestinian American.

Polling conducted in the lead-up to the convention showed a plurality of Democrats (42 percent) felt the Biden-Harris administration was providing too much military aid to Israel and a majority (68 percent) supported restricting military aid to Israel so it could not be used toward military operations against Palestinians.

The gap between Harris's positions and those held by traditionally Democratic voters in Michigan, particularly those of Palestinian and Arab descent, led the Trump campaign to target disaffected Arab American voters. Trump personally visited Dearborn, Michigan, an Arab-majority city, telling Arab American business leaders "What we want is peace," and despite his own track record of delivering on Israel's policy priorities in his first term he secured the endorsements of the mayors of Dearborn Heights and Hamtramck, the first Muslim-majority city in the United States.

Harris has not provided any explanation for sticking to Biden's policies of prioritizing the commitment to unconditional military aid for Israel at the expense of antagonizing her own base. However, one influence that Biden, and later Harris, could not have ignored were the top donors to their campaign. A review of the top donors in May 2024, a time when the campaign was ramping up fundraising and early donors were enjoying regular updates and access to top campaign staff, finds that nine of the twenty-five donors who gave more than \$900,000 to the Biden Victory Fund either contributed funds to staunchly pro-Israel groups or made strongly pro-Israel statements.

Those donors included Haim Saban, who suggested that conditioning US weapons transfers to Israel was tantamount to siding with Hamas, and his wife, Cheryl Saban, who cheered pro-Israel provocateur Ben Shapiro's statement "If Israel put down its guns tomorrow there would be a second Holocaust. If the Palestinians put down their guns tomorrow there would be a Palestinian state." "Bravo," responded Cheryl, in November 2023.

"Why do we only see pro palestinians [*sic*] in acts of violence? Why has this become an accepted form of protest," asked another top donor, mobile gaming pioneer Mark Pincus in a March 8, 2024, post on X.

"Theres [*sic*] no mention by nyt of baby beheading or Biden speech about it. [B]ut continued coverage of destruction in Gaza and Israeli military failures.

[T]hey should rename as ‘the new hamas times,’” wrote Pincus in an October 11, 2023, post, referencing the claim, walked back by the White House on October 12, 2023, that Biden had seen photographic evidence of babies beheaded by Hamas on October 7. (In fact, there is no evidence that Hamas beheaded babies in the October 7 attack.)

Less publicly outspoken Victory Fund donors were major funders of AIPAC and groups targeting the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement, a nonviolent transnational movement created in 2005 and led by Palestinians. The movement urges individuals, companies, and governments to cut economic ties with Israel, thereby pressuring Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territories, uphold refugee rights, and achieve equality for Arab Israelis. Some Victory Fund donors were also funding anti-BDS groups that focused on attacking student organizers, such as StandWithUs, and groups dedicated to maintaining US support for Israel, such as the Israeli-American Council. Donors also supported pro-Israel think tanks, including the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and Friends of the IDF.

At least one member of the Victory Fund, Amed Khan, resigned from the group in November 2023 over the Biden administration’s handling of the war in Gaza but only after trying to sound the alarm to his fellow donors. “They were living in some alternate universe,” said Khan. He tried to explain to the campaign and Victory Fund members, “This is the reality, people don’t like [Biden’s support for Israel’s war in Gaza], so they’re not going to vote for you, enough people to make a difference in the election.” Khan warned that Biden’s policies were enabling a genocide and that the emerging humanitarian catastrophe would translate into “electoral suicide” for the campaign, but his warnings were shrugged off. “I don’t think so, we just don’t see it” was how Khan characterized the responses.

Harris ultimately hewed to talking points and campaign promises in closer alignment with her top donors rather than likely Harris voters. On election night, six battleground states that voted for Biden in 2020 flipped to Trump. Election postmortem polling revealed in stark detail what the Biden administration’s handling of the war in Gaza had cost Democrats. Twenty-nine percent of voters who voted for Biden in 2020 and did not cast ballots for Harris

in 2024 said that the war in Gaza was the top reason for their decision. It was the most commonly given reason, ahead of the economy, Medicare and Social Security, and immigration and border security. The Democratic Party's internal turmoil over the Biden administration's refusal to bring US leverage to bear to end Israel's war in Gaza was highly visible, at both the 2024 convention and in the election outcome.

While Harris's loss and the role that the war in Gaza played in the defection of Biden-Harris 2020 voters, as well as the UDP's success in defeating Bowman and Bush in their respective primaries, garnered the most attention, other critics of the war emerged relatively unscathed. Representatives Mark Pocan (D-WI), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) easily won reelection despite, or perhaps because of, their vocal criticism of Biden's carte blanche support of Israel. Their relatively safe seats and strong support from constituents made them largely immune to the Lobby's pressure and appeared to deter efforts from pro-Israel super PACs and donors to invest meaningful resources in challenging these largely popular incumbents.

The public opinion shift against Israel wasn't limited to the Democratic Party. Between 2022 and 2025, the portion of Republican voters with an unfavorable view of Israel grew from 27 to 37 percent, and the shift was even more significant with Republican voters between eighteen and forty-nine years old, a group whose unfavorable opinion of Israel expanded from 35 to 50 percent.

Seven months before the 2024 election, conservative pundit Tucker Carlson began posting interviews and commentary sharply critical of Israel's war in Gaza and treatment of Christians in the West Bank. Other Republicans, particularly Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY) and Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), emerged as consistent critics of AIPAC and Biden and, later, Trump's deference to Israel. They were joined by Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) and Steve Bannon, who both tacked strongly against Israel and the Trump administration's support of Netanyahu months into Trump's second term. Ongoing bloodshed in Gaza and Trump's decision to defer to Israel in abandoning nuclear negotiations with Tehran and bomb Iran's Fordow nuclear

enrichment plant created a highly public split with two of Trump's most important media boosters, Carlson and Bannon, who openly criticized the White House's military action against Iran.

That split within the Right, emerging in the lead-up to the 2024 election, revealed that Republican critics of Israel's Lobby enjoyed a significant level of support from the party's base and were largely immune from electoral repercussions, despite the overwhelming role of pro-Israel megadonors within the party.

The confrontation with the Lobby most visibly played out within the Republican Party. Populist pundits, led by Carlson and Bannon, capitalized on the gap between the Republican establishment and the party's energized and youthful base, disappointed with Trump's subservience to Netanyahu's agenda in Gaza, Iran, and Lebanon. This tension burst into plain view with the murder of conservative organizer and activist Charlie Kirk on September 10, 2025.

Kirk had toed a consistently pro-Israel line over his thirteen-year career and garnered \$2.5 million in financial contributions from Bernie Marcus for his conservative student organization, Turning Point USA. Leaked text messages from the days before his death revealed that the fiercely pro-Trump and pro-Israel activist complained to friends that "Jewish donors" were "playing into all the stereotypes" and pushing him to "leave the pro-Israel cause." His refusal to distance himself from Tucker Carlson appeared to be a point of contention with his donors, leaving Kirk angry and considering pushing back by inviting not just Carlson but conservative commentator Candace Owens, an even more vitriolic critic of Israel, to appear at Turning Point USA events. "Just lost another huge Jewish donor. \$2 million a year because we won't cancel Tucker," Kirk wrote. "I'm thinking of inviting Candace." Billionaire pro-Israel and conservative philanthropist Robert J. Shillman was revealed as the "Jewish donor" who pulled his support two days before Kirk's murder.

The battle over Kirk's legacy—defined by a media blitz by Netanyahu, Owens, and Carlson, all vying to define Kirk as either staunchly pro-Israel or on the verge of the transition to a critic of Israel that so many young conservatives had already made—reflected all the elements of the domestic political debate over US support for Israel that year. Those included growing unfavorable

opinions of Israel, particularly among younger voters; a Lobby that replaced grassroots support with massive infusions of capital from billionaire megadonors; and a burgeoning conservative punditry striking out from the Republican Party and aggressively rejecting the rigidly pro-Israel stance that defined Republican foreign policy for over twenty-four years since the George W. Bush administration.

In the case of Kirk's death, the battle over his legacy, and an almost immediate swirl of baseless conspiracy theories about Israel's role in his murder revealed simmering distrust and fear of Israel's role in controlling political speech within the United States. That fear went well beyond the conservative spaces inhabited by Kirk, Owens, Carlson, and Bannon and laid bare the Lobby's estrangement from American public opinion.

Tech company Oracle's role as a major investor and proposed manager of TikTok's algorithm, in a sale pressured by both the Biden and Trump administrations as a measure to protect Americans from potential Chinese influence over the social network, quickly revealed another concern: the company has an unusually explicit pro-Israel corporate mission. How would that contrast with TikTok's role as a popular social media platform for young political activists, a group highly critical of Israel?

Hacked emails showed then Oracle CEO Safra Catz telling former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, "We have to embed the love and respect for Israel in the American culture," in a 2015 message. As noted, Oracle's founder, Larry Ellison, told an Israeli television network in 2014, "We love the country of Israel and we'll do everything we can to support the country of Israel." Oracle's commitment to Israel reportedly extended, in some cases, to referring insufficiently pro-Israel employees for mental health counseling.

Putting to rest any question about how Israel viewed the sale, Netanyahu, visiting New York in September 2025, told a group of social media influencers that "the most important purchase going on right now is... TikTok, number one, and I hope it goes through because it can be consequential." Referencing the significance of TikTok and X, Netanyahu said, "We have to fight the fight,

okay? To give direction to the Jewish people and give direction to our non-Jewish friends.”

That “direction” from Israel now included paying influencers as much as a staggering \$7,000 for each pro-Israel post and a \$3.2 million contract to “geofence the actual boundaries of every Major [*sic*] church in California, Arizona, Nevada, and Coloardo [*sic*] and all Christian Colleges during worship times” and then “track attendees and continue to target [them] with ads” with pro-Israel messaging. The proposed plan also included trying to hire celebrity spokespeople and paying pastors to produce pro-Israel content. Unlike most pro-Israel lobbying initiatives within the United States, these efforts were not funded and directed by Americans. The existence of the campaigns was revealed in Foreign Agents Registration Act filings, showing that the efforts were funded and directed by the Israeli government. Israel’s direct role in shaping US public opinion was unprecedented and a clear response to hemorrhaging political support for Israel.

Israel, which had previously enjoyed overwhelming grassroots support maintained by a largely US-based network of institutions and lobbying groups, was now directly financing and directing efforts to influence US public opinion and cheering on efforts from Israel-committed billionaires to take ownership over popular forums for political debate. The mechanics of Israel’s lobbying efforts had rapidly shifted to rely on infusions of billions of dollars to buy and control social networks, use vast infusions of funds to influence election outcomes, and, as we’ll see, stigmatize, persecute, and even prosecute critics of Israel as antisemites.

Trump, never one to shy away from discussions of transactions and dealmaking, revealed much about the access their money gave his megadonors. In an October 2025 address to the Israeli Knesset celebrating the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and the release of the remaining living Israeli hostages, the president showed an unusual degree of candor about the motives of the biggest donors to the Republican Party and his responsiveness to them, doing little to dispel the perception that wealthy donors, rather than any definable notion of US national security or the national interest, were the biggest influences over his foreign policy decisions. Miriam Adelson was in the audience,

and Trump didn't miss the opportunity to acknowledge her and the role she and her husband had played in influencing his thinking.

"Look at Miriam. She's back there. Stand up, Miriam. Stand up," said Trump. Concluding his riff on the Adelsons, Trump speculated on where the allegiances of his biggest and most influential donor lay. He said, "But I actually asked her, I'm gonna get her in trouble with this, but I actually asked her once, I said, 'So, Miriam, I know you love Israel. What do you love more, the United States or Israel?' She refused to answer. That means, that might mean, Israel, I must say."

Trump's statements at the Knesset got little scrutiny in mainstream media, perhaps because nothing he said was particularly new or surprising. The Adelsons and their fellow megadonors have been largely transparent and honest about their motivations for giving a combined \$1.7 billion in campaign contributions and the transactional underpinnings of Israel's Lobby. Speaking at the Israeli-American Council's January 2026 conference, however, Adelson was cagey. Asked how her political influence had been so successfully deployed, she deflected. "Can you allow me not to answer?" she asked, before explaining, "I want to be truthful and there are so many things I don't want to talk about." Haim Saban, sitting next to Adelson, was more forthright, explaining how his money, and that of Miriam Adelson, influenced politicians on foreign policy. He said:

If you support a politician you, under normal circumstances, should have access to be able to share opinions and try to help them see your point of view. That's what access grants you. And the contribution and the financial support grants you the access. So, I mean, those that give more have more access and those that give less have less access. It's a simple math. Trust me.

The circumstances under which they've been giving, however, have shifted enormously, now putting the money of Israel's Lobby in direct opposition to an emerging populist sentiment that US support for Israel is not worth the financial, geopolitical, or moral costs. The Lobby, having no other tools for

influence, is doubling down on efforts to shape and constrain speech, criminalize criticism of Israel, and finance enough primary and general election campaigns to fend off political bases in both parties, which are steadily diverging from the parties' status quo support for Israel.

Rapidly shifting public opinion put the Lobby on the back foot, fending off emerging grassroots opposition to US backing of Israel's war in Gaza, a conflict with an indefensible civilian death toll. But instead of showing independence from Israel's policy preferences and advocating for the United States to use its leverage over Israel to curtail the death toll in Gaza and step back from regionally destabilizing actions in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, the Lobby doubled down on its role as a shaper of US policy preferences in conformity with Jerusalem's preferences. This cemented the perception that the Lobby served as an extension of Israeli policymakers, not as a representative of Americans seeking a strong US-Israel relationship mutually benefiting both countries. Showing the seemingly limitless lengths they would go to secure US backing for Israel, the Lobby's next attack would strike at the core institutions and values underpinning American democratic traditions of open political debate and freedom of speech.

CHAPTER 6

THE ANTISEMITISM WITCH HUNT

Adam Milstein is an Israeli-American member of the ultra-wealthy class. He and his wife run the Adam and Gila Milstein Family Foundation, which funds Impact Forum, whose purpose is to support “exceptional non-profit organizations who fight Jew-hatred worldwide, support the State of Israel, and strengthen American values.” Milstein is a founder and former national chairman of the Israeli-American Council, a national organization of Israeli-American activists. He also sits on many of the boards of the right-wing Israel advocacy organizations that he or his family foundation fund, such as the Israeli-American Coalition for Action, which mobilizes Israeli Americans for street demonstrations and lobbies Congress and policymakers on behalf of Israel; StandWithUs, focused on antisemitism treated as a vehicle for criticizing Israel; the Israel on Campus Coalition, which funds the recruitment and training of Israel advocates in American universities; Hasbara Fellowships, which bring hundreds of college students each year to Israel for training to be Israel activists; and the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA), a media watchdog that challenges news stories and scholarship critical of Israel.

In August 2025, the Milstein Family Foundation distributed an article originally published by Milstein in the *Jerusalem Post*, an Israeli English-language newspaper. The article attacked Zohran Mamdani, at that time the leading candidate in New York City’s mayoral election, as an “Islam-leftist”

who “refuses to acknowledge Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state” and as aligned with “antisemitic incitement and terror.”

A dramatic cartoon accompanied Milstein’s article. A blindfolded woman evoking the Statue of Liberty, and standing for both America and the Democratic Party, is sliding down a “slippery slope” from the “American way of Life and Judeo-Christian values” into a swamp littered with Marxism, DEI, and communism. Tilting toward the swamp, she bears the scales of justice on her shoulders. Dragging her down is the weight of the “Islamist Leftists,” represented by Rashida Tlaib, Zohran Mamdani, Bernie Sanders, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who holds an “Israel Is EVIL” sign). Seemingly unable to stop the descent toward disaster, “Common-Sense Dems,” represented by Ritchie Torres, John Fetterman, and Hakeem Jeffries (holding a sign reading “Israel Is the West’s Floodgate”) stand on the “American Way of Life” side of the scale.

Strikingly, neither the article nor the cartoon attempted to defend or even describe Israeli policies, Israel’s prosecution of the war in Gaza, or anything at all about the country itself. The absence of any attempt to engage with or rebut criticisms of Israel is typical of contemporary Israel Lobby propaganda. So is the reliance on personal attacks using the accusation of antisemitism and the mobilization of bias and prejudice (against DEI supporters, Muslims, Marxists, and leftists in general).

It was not always so. There was a time when advocates for Israel actually engaged in debate with critics based on substantive defenses of Israeli policies. One way of chronicling this shift is by tracing changes in the manuals provided to guide pro-Israeli speakers and activists, especially in their efforts on US campuses to defend Israel’s policies. Over time, discussion and debate were gradually abandoned and replaced by obfuscation, suppression, and attacks on opponents as antisemites.

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the Information Office of the Government of Israel, different Israeli ministries, and various departments of the World Zionist Organization (WZO), including the Jewish Agency, mounted propaganda efforts, known in Hebrew as *hasbara* (literally, “explanation”). In this period,

they mainly entailed distributing official government policy positions and providing advocates for Israel with detailed information and substantive arguments on a wide variety of topics to use in debates with adversaries. For example, a manual distributed to pro-Israel speakers at that time by Israel's consulates in the United States described Zionism as the "national liberation movement" of the Jewish people, offered accounts of what happened in 1948 that placed some or most of the blame for the Palestinian refugee problem on the Arabs themselves, and suggested rationales for Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank. The manual told speakers how to defend Israel against accusations that it launched wars in 1956 and 1967 with aggressive or expansionist intent, gave evidence of the government's interest in finding a compromise peace with its neighbors and praised occupation policies for offering opportunities for free expression, minimizing its military presence, and maximizing self-government. It presented security, legal, and democracy-based arguments in favor of Israel's policies toward its Arab minority, explained why Israeli links to formerly imperialist powers did not make it an imperialist country, countered portrayals of the country as a militarist state, and justified Israel's claims to Jerusalem as more valid than those of any other country.

By the turn of the century, however, this *hasbara* strategy of engagement with substantive criticisms of Israel was largely discarded. Beginning in 1977, when Menachem Begin's right-wing Likud Party first formed a government, the country's image was already difficult to promote by documenting government policy or explaining its commitment to peace. Insisting that the Palestinians be treated as diabolical terrorists rather than as a people with political rights, the governments led by Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Ariel Sharon, and Benjamin Netanyahu acted systematically, and with increasing explicitness, to prevent any kind of territorial compromise. At the same time, they rapidly expanded the Jewish settler population in the West Bank and turned the Gaza Strip into a ghetto, an open-air prison, and then a free-fire zone. Accordingly, it became harder and harder in Europe, the United States, and the Global South for its advocates to justify Israel's policies and behavior, even as the extremism of its governments produced sharp criticism from countries and groups that had formerly been reliable supporters and allies.

Unable to respond with arguments that most audiences around the world would find convincing, Israel advocates increasingly moved away from engaging in substantive discussion and debate entirely. In 2002, the Education Department of the World Zionist Organization's Jewish Agency for Israel sponsored a World Union of Jewish Students manual for Israel: *Hasbara Handbook: Promoting Israel on Campus*. Although 40 of its 120 pages were devoted to ways to rebut accusations made against Israel, the main focus of the publication was on mastering the principles and "devices" of effective propaganda, meaning communications "*that engage the emotions and downplay rationality*." Suggested tactics included appealing to the prior notions and prejudices of marginally engaged students, refusing to answer questions about controversial topics, preemptive strikes to avoid having to defend Israeli policies, controlling the terms and frames within which discussion could take place, and shaping opinion without engaging in substantive debate—for example, by commissioning polls of groups known to be pro-Israel and then using the results "to give the impression that Israel is the 'team to support.'"

A crucial task for these young advocates was to learn how to score points with uninformed audiences. The manual emphasized, however, that to score points on campus, one should disguise point scoring as sincere conversation. That would require making responses that would "seem to be logical, and to follow from what was said before." To do this, the advocates were told to "use phrases that subtly change the agenda or reframe the debate" such as "Well, that's not really the right question..."; "I really think that we would be all better served by looking forward instead of back..."; and "That's an interesting point, but I don't think we can really begin to address it before we think about..." Confronted with questions about Israeli settlements, Israel boosters were urged to "consider calling settlements 'communities' or 'villages.'"

An even more detailed manual, *The Israel Project's 2009 Global Language Dictionary*, was produced in 2009 by The Israel Project (TIP), an Israel advocacy organization focused on promoting Israel to the general public, including in the media and on college campuses. TIP's manual used sophisticated advertising and spin techniques to combat criticism of Israel. Its author was Frank Luntz, an American political consultant and "messaging" specialist associated with Newt

Gingrich and other Republican politicians. TIP was funded heavily by Lobby stalwart and Republican megadonor Paul Singer. Closely aligned with AIPAC, TIP was active between 2003 and 2012. Its insistent message was that Israel advocates should avoid seeking to win arguments, whether with better information or by defending Israeli policies as consistent with American values. Instead, speakers were told how to read an audience; determine what it believed, wanted to believe, feared, or hated; and then deliver a message to exploit those biases to encourage sympathy for Israel and skepticism toward its critics.

Notably, neither the *Hasbara Handbook* nor the *Global Dictionary* identified antisemitism as the cause of or the major contributor to Israel's problems on American campuses. The latter mentioned antisemitism only once, not as a source of opposition to Israel on campus but as a feature of some extreme forms of Palestinian propaganda. Although the *Hasbara Handbook* alerted its readers that some criticisms of Israel were probably based on antisemitism and that "many who attack Israel are motivated by, or express, Antisemitism," it defined antisemitism clearly and simply as opposition to or dislike of Jews "simply because they are Jews." While the *Hasbara Handbook* advised Israel advocates that antisemitism, when it did appear, should be "pointed out and opposed," it also cautioned that "constantly accusing opponents of Israel of Antisemitism can be counterproductive, if this charge is brought lightly. The charge of Antisemitism is a serious one, and should not be used unless there is good cause." In ambiguous cases the *Handbook* advised refraining from levelling public charges." Prior to Israel's shift in 2014 toward treating public relations challenges as a kind of war, the manuals used to coach the hundreds of Israel-boosting organizations on US college campuses neither focused on antisemitism nor accused Israel's critics of being antisemites. But following shift, weaponized accusations of antisemitism assumed a dominant role.

The Israel on Campus Coalition, funded in part by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, a foundation also closely tied to AIPAC, is specifically dedicated to coordinating and uniting "pro-Israel organizations" operating on college campuses. In November 2019, it published the *2019 Campus Trends Report*, which described a "surge in attacks targeting Jewish students" as part of a national antisemitic trend that "reflected clear links to anti-

Israel activity, with Israel's detractors intensifying hostility toward Jewish groups." Citing its own data along with that of the ADL, the report warned that "antisemitic activity has reached critical levels on American college campuses." While encouraging and hailing pro-Israel students for their initiatives to identify and fight back against these threats, the report offered no account of Israeli policies toward Palestinians and no suggestions for how to defend those policies. The vision of campus life that it promoted was a place "where the anti-Israel movement is marginalized." How this was to be accomplished was implicit in the manual's omission of any suggestions for how to dialogue with critics of Israel while referring to "antisemitism" or "antisemitic" behavior sixty-two times.

Similar patterns can be found in other manuals designed for Jewish college students: defining their struggle as one against antisemitism, exhorting them to defeat and delegitimize anti-Israel activities on campus, but offering them few resources, guidance, or encouragement for defending Israeli policies or engaging substantively with the views of their opponents.

By making it impossible to rule out antisemitism when considering criticism of Jews or Israel, the IHRA formulation gave Natan Sharansky and his allies outside of Israel exactly the weapon they needed in their "recapture the campus" campaign, and in their broader effort to drive criticism of Israel, or of Israeli government policies, from public debate and discussion. For just as new laws can vastly increase the amount of crime in a society simply by increasing the number of activities deemed to be criminal, so too could and would this open-ended definition produce "evidence" of a steep rise in antisemitism.

In 2015, Jonathan Greenblatt replaced Abraham Foxman as the leader of the ADL. Foxman was a strong Israel advocate who was not averse to attacking those, such as Mearsheimer and Walt, who challenged the Israel orthodoxy that the Lobby sought to enforce. However, under his leadership, the ADL focused most of its attention on fighting discrimination and prejudice—against Jews, but not only against Jews. Greenblatt transformed the ADL into a full-bore Israel advocacy organization, declaring as official policy that "*antizionism is*

antisemitism"; phasing out its forty-year-old antiprejudice school program, "A World of Difference"; promoting anti-BDS legislation; and embracing the Trump administration's campaign to investigate, prosecute, and punish universities for supposedly antisemitic programming about the Middle East.

Of central importance in this campaign was the ADL's adoption of language from both the 3 D's and the IHRA formula to include speech and actions targeting Israel as antisemitic. By shifting its data collection and analysis procedures to conform to that expanded definition, and by doing so at a time when large segments of the American population found themselves opposed to the policies of an extreme Israeli government, the ADL suddenly and vastly increased the amount of antisemitism it reported. Since its annual "audits" of antisemitism in America had long been the go-to source for data on the topic, the ADL's procedural changes produced alarmist reports of a surge in antisemitism that became talking points, authoritative citations, and conventional wisdom on the basis of which congressional hearings were conducted, legislation drafted, and new programs funded to combat the age-old scourge of antisemitism. Suddenly antisemitism in America had become a problem much more important and more dangerous than racism directed at African Americans, homophobia, Islamophobia, or prejudice against Hispanic and Asian immigrants.

The ADL's statistics are widely cited as truth. But they are not true. They are an extension of the hoax perpetrated by those who engineered the IHRA nondefinition, a thoroughly political and parochial characterization of antisemitism. Even cursory examination of the ADL's methodology shows how distortive its measures of antisemitism are and how biased they are in ways designed to justify persecution of Israel critics and Palestine supporters.

Consider this: the average number of "antisemitic incidents" recorded by the ADL in 2023 and 2024 was nearly triple the average number recorded in 2021 and 2022. The ADL attributes this leap to a sharp rise in antisemitism. But it provided no evidence of a sudden change in the amount of prejudice against Jews present in the hearts and minds of Americans. In fact, the statistical tripling is quite easily explained. According to the ADL's monthly reports, the steep rise in antisemitic incidents precisely occurred after October 2023, coinciding with

widespread public opposition to Israel's pulverization of the Gaza Strip and the ADL's simultaneous decision to expand what it treated as antisemitic incidents to include criticism and condemnation of Israel. As explained in the "Methodology" section of its audit report, "Since October 7, 2023, ADL began to include in the Audit certain expressions of opposition to Zionism, as well as support for violent resistance against Israel or Zionists that could be perceived as supporting terrorism or attacks on Jews, Israelis or Zionists."

Based on these new counting rules, the ADL's 2024 audit reported that 58 percent of that year's count of antisemitic incidents "contained elements related to Israel or Zionism" and that this was the first time most incidents were of that type. The figures reported in the audit are then cited by Israel advocacy groups and accepted as truth by politicians and government agencies at federal, state, and local levels. As conventional wisdom, these inflated and almost entirely artificial "findings" are then used to bolster the strange but prevalent argument that the horrors of the October 7, 2023, attack on Jewish Israelis somehow increased the hatred Americans felt toward Jews.

Echoing language used in the IHRA formulation, the ADL claims it "[does] not conflate general criticism of Israel or anti-Israel activism with antisemitism. Legitimate political protest, support for Palestinian rights or expressions of opposition to Israeli policies are not included in the Audit." But neither the IHRA nor the ADL gives examples of criticism of Israel that they would not code as antisemitic. By relying as heavily as it does on individual reports of antisemitism and by including as "antisemitic" any expression that could be determined to have "had a negative impact on one or more Jewish individuals," there is very little in the way of vigorous or explicit criticism of Israel or Zionism that would certainly be excluded from possible categorization as antisemitic. The ADL's own language makes this clear. It is not whether a protester or an article supports "violent resistance against Israel or Zionists" that is the criterion for judging it as antisemitic. What leads to an ADL judgment of "expressions" as antisemitic is if they "*could be perceived* as supporting terrorism or attacks on Jews, Israelis or Zionists."

Following the lead of Israeli propagandists and the organizations that support them, Israel advocates condemned slogans and chants used to protest Israeli

actions in Gaza or support Palestinian rights as antisemitic. But calling slogans antisemitic that celebrate intifada, a liberating tradition of popular mobilization, or that call for freedom is close to ridiculous. *Intifada* literally means “shaking off” in Arabic and is used to refer to popular uprisings against oppression, including, for example, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The First Palestinian Intifada, from 1987 to 1993, erupted as a mostly nonviolent challenge to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It was one of more than a dozen “popular mobilizations” against oppressive regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These included the People Power Revolution in 1986 that replaced the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines with a democratic system, Solidarity’s victory over the communist regime in Poland in 1989, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia (also in 1989), the Tiananmen Square protests in China, and movements that all had mixtures of nonviolence and violence.

Yet, for Israel’s Lobby in general and the ADL in particular, slogans such as “Long live the intifada” and “Globalize the intifada” are now treated as evidence to brand any demonstration or publication featuring them as antisemitic. The chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, Tim Walberg, showed how dangerous such sweeping condemnations are for traditional American values of free speech. In December 2025, he sent a letter to the president of MIT. The letter was similar to those written to other American universities expressing concern that an antisemitic climate had been allowed to develop that required congressional investigation because “under Title VI, even speech that is protected by the First Amendment may contribute to a hostile environment.” On behalf of the committee, he invoked Congress’s constitutional authority of “oversight” over “education... generally” and demanded “[a]ll documents and communications since October 7, 2023, referring or relating to “antisemitism,” “Jews,” “Judaism,” “Israel,” “Palestine,” or “Zionism” in the possession of MIT,” along with a “chart of all complaints against students, faculty, or staff related to potential antisemitic incidents” and reports of how they were investigated and what disciplinary actions resulted. By “antisemitic incidents,” Walberg used the ADL playbook to explain he was referring to “any incidents involving the targeting of Jews, Judaism, Israel, Israelis, Zionism, or Zionists, or incidents otherwise identified as antisemitic.”

One of the slogans condemned as antisemitic is “From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free.” The irony here is that this slogan closely matches language used by the pre-1948 forerunner of the Likud Party, Irgun. In its struggle to free the country from British rule, the paramilitary organization, and the Revisionist Party it served, established the goal that remains that of the Likud today: establishment of a Jewish majority state in the entire Land of Israel and most emphatically over all the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The chorus of one Irgun recruitment song from the 1940s could easily be mistaken for a pro-Palestinian chant, “Free, it’s got to be free. We’ll fight for the right, for the right, that says Palestine must be free.”

The ADL is only one of a dense network of Israel advocacy organizations using accusations of antisemitism to remove critical discussion of Israeli policies from the public domain. These organizations effectively transmit changing Israeli propaganda techniques to America. In August 2025, Shimon Stein, a former Israeli ambassador to Germany, and Moshe Zimmermann, an emeritus professor of German history at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, published an article entitled “Inflating Antisemitism.” Referring to Israel’s highly effective antirocket and antimissile defense system, they described Israel’s strategy of “damning every critic of Israel’s actions in Gaza as a modern-day Nazi” as constituting a kind of “verbal ‘Iron Dome,’” which protects Israeli officials from having to reassess or even defend the country’s policies and actions.

Accusations of antisemitism, they wrote, backed up with direct or indirect invocations of the Holocaust, were an “automatic response system” that freed “official Israel” from the need to engage in any “substantive discussion of legitimate claims against Israel’s conduct.” An especially grotesque deployment of this verbal Iron Dome defense was on display in 2019 when an Israeli-American miniseries dramatized the murder of an Arab boy in Jerusalem and the trial of the Jews who burned him to death. Prime Minister Netanyahu denounced the program as antisemitic, not because what it depicted was untrue, but because it “besmirches the good name of Israel.”

The strategy of “demonizing the demonizers” by painting critics of Israel as antisemitic implies more than delegitimizing “anti-Israel” publications and speech. This is an escalation of the Lobby’s public affairs strategy, to “Attack The Messenger, Not The Message,” as Canary Mission, an anonymously funded and operated Israel-based advocacy website that mounts doxing campaigns against thousands of academics and others it deems antisemites and enemies of Israel, put it in a leaked document boasting of its accomplishments. The strategy includes harassing, smearing, blacklisting, intimidating, and even prosecuting, imprisoning, and deporting individuals identified as “anti-Israel.” The enemy is not falsehood, to be corrected by truth, or ideas, to be deflected or spun into incoherence. It is the people themselves who question Israeli policies, criticize Zionism, object to unconditional American military aid, or support Palestinian rights; they must be neutralized.

Nothing demonstrates more clearly the Lobby’s nature as machinery transforming Israeli propaganda into American opinion, policies, and laws than the guidance offered to Israel advocates in the United States for how to deal with the threat of BDS. At first, Israeli officials dismissed BDS as unimportant and undeserving of serious attention. That changed in 2009 to 2010 with a surge in BDS activity in response to the destruction Israel inflicted on the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead and its bloody seizure of the *Mavi Marmara*, the flagship of the “Gaza Freedom Flotilla.”

On May 31, 2010, the Turkish vessel was in international waters, heading for the Gaza Strip. It carried ten thousand tons of aid and seven hundred activists from fifty countries expressing solidarity with Gaza Palestinians and seeking to break the blockade enforced against the enclave by Israel. When Israeli naval forces tried to board the ship, the passengers, who were unarmed, nevertheless resisted, throwing things at the soldiers who were trying to climb aboard. Israel responded by spraying the passengers with gunfire from a helicopter. Commandos rappelled to the deck and continued firing, killing nine passengers and wounding fifty others.

Outrage at the bloody seizure of the vessel reverberated in Turkey and around the rest of the world, giving a major boost to BDS and its strategy of nonviolent actions of international solidarity with Palestinians. In the aftermath

of this incident, Israeli leaders became convinced they needed to treat BDS as a dangerous and even existential threat. The government allocated large budgets to struggle against it, along with high-level ministerial attention and support from Mossad, the branch of Israel's security services responsible for espionage and sabotage.

In its struggle against BDS, the government saw Israel advocates in the United States and Europe as its decisive allies. In 2016, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, occasionally referred to, using Netanyahu's nickname, as "Bibi's Mini-Me," met with pro-Israel activists and donors in Cleveland to discuss the threat from BDS. Dermer's advice was not to educate the American public in defense of Israeli policies or refute the arguments of Israel critics but to use accusations of antisemitism to ban those critics from participation in American politics. "We can't fight alone against BDS. That's a battle—the effort to boycott, divest and sanction Israel, where all of you are soldiers with us in fighting that." Drawing on the double-standard criterion for identifying antisemitism featured in both the Sharansky slogan and the "working definition," Dermer labeled BDS as clearly antisemitic.

"It's an anti-Semitic movement because it seeks to single the Jewish people out," he explained. "The old way of anti-Semitism was to treat Jews to a different standard than other peoples around them. That's exactly what BDS does to Israel. It holds us to a different standard." Dermer's guidance for the fight was to avoid engaging BDS critics, instead he advocated suppressing and delegitimizing them. "When I hear about a group when Israel is the only country around the world that they're boycotting, I'm not interested in engaging them because they're anti-Semites. You don't give legitimacy to racists, you shouldn't give legitimacy to anti-Semites."

Whether the issue is BDS, Israel Apartheid Week (an annual period of protest on behalf of Palestinian rights focused on discrimination and inequality), or demonstrations against genocide in Gaza, Israel Lobby groups have followed Dermer's advice. Insisting that antisemitism is present whenever some Jews, Israelis, or supporters of Jews and Israelis say it is, they free themselves to attack and demonize their critics while ignoring the criticism.

Writing for Tikvah in October 2025, an influential analyst of American Jewish affairs declared that “there is no question that American Jewry currently faces an onslaught of anti-Semitism.” Tightly linked to this image and to the idea that Jews in America are a besieged minority are beliefs that increased criticism of Israel springs from rising antisemitism and that Palestinian attacks on Israelis are antisemitic and increase antisemitism. These notions are enshrined in public discourse and treated as articles of faith by Jews in most Orthodox and Conservative synagogues, though research has shown the reverse: not that Palestinian violence against Israelis increases antisemitism, but that it often leads to sympathy for Israelis. It is Israeli violence against Palestinians that increases antisemitism.

“Antisemitism,” declared Jonathan Greenblatt, ADL’s CEO, “is nothing short of a national emergency, a five-alarm fire that is still raging across the country and in our local communities and campuses.” By one count, in October 2025, there were “160 organizations and initiatives devoted to countering the onslaught against Jews and Israel.” Both the Biden and Trump administrations joined in. In May 2023, the Biden White House issued the US National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, which relied explicitly and almost solely on data produced in the ADL annual audits. In September 2025, the Trump administration did the same. Partnering with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Committee, and the Orthodox Union, the State Department organized a briefing for journalists on antisemitism in America that relied entirely on the ADL’s 2024 audit to dramatize what it portrayed as a torrent of antisemitism. The session opened with ADL statistics showing 9,354 antisemitic incidents in 2024, “the highest on record.” Citing ADL sources, the journalists were told that Jews “account for 2 percent of the U.S. population but were the target of nearly 70 percent of religiously motivated hate crimes in 2024.”

The hatred of Jews apparent in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017, when neo-Nazi and other white supremacist demonstrators with torches chanted, “Jews will not replace us!” and the murderous attack on worshippers in Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue the following year were shocking reminders that fierce antisemitism lurks in dark corners of American life. And it is certainly

alarming to hear reports that Jews in the United States were attacked nearly ten thousand times in one year and that, according to ADL statistics, this represents an “893% increase over the last decade.”

In 2023 and 2024, the number of false bomb threats and swatting incidents aimed at synagogues did sharply increase. The FBI reported that most of these threats were similarly worded and came from obscured internet addresses, suggesting coordination by a small group of bad actors located outside the United States. But despite an increase in the willingness of those who hate Jews to publicly share their feelings, the image of pervasive, wildly escalating, and rampant antisemitism is propaganda, not truth. It is Israeli propaganda transformed by Israel’s Lobby into conventional wisdom and then used by it, and by allied politicians, to tar critics of Israel as antisemites while ginning up donations from the Lobby’s deep pockets.

The matter is complex. The most explicit and sustained attacks on Jews come from far-right, Christian, and white nationalist groups, who are not the main target of the accusations of antisemitism based on opposition to Israel’s policies. And although antisemitism has increased in America, that has been in part a reaction to rising public disgust with brutal actions the Israeli government takes in the name of the Jewish people. In any case, the amount of that increase is dwarfed by a virtual tsunami of warrantless accusations of antisemitism.

This exaggerated account of contemporary Jew hatred was the basis for legislation in states across America to punish boycotters of Israel and neutralize the BDS movement. In line with guidance from the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Israeli ambassador Dermer’s exhortation to treat BDS as antisemitic and suppress rather than argue with its supporters, Israel Lobby organizations pressed Congress and state legislatures to pass laws against BDS.

In 2019, the Center for Public Integrity in its report *Copy, Paste, Legislate* documented a pattern across the country of state legislatures passing bills that were identical to one another, the result of the influence of special-interest lobbies that prepared the texts of the bills. Among the most prominent of this kind of “copycat legislation” were anti-BDS laws. Along with evangelical

Christian advocacy groups, the Jewish Federations of North America, the Israeli-American Coalition for Action, and StandWithUs were particularly active in this effort. Following Dermer's guidance, Peggy Shapiro, then– executive director of the Midwest chapter of StandWithUs (and subsequently executive director of the Center for Combating Antisemitism) labeled BDS “an anti-Semitic movement,” adding that “it’s important for governors and legislatures to speak up and say this is not something our states will invest in.”

Between the end of 2015 and the middle of 2025, thirty-five states passed anti-BDS legislation. These laws and orders forbid state contracts with companies unless they have certified that they did not engage or would not engage in a boycott of Israel; create a blacklist of companies and other entities known to engage in a boycott of Israel; and/or ban from bidding on state contracts companies not certified as not boycotting Israel. The governors in four other states issued executive orders of this kind. The simultaneity of these actions and the fact that the language used is strikingly similar and often identical across dozens of states reflect the extent to which coordinated efforts by Israel Lobby organizations were behind the wave of legislation.

The Lobby's overall strategy to proscribe BDS rather than defend Israeli policies was made in Jerusalem. But the decisions, in 2015 and 2016, to focus that effort on illegalizing BDS were made by Lobby activists. Fighting BDS on college campuses seemed a losing proposition. BDS found support among well-informed students and faculty, including among them a large number of Jews. A campaign against BDS based on accusations of antisemitism rather than substantive debate was bound to suffer regular defeats. Between 2005 and 2016, thirty college student governments passed resolutions calling for divestment from Israel. Pressure on lawmakers promised Israel advocates much better returns. State legislators were generally ill-informed about the Middle East, naturally sympathetic to those claiming to be combating antisemitism, and exquisitely sensitive to imbalances in the messaging received on different sides of obscure issues by mobilized constituents, lobbies, and donors.

It is unclear how much this legislation at the state level impeded BDS. Certainly, the movement did not grow as rapidly as it believed it would have, but

neither did it disappear. Indeed, its presence on American campuses became semi-institutionalized with its sponsorship of an annual Israel Apartheid Week.

As the genocide in Gaza continued from the fall of 2023 into 2024, students and faculty ramped up protests, focusing on shocking levels of Israeli violence against Palestinians. Neither Israel nor the Lobby could ignore intense and widespread demands for a ceasefire and an end to American support for the Israeli war effort. So was launched the Lobby's great attack on American higher education as riddled with antisemitism, a condition vaguely but persistently said to be linked to "wokeism," including twisted ideas about gender, systematically discriminatory programs of "diversity, inclusion, and equity," and prejudices against legacy applicants for admission.

Why, given the limited success of anti-BDS legislation at the state level and given the obvious problem of seeming to attack hallowed principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech did the Lobby move so aggressively against icons of American higher education? The answer is that it had no choice. Since Lobby activists could not and did not want to try to defend Israeli policies in ways convincing to most American students, their goal was not to win debates about Israel but to prevent public discussion about it. That meant treating mobilization critical of Israel as antisemitic and then using political influence over lawmakers and government agencies to illegalize, prosecute, and punish it. That mobilization was occurring on college campuses, and especially on the campuses of top-ranked institutions. Attacks on them became the central front in the Lobby's struggle to suppress critical discussion of Israel.

The assault on higher education began in late 2023, escalated in 2024, and morphed into something akin to an all-out war with Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025. But its origins must be sought in the plans and diligent efforts of Israel-firsters, who for years had been developing the legal and administrative frameworks and tactical experience necessary for government power to be used against critics of Israel.

Kenneth Marcus is the founder and director of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, funded in part by Miriam Adelson's Maccabee

Task Force and foundations controlled by Bernie Marcus, Jan Koum and Adam Milstein. According to his official biography posted on the center's website, Kenneth Marcus founded it in 2011 to "combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism in American higher education." From early on, he has been the standard-bearer for a distinctive approach to battling anti-Israel mobilization on college campuses. It centered on transforming the nondiscrimination provisions of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 from tools for expanding opportunities for underrepresented groups into weapons for punishing people, programs, and institutions accused of discriminating against or failing to protect Asians, white Gentiles, and especially Jews. In 2004, as an official in the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education in the George W. Bush administration, Marcus drafted new language to expand the range of Title VI's antidiscrimination clause. By extending Title VI protection to students affected by treatment of their "shared ancestry" and combining that with the Lobby's claim that Israel and Zionism had become central to Jewish identity, criticism of Israel or a "hostile environment" arising because of anti-Israel protests could be grounds for complaints of antisemitism warranting OCR intervention.

Between 2004 and 2013, antisemitism complaints were brought against Barnard; Rutgers; the University of California, Santa Cruz; the University of California, Irvine; the University of California, Berkeley; and Brooklyn College. They were filed by the Zionist Organization of America, a small, Adelson-funded, far-right Israel advocacy organization; AMCHA (Your People), funded by the Islamophobic MZ Foundation (named after its founder, Myron Zimmerman) and focused on suing colleges and universities in California for discrimination against Jews; and Kenneth Marcus himself. Each was firmly rejected by the OCR for lack of evidence and on the principle that comments about Israel or Israeli policies were protected speech and could not be treated as evidence of antisemitism.

In a startlingly candid article published in 2013, Marcus justified his practice of filing complaints and lawsuits against universities that he knew would fail on legal grounds. A flood of such accusations, even if found to be unwarranted or inadmissible, would, he argued, make crucial contributions to the struggle against criticism of Israel on college campuses. Key would be to include negative

comments about Israel as evidence of “ethnic disparagement” of Jews. By arguing that Jews deserve protections from “ethnic disparagement,” the door would be opened, eventually, for different federal officials to make different decisions. The intimidation factor was also important. Even failed complaints, Marcus observed, had changed the behavior of university administrators because of the “prospect of litigation” and their fear of “bad publicity.” Such actions frightened students, who would subsequently shrink from participating in anti-Israel protests because “getting caught up in a civil rights complaint is not a good way to build a resume or impress a future employer.” Finally, by framing the issue in legal terms, the merits of the arguments of Israel critics could be ignored. By treating harsh criticism of Israel as antisemitic discrimination and therefore illegal under the Civil Rights Act, Israel advocates would be freed from having to defend or even discuss Israeli policies.

In October 2017, President Trump nominated Marcus to lead OCR. Strong opposition to his nomination in the Senate was based on his record of hostility to affirmative action and fears that his hard-line opinions on Israel would lead him to “restrict the rights of students who are critics of the Jewish state.” In June 2018, citing strong support for Marcus from Hillel (the dominant Jewish campus organization) and other Israel advocacy groups, Republican leaders in the Senate succeeded in confirming his appointment by a vote of 50 to 46.

In August 2019, with Marcus now in charge of the agency that had rejected his complaints, his office sent a letter to the Duke–University of North Carolina Consortium for Middle East Studies threatening to cancel \$235,000 in Title VI funding. OCR accused the consortium of overemphasizing Middle Eastern culture and the “positive” aspects of Islam while paying too little attention to discrimination against “Christians, Jews, Baha’is, Yazidis [*sic*], Kurds, Druse, and others.” It also complained that too many of the program’s graduates were pursuing academic careers, that “ideological priorities” were being advanced, and that its programming was not clearly serving American national interests.

The letter’s origins are as bizarre as its contents. In March 2019, Ami Horowitz, a right-wing provocateur, attended a conference entitled “Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics, and Possibilities.” The conference was partially funded by the Duke–UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies. Horowitz

then distributed a heavily edited video of some of the proceedings that included images of a Palestinian rapper ironically portraying the absurdity of treating criticism of Israel as antisemitic.

Stripping away its context, Horowitz forwarded this “evidence” of antisemitism to Republican congressman George Holding of North Carolina. Holding then sent a letter to Education Secretary Betsy DeVos asserting that “according to first-hand accounts, the conference had a radical anti-Israeli bias,” that a “brazenly anti-Semitic song” had been sung, and that “several of the conference’s speakers are actively involved in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.” DeVos then launched an investigation into the consortium’s use of funds, leading to the letter from Marcus’s office accusing Duke and the University of North Carolina of malfeasance. The schools rebutted the complaint in detail as either trivial or wrong. In December, as part of a “resolution agreement,” the OCR agreed to drop its demands, while the schools agreed to upgrade their training to include a focus on antisemitic harassment even as they admitted no wrongdoing.

As per Marcus’s strategy, when filing unsustainable complaints as a private person, the point was not to win but to exert a chilling effect on all Middle East programming that enjoyed or aspired to gain Title VI support. But Marcus also believed that under the right political conditions such complaints would be successful. In that respect, the 2019 letter to the Duke–UNC consortium was a trial run, a harbinger of the kind of full-barreled campaign to suppress programs and scholarship in American universities seen as anti-Israel that could be undertaken by a presidential administration committed to making that a priority.

That is precisely what unfolded in 2025 when the second Trump administration, building on precedents set during the Biden administration, launched its assault on American universities under the banner of combating rampant antisemitism expressed by anti-Israel protests. Israel’s Lobby and the Republican Party, well into its campaign to bring Donald Trump back to the White House, found common cause in the Gaza War protests that had spread across America in the winter and spring of 2024. Each presented “woke” ideology, transgender rights, neo-Marxism, “critical race theory,” and diversity,

equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs as threats to Jews and other “unprotected” groups. Late in 2024, Tikvah commentators were casting the October 7 attack and Israel’s response as showing that systematic attacks on the West and Western values expressed through critical Marxism, radical feminism, the transgender ideology, and the entire fabric of DEI would eventually turn against Jews and Judaism. After all, this was true of anti-Western, illiberal ideologies of the past, including fascism, Nazism, and communism. Therefore, they suggested, it will be true of their successors, from radical Islam to today’s radical “woke” left.

The anti-Israel turmoil on college campuses offered pro-Israel conservatives a wedge issue against Democrats in particular by separating ardently pro-Israel wealthy donors from the Democratic Party’s younger and progressive base. This could be accomplished by using the same playbook that had worked in Trump’s first term: smearing the demonstrations, protests, and unrest associated with Black Lives Matter and the police killing of George Floyd as the work of radical leftists and violent anarchists. It meant treating protests against Israel as a scandalous wave of Jew hatred stemming from the same wokeness, reverse discrimination, and radical leftism that was blamed for the BLM-supporting demonstrations and urban unrest associated with them.

Christopher Rufo is a right-wing pundit based at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a group heavily funded and formerly chaired by Paul Singer. Rufo invented the strategy of weaponizing “critical race theory.” Less than one week after October 7, and before the wave of student protests reached anything like its crescendo, he called for using demonstrations against Israel to amplify attacks on the progressives and the academy:

Conservatives need to create a strong association between Hamas, BLM, DSA [Democratic Socialists of America], and academic “decolonization” in the public mind. Connect the dots, then attack, delegitimize, and discredit. Make the center-left disavow them. Make them political untouchables.

In September 2024, candidate Trump told a thousand Republican Jewish donors in Las Vegas that “colleges will and must end the antisemitic propaganda

or they will lose their accreditation and federal support.”

Facing an unprecedented threat to Israel’s standing in American public opinion, Lobby activists helped form the vanguard of this effort. At elite institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania, MIT, Columbia, and Harvard, megadonors with long-standing ties to different arms of Israel’s Lobby, including members of their boards of trustees, joined forces with a small number of well-funded student activists and hard-line Zionist faculty members. They demanded that their universities officially adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism so that criticism of Israel as a settler colonial or apartheid state along with common slogans of support for Palestinians could be treated as antisemitic hate speech.

The Lobby’s vilification of University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer and Harvard University professor Stephen Walt after their publications in 2006 and 2007 detailing the Lobby’s influence over American foreign policy—along with the damage inflicted on academics critical of Israel such as Steven Salaita, Joseph Massad, and Norman Finkelstein—shows that Lobby attacks on critics and attempts to censor scholarship on Israel are not new. Nevertheless, the intensity and ruthlessness of campaigns launched during the Gaza War, directed toward professors as a class and at presidents of the country’s premier institutions, were unprecedented.

Anonymously funded doxing trucks, equipped with loudspeakers and video screens, descended on the campuses to deliver nonstop vilification of specific faculty members and administrators as vicious antisemites. Lawsuits and complaints to Congress used the atmosphere of intense criticism of Israel and the discomfort this caused some Jews on campus as evidence of a “hostile environment” and as the basis for accusations of institutionalized antisemitism in K–12 schools as well as in higher education. As one strategist put it, such “lawfare” campaigns were intended “to make it too expensive for the boards and school systems to allow feral students and professors running amok.” While ignoring the harassment and violence of Israel-supporting thugs and provocateurs directed against peaceful protesters and speakers, the antisemitism vigilantes behind these denunciations called for police to forcibly break up

protest encampments and for academic discipline, legal prosecution, and deportations to be used against leaders of the protests.

In 2018, Columbia University commemorated the fifty-year anniversary of the 1968 anti-Vietnam War protests that resulted in students occupying five buildings and shutting down the campus. Lee Bollinger, Columbia's president, described the episode as "part of the identity of Columbia." As a result of Lobby and federal government pressure, however, the university treated a peaceful student encampment protesting Israel's actions in Gaza and a demonstration inside the library as a "disruption" prompting coercive intervention and severe punishments. The police were called in to forcibly disperse the encampment; one hundred students were arrested, scores were expelled, and others had their degrees taken away.

One leader of the Columbia protests, Mahmoud Khalil, was targeted by Betar USA, a far-right Zionist group, and Miriam Adelson's Maccabee Task Force. Khalil was a Palestinian green card holder married to an American citizen. His name was included on a list of hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists that they wanted deported. Betar claimed to have provided the list to high-level government officials, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Six weeks after Betar said they had turned his name over to the government, Khalil was detained by ICE, threatened with deportation, and incarcerated at an ICE facility in Louisiana for more than three months, during which time he missed the birth of his first child.

The moral panic over antisemitism fostered by the Lobby affected the entire American educational system, not just colleges and universities. It turned school districts across the country into battlegrounds over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In California, the Lobby scored mightily, pushing the legislature to unanimously pass a bill, signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom, that imposed the IHRA categories of antisemitic speech on all teachers. As a result, any complaints by a parent, politician, or outside advocacy group that a textbook, assignment, poster, or class presentation was "antisemitic" by IHRA standards could result in an investigation and disciplinary action.

This same moral panic encouraged Republican politicians in Congress to launch their own antisemitism witch hunt. In April 2024, six different House committees used McCarthy-style tactics to publicly humiliate and force from office the presidents of leading American academic institutions. While portraying the hearings as Congress's effort to "respond to the crisis head on" by coming to the defense of Jewish Americans, the real purpose of the campaign was to attack and punish bastions of liberal power and prestige by treating anti-Zionist and anti-Israel protests as antisemitic and then blaming them explicitly on "radical," "woke," DEI-obsessed, and overfunded colleges and universities.

In December of that year the *U.S. House of Representatives Staff Report on Antisemitism* appeared, issued "in coordination with" Speaker Mike Johnson, majority leader Steve Scalise, majority whip Tom Emmer, Republican Conference chairwoman Elise Stefanik, and Republican Conference vice-chairman Blake Moore. It accused the "so-called university leaders" of the most prestigious universities in America of fostering environments filled with antisemitism and expressed outrage at the failure of various colleges and universities to suspend or expel more students involved in anti-Israel activities, which it treated as essentially identical to antisemitism. Indeed, the report never indicated what it meant by "antisemitism," relying instead on ADL accounts of the antisemitic nature of student protests. However, it did suggest that failure of an academic research institution to condemn Hamas's attack on October 7 could itself be considered evidence of "turning a blind eye to antisemitic discrimination."

While condemning the double standards it said were applied to Jewish students, the report not once mentioned threats and violence by pro-Israel activists or the tens of thousands of public and private threats directed at students, faculty, and administrators for expressing support of Palestinians or concern for destruction and death in Gaza. Nor did it mention how many of the demonstrators labeled as antisemitic were themselves Jewish. Without claiming they were experts on complex Middle Eastern realities or on distinguishing between analysis and propaganda, the authors of the report also recommended that all National Institutes of Health-funded institutions establish task forces comprising "external experts... including on antisemitism" but excluding

university administrators to “review their curriculums for bias, discrimination, indoctrination, etc. to ensure that students are not being subjected to politicized or biased educations.”

The report’s most insistent recommendation was to use all tools of the federal government to strip funding from universities deemed insufficiently committed to fighting antisemitism or unwilling to enforce government speech codes and rules for expressing dissent. In effect, only by joining the witch hunt could institutions hope to retain their funding. That would mean accepting the report’s judgment that anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiment was antisemitic, that the explosions of protests across the country were not responses to Israeli policies but were inspired by the Hamas attack, that Jews were the only group on college campuses threatened enough to deserve intensive public concern, and that prestigious academic institutions should trade their independence for government-ordered purges, programming, and codes of discipline.

At congressional committee hearings, the presidents of leading universities were unwilling to go toe-to-toe with fiery, self-promoting members of Congress. To do so, they would have had to challenge the premises of the investigation that antisemitism was rampant on college campuses, that chants against Zionism or for “Free Palestine” were genocidal, that slogans about Israel as an apartheid state were antisemitic, or that Israel supporters on campus deserved guarantees that they would not encounter the expression of political opinions that made them feel uncomfortable. Instead, seeking to avoid open conflict with members of the committee, Presidents Liz Magill of the University of Pennsylvania, Claudine Gay of Harvard, and Minouche Shafik of Columbia tried to dodge and weave in their testimony and were eaten alive. Humiliated in the political theater created for that purpose and faced with brutal attacks from Israel Lobby-affiliated donors, alumni, trustees, and some students and faculty, each president eventually resigned.

With this success, Republican politicians dramatically escalated government participation in the Lobby’s antisemitism offensive. In doing so, they could cite measures supported by Democratic colleagues as well as Biden administration

policies consistent with their efforts, even while condemning them as inadequate. On November 2, 2023, the House passed a resolution by a vote of 396 to 23 that “condemns the support of Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations at institutions of higher education, which may lead to the creation of a hostile environment for Jewish students, faculty, and staff and urges the Secretary of Education to direct the Office of Civil Rights to investigate and, where appropriate, take action immediately.”

In December 2023, a year before the release of the House report, the Biden administration’s Education Department advised universities that “the phrase ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’ likely create[s] a hostile environment for Jewish students which undermines their equal opportunity to an education, thus requiring investigations and mitigation efforts.” It went on to announce investigations into Cornell University, the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, Cooper Union, Lafayette College, and Wellesley College. The complaints focused on accusations these institutions had allowed protests against Israeli actions in Gaza, including demonstrations that blocked access to buildings and social media posts using the phrase “From the river to the sea,” to create illegally hostile and discriminatory environments for Jews. Many of the specifics of these complaints were later found by courts or the investigators to be baseless or as contradicting rights to freedom of speech. Indeed, First Amendment experts, the ACLU, the academic freedom organization FIRE, and the courts raised concerns that such OCR investigations pressured colleges to suppress precisely the kind of political speech the First Amendment was designed to protect.

The House Republican leadership’s *Report on Antisemitism* condemned the “Biden-Harris administration” for having “failed to hold universities accountable for Title VI violations” in the midst of “a historic explosion of virulent antisemitism.” Complaining that President Trump’s December 2019 executive order titled “Combating Antisemitism” had not been aggressively enforced, the authors hoped for a new administration that would treat targeted universities as “unfit stewards of taxpayer dollars.”

Their hopes were realized in January 2025 when newly inaugurated President Trump intensified suppression of anti-Israel mobilization, embracing the

Lobby's campaign as a major focus of the war on "woke" progressivism. The dream that Marcus and other Israel Lobbyist strategists had worked many years to realize came true: the federal government had decided to treat most criticism of Israel as antisemitism, thereby adopting the Lobby's overall strategy of delegitimizing critics of Israel and silencing discussion rather than making any effort to explain or defend Israeli policies. That is precisely how Leo Terrell described the mission of the Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism that President Trump appointed him to lead: "The Task Force's mandate is to bring the full force of the federal government to bear in our effort to eradicate Anti-Semitism, particularly in schools."

The task force included representatives from the Departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, the Treasury, and Homeland Security. Though Terrell is its official head, the driving forces behind it were identified as Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and "other key White House officials involved in domestic policy." Miller, an advocate for extreme measures to achieve mass deportations, was designated as responsible for all domestic policy in the second Trump administration. Ominously, he referred to peaceful demonstrations against ICE raids in Los Angeles in 2025 as an "insurrection." The administration used the antisemitism witch hunt as an integral part of its wider war against DEI and the liberal agendas of privileged progressive elites. The scale of its campaign to delegitimize and defund independent scholarly and scientific work on Middle East affairs was unprecedented. In just the first nine months of 2025, the government launched more than sixty antisemitism-focused Title VI investigations of universities and colleges. These were advertised and widely viewed as the administration's response to demonstrations and 121 campus encampments protesting Israeli brutality in Gaza and American support for Israel that had occurred from late 2023 to summer 2024.

Without due process, systematic investigation, or guarantees they would avoid additional demands and penalties, the administration clawed back funding from the nation's most prestigious research universities, including Columbia, Harvard, Cornell, MIT, Northwestern, UCLA, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania. In the first four months of 2025, the administration cut approximately \$11 billion from institutions of higher education.

Some universities, notably Harvard, challenged the government in court, but even Harvard joined most other university administrators by seeking settlement agreements that would restore at least some funding at the cost of acquiescing to the administration's demands and opening themselves up to further, if not unending, scrutiny and discipline. These agreements typically included large payments to the federal government and university commitments to closely monitor incidents and atmospherics on campus for evidence of antisemitism and enhance programming focused on Israel and Jewish studies.

In addition to the pressures they were under from the federal government, the readiness of administrators to defy the outrage of faculty and students by complying with witch hunt demands appears also to have been due to the demands of ultra-wealthy donors to their universities, most of whom had close connections to Israel's Lobby. Many of these made their threats to universities public. Among them were Bill Ackman, the billionaire CEO of Pershing Square Capital Management, who called for the public blacklisting of protesting Harvard students and demanded resignations at MIT, accusing it of failing to combat antisemitism. Kenneth Griffin, billionaire founder of Citadel, announced he was ceasing his donations to Harvard in response to what he considered the school's inadequate response to antisemitism. Marc Rowan, CEO of Apollo Global Management, chair of the board of advisers of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, and chair of the board of the UJA-Federation of New York, called for the resignations of the president of Penn and the chairman of its board of trustees and urged all alumni to cease their contributions in light of the university's response to the post-October 7 protests. Penn also faced actions by Ross Stevens, who withdrew a \$100 million contribution; Jon Huntsman, who declared he and his family would no longer donate to Penn; David Magerman, who shifted his donations to Israeli universities; and Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, who threatened to end his support.

Columbia University lost major contributions from Leon Cooperman, a billionaire hedge fund manager who described student protesters as "fucking

crazy.” Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, announced he would stop supporting Columbia, criticizing it for permitting pro-Palestinian demonstrations that included rhetoric he considered antisemitic and made Jewish students feel unsafe. Denouncing Columbia for the “virulent hate” he said pervaded its campus, he accused professors there of “trying to tell our young people what they should think” instead of “teaching how to think.”

Researchers and physicians across the country decried drastic and dangerous cuts to scientific and medical research resulting from the administration clawbacks. But for Israel’s Lobby and many of its ultra-wealthy donors, the government’s assault on the universities proved a major success. Universities spent the spring and summer of 2024 devising rules, restrictions, and requirements to discourage campus demonstrations and making it difficult or impossible to mount spontaneous events or use facilities for extracurricular meetings, teach-ins, or speakers. They banned anti-occupation and Palestinian solidarity organizations, tightened disciplinary procedures, and sharply decreased or even effectively banned extracurricular programming focused on the Middle East even as Israeli violence against Palestinians in Gaza was increasingly seen to have reached genocidal dimensions. In spring 2024, at least fifty encampments on American college campuses were forcibly removed, with more than three thousand pro-Palestinian demonstrators arrested or detained on seventy-three campuses.

Despite the unprecedented steps by university administrators to appease pressures from the Lobby and from the government, these pressures not only continued but intensified once Trump resumed the presidency in January 2025. High-profile actions by ICE to arrest and deport foreign students identified as leaders of anti-Israel protests were taken against the background of widespread revocations of student visas. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told Congress in May 2025 that “we’re going to continue to revoke the visas of people who are here as guests and are disrupting our higher education facilities.” Applications for new student visas were to be scrutinized to weed out those “who advocate for, aid, or support designated foreign terrorists and other threats to national security; or who perpetrate unlawful anti-Semitic harassment or violence.” By August, the US State Department had revoked six thousand student visas.

In the fall of 2025, a letter from the federal government to nine universities offered privileges and protection against funding cuts in return for a list of extraordinary commitments described as a “compact.” These included disbanding groups or departments hostile to conservative ideas, limiting international student admissions, restricting political speech by university employees, and implementing specific gender, bathroom, recruitment, and tuition policies. Institutions unwilling to make these commitments would be “free to develop models and values other than those” in the compact but would have “to forgo federal benefits.” Much of the letter’s wording was identical to a proposal developed and promoted by Marc Rowan, who had led the antisemitism charge against the leadership of the University of Pennsylvania. The University of Pennsylvania was one of the nine institutions that received the letter. The compact signaled the scope of the Trump administration’s ambition to dominate civil society, and its McCarthyist tactics showed how far it was willing to go to achieve that domination.

In September 2025, the government demanded information from the University of California, Berkeley, on 160 students and faculty in connection with its investigation of accusations of antisemitic behavior. Berkeley’s administrators complied even though the government refused to supply the accusers’ names and even though it was known that some accusations were made anonymously and could be assumed to have come from pro-Israel activists. Meanwhile, Israel Lobby organizations actively encouraged the filing of complaints about professors, students, incidents, speech, and postings a campus supporter might consider antisemitic, providing easy-to-use forms for that purpose. Canary Mission is reportedly used by ICE to help identify targets for deportation. Groups operating similar campaigns include Betar and the Shirion Collective, which describes itself as a “surveillance network” and offers monetary rewards for identities of participants in anti-Israel demonstrations.

Additional features of the antisemitism witch hunt included floods of phone calls, text messages, emails, and social media threats of violence and death by pro-Israel vigilantes against those identified on campuses as pro-Palestine supporters or Israel critics, including Jews. Adjunct faculty were particularly vulnerable to firings or refusals to renew contracts, but tenured professors were also dismissed

for opinions considered antisemitic. Few such actions were reported to have been taken against faculty expressing anti-Palestinian or Islamophobic views.

While the most visible impact of the campaign to demonize critics of Israel and supporters of Palestinian rights has been on campuses, academia is not the only domain in American life where antisemitism “witch finders” have imposed limits on freedom of speech. After pro-Israel groups charged that discussion of Israel and Palestine increased antisemitism among high school students, the California legislature ended funding for what had been required ethnic studies courses in high schools. In 2025, the only textbook San Francisco teachers were allowed to use omits any discussion of Israel and Palestine. Use of any supplemental material required supervisor approval.

Censorship is also rife in the media. The *New York Times*, for example, typically considered an exemplar of courageous and unbiased reporting, instructed its journalists covering the Gaza War to avoid using the terms “refugee camps” and “occupied territory,” to “restrict the use of the terms *genocide* and *ethnic cleansing*,” and to not use the word *Palestine* “except in very rare cases.” While reporting on virtually unconstrained Israeli attacks on civilians and the leveling of entire neighborhoods, the *New York Times* advised journalists to “think hard” before using “words like ‘slaughter,’ ‘massacre,’ and ‘carnage,’” though such terms were regularly used to describe the attack by Palestinians on Israelis on October 7, 2023. More insidiously, *Times* correspondents have been documented using the passive voice to describe Palestinian casualties, leaving open who or what killed or injured them, while using the active voice to report Israeli casualties, including identification of the perpetrators and the means used to kill and maim them.

Despite research and testimony by hundreds of journalists that document a strong pro-Israel, anti-Palestinian bias in the American news media, well-orchestrated campaigns by Lobby groups such as CAMERA, the Zionist Organization of America, and Canary Mission flood newsrooms with emails, letters, and text messages complaining of unfavorable coverage of Israel by journalists or of sympathetic coverage of Palestinians. In Canada, one such

group, HonestReporting, boasted of being responsible for fifty thousand such complaints in the eight weeks following October 7, 2023, and for forcing the firing or reassignment of journalists by CNN, the *New York Times*, AP, Reuters, and other major outlets.

In the fall of 2025, YouTube (owned by Google) removed three respected Palestinian sites from its platform and wiped their archives, including hundreds of videos documenting Israeli human rights violations. It said it did so after the Trump administration sanctioned the organizations.

Blacklisting of participants in anti-Israel events has reportedly become commonplace at major US law firms. Even an applicant's casual association with such activities can trigger rejection by one of the biggest firms, Sullivan & Cromwell. A leader of that firm with close ties to Israel, Joseph Shenker, organized a November 2023 letter signed by 250 of America's top law firms and sent to the deans of the nation's law schools. The letter condemned Gaza-related mobilizations at law schools as including antisemitic harassment and warned that "as employers who recruit from each of your law schools, we look to you to ensure your students who hope to join our firms... have zero tolerance... for any form of discrimination or harassment, much less the kind that has been taking place on some law school campuses."

Antisemitism vigilantes, along with Israeli influence operations, have attacked, threatened, and punished critics of Israel, spread disinformation, suppressed or controlled speech, and smeared Palestinians. The documentary film *Israelism* highlighted distortions in the educational programs about Israel offered by Jewish schools. When three Jewish organizations organized a screening of the film in the Northbrook, Illinois, public library, the library director decided to cancel its screening after receiving eight thousand emails and hundreds of phone calls demanding he do so, the result of campaigns by groups such as Mothers Against College Antisemitism. Announcements of screenings of the film on campuses triggered similar campaigns. University administrators across the country received tens of thousands of emails demanding they prevent its showing. When Penn administrators ordered the screening's cancellation, the

Jewish students who organized the event managed to show the film anyway and were threatened with disciplinary action. Similar dramas in response to similar campaigns against the film's showing played out at Yale and Hunter College.

Though seldom reported in the national media, militant and organized Israel advocates regularly threatened critics of Israel with telephone calls, text messages, social media posts, and emails. Their tactics also included swatting reports to trigger law enforcement or administrative investigations of their targets and threats to disrupt events featuring discussion of Israel's war in Gaza and its consequences. In July 2024, the newsletter of the Diversity, Respect, Equity, and Inclusion unit of Lankenau Medical Center near Philadelphia described the suffering of Palestinian patients and the struggles of doctors in Gaza, including references to the Israeli military as an "occupying army," the damage it did to Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, and an account of staff there being forced to strip to their underwear. Some Lankenau staff members reacted strongly to the article's publication as antisemitic because it failed to provide sufficient context for why Israel had bombed the hospital and treated it as a military target.

Lankenau's leadership, which was also sensitive to members of the hospital's staff with genuine concerns about the health crisis in Gaza for Palestinians, responded with profuse apologies for allowing the article to be published, while also moving to educate its leadership and managers about Israel, Zionism, and antisemitism. Announcement of its programming then led the ADL to threaten to arrange demonstrations in front of the hospital and accuse it of antisemitism if they did not replace their planned programming with the ADL's own version of how to understand antisemitism, Israel, Zionism, and the Palestinian issue. Lankenau then canceled its own planned programming and met instead with ADL representatives, whose presentation to Lankenau administrators was experienced as overwrought and inappropriate but necessary to endure.

Lobby activists have hunted for and sought to cancel antisemitic "witches" in every corner of public life in America. Accuser anonymity, the treatment of sympathy with Palestinians differently from attachment or solidarity with Israel or with any other cause, prioritization of the psychic comfort of Israel advocates over freedom of expression, and treatment of negative opinions about Israel as bigotry rather than politics are key tactics. In the entertainment industry,

solidarity with Palestinians during the Gaza War was particularly evident at the worker level. By demanding that artists “speak out forcefully against Hamas... as Israel takes the necessary steps to defend its citizens” and by using layoffs and threats of layoffs to punish those who expressed their own views, corporate executives created a climate of fear that suppressed criticism of Israel without ever justifying their actions as anything but combating antisemitism.

A-list celebrities are rarely targeted publicly, though Susan Sarandon was dropped by the agency representing her after she spoke at a rally in support of Palestinians. Actress Melissa Barrera was dropped from the cast of an upcoming *Scream* sequel as punishment for sharing a social media post accusing Israel of “genocide and ethnic cleansing.” Blacklists are circulated based on witch-finder surveillance of social media to send the message that actors or entertainers who speak out against Israel or in support of Palestinians will not find work.

A deeper dive into the domain of health and medicine, a sphere that in principle should be expected to be thoroughly apolitical, shows with more granularity how ruthless and contrary to principles of free expression is the Lobby’s campaign to drive criticism of Israel from the public sphere.

In its doxing campaign against those it accuses of Jew hatred, Canary Mission attacked some four hundred doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals. In December 2024, StandWithUs reported on a survey of 645 Jewish health care professionals it had conducted. The organization noted that “nearly 40% of Jewish medical professionals report exposure to antisemitism,” a result that “clearly points to an urgent need to fight antisemitism in medicine.” But the report’s findings were based on “snowball sampling,” meaning the investigators interviewed not a random sample of Jewish medical professionals but only those identified by individuals who had already been interviewed. Since the questionnaire was initially sent to groups such as the Jewish Orthodox Women’s Medical Association, the OrthoDocs discussion group (a Facebook group of Jewishly observant physicians and medical students), and “WhatsApp groups of Jewish identifying individuals collated by people known to the study team,” what is surprising is that fewer than 40 percent of respondents reported ever witnessing or experiencing something they could define as antisemitism.

Still, these alarms about antisemitism in hospitals, clinics, and medical schools had dire consequences for health care personnel. Hesen Jabr was a labor and delivery nurse at NYU's Langone hospital for a decade. In a speech in May 2024 to accept an award she was receiving for compassionate care, Jabr, a Palestinian American, referred to the suffering of mothers in Gaza who had lost children, both born and unborn. "Even though," she continued, "I can't hold their hands and comfort them as they grieve their unborn children and the children they have lost during this genocide, I hope to keep making them proud as I keep representing them here at NYU." On the first day of work following the award ceremony, Jabr was fired for "bringing politics into the workplace."

In the summer of 2025, Claire Raizen, a medical social worker at Mount Sinai Hospital, who is a descendant of Holocaust survivors, put a postcard on her desk in an area restricted to employees that read "Gaza Must Live." Tokens of support for Israeli hostages, pride flags, and other expressions of solidarity with causes dear to the hearts of Mount Sinai employees were a standard feature of the work environment. Nevertheless, following an anonymous complaint from someone made uncomfortable by the postcard, Raizen was ordered to remove it. She refused and was fired.

One legal aid organization reported a 50 percent increase in one year in requests for assistance by employees in connection with persecution for expressing views in support of Palestine. Few of the many workers and professionals who have been punished for expressing criticism of Israel or solidarity with Palestinians attract as much media attention as did the firings of Jabr and Raizen. But their stories, small yet personally painful, are worth telling.

Traditionally, many of the faculty and staff of the University of California, San Francisco, medical school are politically active and commonly advertise their attachment to different causes by wearing pins or other insignia. After "several colleagues and patients" complained that pro-Palestinian pins, watermelon badges (with the colors of the Palestinian flag), and Palestinian keffiyeh scarfs often worn by Palestinians made them feel "unsafe," the administration took disciplinary action. When threatened with suspension or termination if they did not stop wearing Palestinian insignia, most staff members complied. Bridget Rochios, a nurse practitioner and midwife, refused and was placed on

administrative leave for “insubordination.” She was one of nine staff members at UCSF who told a reporter about “their experiences of censorship and punishment after speaking out about human rights for Palestinians.” One physician, Rupa Marya, had her right to practice medicine suspended after pro-Israel politicians in the California State Senate criticized her for describing Zionism’s negative impacts on Palestinian health care.

According to Dan Siegel, a lawyer with thirty years of experience representing faculty and staff within the University of California system, there had never been “such a widespread effort to punish employees for speaking out about a specific issue.” Under the guise of claiming to feel “uncomfortable as a Jew,” Siegel (who himself was Jewish) said that “supporters of the Israeli government” were engaged in a “cynical and manipulative effort to limit debate.”

An emergency room doctor in an Upper East Side Manhattan hospital was fired for a posting about the Hamas attack that “Zionist settlers” were “getting a taste of their own medicine.” At SCA Health, a surgical center in La Jolla, California, a registered nurse, Lauren Gaw, was fired for putting Palestine-supporting stickers on her water bottle. According to a federal lawsuit she filed, Gaw alleged that SCA Health had “allowed other employees to express support for Israel’s conduct in the war in Gaza, and even to verbally harass [her].”

At the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, staff were banned, beginning in the fall of 2023, from using facilities or convening any events to discuss the Gaza War or anything pertaining to Israel and Palestine. J. Larry Jameson was at the time the executive vice president for the health system and dean of the School of Medicine. Instructively, Jameson was tapped in December 2024 to serve as interim president of Penn following Liz Magill’s forced exit from that position. In March 2025, he was officially named president of the University of Pennsylvania.

The leadership of the 190,000-member American Psychological Association has been repeatedly and vehemently attacked by ADL witch hunters in the guise of demanding that the APA take action against those expressing what it saw as antisemitic and “extremist” political views. The ADL, its supporters within the APA, and the Academic Engagement Network (the ADL’s partner in efforts to impose the IHRA formula on academic associations) demanded imposition of

their own political views, which were themselves widely seen as extreme. In addition to special protection for those with “Zionist beliefs,” the ADL, billing itself as the “world’s largest anti-hate organization,” demanded acceptance of its political catechism that efforts to boycott Israel are intrinsically antisemitic, that Israel is not committing genocide, that it is a democracy, that it is not an apartheid state, and that it is the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people as the price for escaping accusations of antisemitism.

These attacks are best understood as a kind of political swatting. By wildly exaggerating the significance and representativeness of a truly antisemitic social media post or offhand remark, and by priming politicians committed to the antisemitism witch hunt, Lobby vigilantes, both inside and outside the APA, made false accusations that triggered damaging and time-consuming investigative and enforcement measures.

A letter from one of the Lobby’s strongest supporters in Congress, Ritchie Torres of New York, accused the APA of having “a persistent and pernicious pattern of antisemitism within [its] ranks.” Labeling reports of Israel activists within the association as those of “whistleblowers,” Torres cited no acts of prejudice or hostility toward Jews qua Jews. Rather, he treated language critical of Israel and Israeli policies in statements issued by some APA groups, such as descriptions of Israel as an apartheid state or as committing genocide, as evidence of antisemitism. He also mentioned as evidence of a “hostile environment” for Jews in the APA that a smiling African American man wearing a black-and-white keffiyeh appeared in an advertisement for the association’s annual convention.

In December 2025, the House of Representatives Education and Workforce Committee announced an investigation of the APA. Citing the same sources treated by the ADL and Congressman Ritchie Torres as “whistleblowers,” the committee declared it was “gravely concerned about antisemitism at the APA,” demanding all documents and communications in the APA’s possession since October 7, 2023, “referring or relating to ‘antisemitism,’ ‘Jews,’ ‘Judaism,’ ‘Israel,’ ‘Israeli,’ ‘Palestine,’ or ‘Palestinian.’”

Just because American leaders are elected does not mean that what they do is supported by the American people. Similarly, what political leaders say about why they act and what may really be motivating them are not the same.

In November 2024, pollsters found what had been true for many years was still true: a majority of Americans favored a ban on assault weapons that Congress has repeatedly refused to pass. In 2025, 74 percent of Americans favored gun laws requiring firearms to be locked up when not in use. In that same year, only one state, Massachusetts, had such a law. There is little mystery about why this is so. The National Rifle Association (NRA) effectively imposes its opposition to such laws by punishing politicians who defy its agenda. That is the reality, though rarely do politicians voting against gun laws defend themselves by blaming the NRA for making them do what they did not want to do.

According to *Forbes*, the net worth of Jared Kushner and his wife, Ivanka Trump, increased to \$1.1 billion in 2025. From 2024 to 2025, the net worth of Donald and Melania Trump jumped from \$4.3 to \$7.3 billion. The combined net worth of Eric, Donald Jr., and Barron Trump was \$1.4 billion. There were many reasons for Trump's victories in 2016 and 2024, but public demand that the Trumps become fabulously rich was not one of them. The vast increase in the family's wealth is not an accident. The Trumps have used their political power creatively and energetically to make that happen. But they do not ever say that is why they are in politics or why the president makes decisions. As with gun control, when partisan or private interests are the dominant factors producing political outcomes, those responsible will seldom acknowledge that fact.

The same is true for US policy toward Israel and the embrace by federal and state governments of the Lobby's antisemitism witch hunt. Lobby leaders, allied politicians, and government officials often speak in apocalyptic language about an "explosion of antisemitism" and describe our universities, hospitals, and professional associations as seething cauldrons of Jew hatred. Neither universities nor "the Left," including those protesting against Israeli policies, are entirely free of antisemitism, but the notions that antisemitism is "rampant," or "sky-rocketing," since October 2023, and that it is to be measured by the amount and intensity of criticism leveled at Israel have become assumed truths

for many American Jews—beliefs unremittingly expressed by establishment Jewish leaders and in the newspapers of metropolitan Jewish Federations. When it is not driven by paranoia, such rhetoric, saturated with denunciations of leftist radicals, neo-Marxists, and Communists, conceals agendas driven by narrow and radical, political interests, opportunities to humiliate opponents and score points in the broader culture war, and donations from well-heeled Israeli Lobby-connected contributors.

The intensely partisan nature of the Republican leadership's campaign against antisemitism is obvious from the complete absence in its staff's summary report and in the hundreds of pages of documents and analysis that accompanied it of any concern for or even mention of the substantially more potent threat of antisemitism on the right side of the political spectrum. This, despite violent attacks on Jews by right-wing antisemites, such as the Tree of Life synagogue massacre; chants by white supremacists and Christian nationalists that "Jews shall not replace us"; shirts at the January 6 Capitol riot referring to "Camp Auschwitz" and "Six Million Wasn't Enough"; and the use by Trump-supporting groups of accusations that Jews are committed to "white genocide." In street demonstrations and social media, neo-Nazis, right-wing influencers, and Republican Party activists express Jew hatred in forms far more explicit and far less in need of exegesis and elastic definitions to classify them as antisemitic than anything House Republicans found among left-wing college students or faculty. In November 2025, the presence of rabid antisemitism within bastions of the conservative movement became undeniable after Kevin Roberts, the head of the right-wing Heritage Foundation, defended Tucker Carlson's sympathetic interview with Nick Fuentes, a notorious and proud antisemite. Senator Ted Cruz reacted by condemning Roberts and admitting that the Republican campaign against left-wing antisemitism had ignored its prominence on the Right.

There could hardly have been more spectacular confirmation of the disingenuousness of the Trump administration's campaign to impose antisemitism speech codes on college campuses than Vice President J. D. Vance's February 2025 speech in Munich in which he excoriated European governments for laws restricting "hateful content." The vice president told European leaders

that Swedish, German, and British laws restricting speech that made some groups (including Jews) uncomfortable were a greater threat to European democracy than Russian aggression. Following Elon Musk's endorsement of the Nazi-adjacent AFD Party in Germany, Vance's comments were widely understood as a demand that Germany rescind laws banning slogans used by the AFD that celebrated the Nazi era.

Politics, including democratic politics, is never what it says it is. Ruthless pursuit of factional interest was enshrined in the US Constitution by the founding fathers, though it runs counter to the norms they claimed to embrace. Yet Israel's Lobby poses threats that make it uniquely dangerous. Indeed, no other faction in the United States has contributed more to building the legal and administrative machinery for the Trump administration's attack on American colleges and universities, representing the central front in its general assault on American civil society. And unlike any other lobby of such reach and impact in American politics, it operates, remotely but effectively, as an agent of a foreign power undermining our democracy.

CONCLUSION

DESPERATION, DANGER, AND HOPE

In February 2026, President Trump ordered the American military to begin a war with Iran. According to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, this decision was taken not because of an Iranian-initiated threat to US national security but because the Israelis were in the process of attacking Iran and this would lead to retaliation against American military targets. He said:

We knew that there was going to be an Israeli action, we knew that that would precipitate an attack against American forces, and we knew that if we didn't preemptively go after them before they launched those attacks, we would suffer higher casualties and perhaps even higher those killed, and then we would all be here answering questions about why we knew that and didn't act.

When Trump then declared that, no, he had "forced the Israelis' hand," and not the other way around, Rubio backtracked, but all he did was add to the welter of somewhat conflicting rationales for the war provided by different administration spokespersons. These included preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, destroying its missile-launching capability, protecting Iranians from a murderous regime, bringing an end to the Islamic Republic, and choosing Iran's future leader.

But especially in light of Trump's reputation for flippancy in matters of foreign policy, vividly illustrated by his claim, eight months before launching the

war, that the US Air Force had “obliterated” Iran’s nuclear weapons program, none of these suggested rationales seemed persuasive. The war also dramatically contradicted Trump’s promise to avoid unnecessary military interventions abroad and the “forever wars” that often followed. Indeed, a serious rationale for the war, and the associated human and financial costs, cannot be found in Washington. Even Republicans, including a substantial chunk of Trump’s MAGA base, were muted in their expressions of support for the war.

Surveys showed most Americans were opposed to the war, but not so Israel’s Lobby. AIPAC and other of its major organs were full-throated in their support. If a coherent rationale for the war was missing in action in Washington, it was easy to find in Jerusalem, where an overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews told pollsters they supported the war. Both the attack on Iran in June 2025 and the 2026 war were born, planned, and insisted upon by Israel and its long-serving prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel has long possessed one of the most potent nuclear arsenals in the world, yet Netanyahu has, for decades, railed against Iran as posing an existential threat against Israel simply by developing the capacity to build a nuclear weapon. The real reason for the prime minister’s obsession, however, is the role it has played, against so much evidence, to promote himself as “Mr. Security”—as the one leader in Israel willing and able to do what is necessary to defend Jews against the Hitler of the age.

Unless, with Trump’s vociferous help, Netanyahu secures a pardon from Israel’s president, he knows that once he leaves office, he faces the prospect of criminal conviction and prison. The campaign for war has helped him, but now that he has his war and has killed the Iranian dictator, what is his plan? The best way to suss that out is to consider what he has sought to do and has done in Gaza.

After the Hamas-led attacks on Israeli settlements near the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023, Netanyahu launched a war of destruction and punishment whose declared objective, the elimination of the Hamas regime there, was neither its actual objective nor what was achieved. Nearly three years of pulverization and the killing or wounding of more than 10 percent of Gaza Palestinians have failed to remove the Hamas regime. But that war, prolonged and conducted in a way to preserve the prime minister’s hold on office and his

prospects in upcoming Israeli elections, has created in Gaza a field of suffering and chaos and a kind of free-fire zone for the Israel Defense Forces. That is, more or less, what he imagines will be the future of Iran, and it will, again, serve Netanyahu more than any plausible US security or geopolitical interests.

The Israeli prime minister was quick to hail the American attack as his dream come true, “to do what I have yearned to do for forty years,” the culmination of his efforts to secure full American participation in a war against Iran. On the other hand, war boosters in America, and especially Israel’s Lobby itself, denied up and down that the war was being fought for Israel even as they struggled along with the administration to find an “America First” explanation for it. With the daily cost of the war estimated in early March 2026 at \$1 billion, estimates of eventual direct costs of over \$200 billion, and noncomputable costs of damage to the American economy inflicted by skyrocketing oil and gas prices, there could hardly be a clearer case of the Israeli tail wagging the American dog.

Consider what led up to it.

On December 29, 2025, Netanyahu and Trump met at Mar-a-Lago. This was the sixth such summit meeting between the two leaders since the November 2024 election—three times as many meetings as the president had in that time frame with any other foreign leader. In the press conference held after the meeting, Trump warned, as if reading from a script written in Jerusalem, that if Iran sought to rearm, the result would be American action “very quickly to eradicate that buildup.”

For his part, Netanyahu announced that, for the first time, a non-Israeli, namely President Trump, would be awarded the Israel Prize, in recognition “for his tremendous contributions to Israel and the Jewish people.” He said he would “back completely” Trump’s threats against Nigeria and its air strikes there in the name of protecting “beleaguered” Christian communities in Africa and around the rest of the world.

Two days later, Netanyahu spoke at a synagogue event in Surfside, Florida, an event organized by the Jewish News Syndicate. After casting Israel’s response to October 7 as the age-old answer of Jews to antisemitism—“Never again was last

year... Never again is next year, and Never again is forever...”—Netanyahu told his audience that, in addition to the seven fronts on which Israel was fighting in the Middle East, there was an “eighth front.” This he described as “the rising tide of antisemitism around the world and the tremendous battle that we have for the truth.” What were individual American Jews to do in this battle? His answer, adding to the encomiums he heaped on President Trump, was to “fight, fight, fight.”

When meeting with Christian evangelical leaders earlier that same day, Netanyahu broadened his characterization of the “eighth front.” In his speech, the prime minister stressed Israel’s status as America’s most important—if not its only—ally in the effort to protect Christian minorities. He alluded to Israeli intelligence operations in Africa in support of US actions in Nigeria and, with a wink and a nod, to clandestine actions to support Middle Eastern Christians. But Netanyahu’s depiction of the rationale and importance of the Israeli-American alliance went much further. The “eighth front” on which Israel was fighting was “for the hearts and minds of the people, especially the young people in the West.” The battle being fought, he declared,

is not just Israel’s battle. I think it’s our common Judeo-Christian civilization’s battle, and I think we have to engage in that battle as forcefully, with as much resolution, as we engage the other seven fronts. I think it affects not only Israel, it affects America, it affects our alliance, it affects the future of Western civilization. And I don’t think I’m exaggerating one bit.... We feel that this is a theatre that has to be engaged with great force.

Netanyahu’s remarks reflected, and indeed encouraged, a shift in the rhetoric of Israel advocates to attack critics of Israel and supporters of Palestinians not just as antisemites but as enemies of Western civilization and its “Judeo-Christian values.”

The degree to which Israel’s Lobby and the Trump administration have begun to sing from the same “Let us save Western civilization” hymnal is vividly

expressed by what is happening at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

President Donald Trump has made no secret of his desire to eventually eliminate the NEH. But as long as it does exist, it has been forced to update its funding priorities to align with Trump's executive orders. Thus, its mission has officially changed, replacing promotion of "excellence in humanistic scholarship and the arts" with the goals of "celebrat[ing] the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence" and "American exceptionalism." In the name of this change, 85 percent of all NEH projects were canceled in the spring of 2025. Its new leadership stressed the imperative to end all DEI funding, including support for projects analyzing or exploring ways to redress discriminatory practices against historically disadvantaged groups. The operative principle was that "NEH-supported projects should not preference some groups at the expense of others..."

Despite this categorical imperative, six months later, the NEH awarded the largest grant in its history, \$10.4 million, to support the Jewish Civilization Project of Tikvah, an organization dedicated to promoting the communal interests and special "covenantal" status of one group, the Jews. Tikvah's energetic promotion of these ideas, helped by enthusiastic coverage by the closely aligned Jewish News Syndicate, has made it an avatar for this burgeoning line of Israeli *hasbara*.

The NEH grant was also an alliance of funding between the US government and the president's biggest political donor. The Adelson family contributed \$3 million to Tikvah in 2024. In December 2025, Tikvah's CEO, Eric Cohen, in keeping with the organization's increasingly ambitious goals for transforming both Jewish life in America and the basis for American support of Israel, declared its purpose was to foster a "return of Jewish exceptionalism," the "perpetuation" of which he described as "the greatest cause in the world." The United States, he proclaimed, "has a providential role in projecting that civilizational light around the world." Echoing Netanyahu, Cohen portrayed Israel, with a distinctly Christian United States as its only real ally, joined in a lonely but heroic struggle to save Western civilization and its "Judeo-Christian" core. Tikvah's mission, turbocharged with NEH's lavish funding for its Jewish

Civilization Project, was to help American Jews “wage the battle of ideas, beginning with the clear idea that the preservation of Jewish sovereignty including the defense of Jerusalem as the moral capital of the West is the defining moral imperative of our age.”

Tikvah’s “battle of ideas” frequently took the form of denigrating Palestinians and protests advocating for Palestinian rights. “The worst Israel does is far better than the best that the Palestinians do, to their own people and to their neighbors,” wrote Tikvah senior fellow Ruth Wisse in the group’s journal, *Mosaic*, in January 2026, repeating the same controversial remark she had made in a Tikvah-sponsored talk, “The Challenge of Jewish Sovereignty.” Critics of her comments were “trawling for evidence of ‘hate speech,’” said Wisse dismissively.

A Tikvah article published shortly after the October 7, 2023, attack echoed the same view that Israel’s actions cannot be questioned and that doing so empowers enemies of “the West.” Historian Arthur Herman, writing in *Mosaic*, compared Hamas to “Einsatzgruppen,” Nazi Germany’s paramilitary death squads, and demonstrators protesting the mass killing of Palestinians to Nazis. Europe and the United States “must now recognize that what’s ultimately at stake is not just Israel’s existence, but the survival of the West itself,” Herman wrote. The article was published alongside a photo of a demonstrator holding a sign that said “Free Palestine, No More [US] Support of [Israel’s] War Crimes.”

Guided by the Israeli government and subsidized financially and politically by the Trump administration, the Lobby seeks to subject American foreign policy in the Middle East to civilizational and theological imperatives. The objective is to harness American power to serve the ambitions of what has become a rogue state, a state whose prime minister is under indictment for war crimes and whose government includes leading ministers who explicitly espouse and certainly pursue policies of Jewish supremacy. The claims Israel’s Lobby advances of both Jewish and American exceptionalism imply immunity for Israel and the United States from norms and laws governing other states and peoples. That, in turn, expands the prerogatives that Washington and Jerusalem use to justify defiance

of international law, assert military dominance over entire regions, and impose harsh and discriminatory policies toward disfavored groups.

The American and Israeli attacks on Iran have inflicted enormous damage in the Middle East, on the world economy, and to the Trump presidency. The war is likely to stop with propagandist declarations of victory, but with Netanyahu and the Lobby characterizing the Islamic Republic as an existential threat, pressures in Washington to “get the job done” by sending in American troops will mount. If that happens, another forever war will have begun.

However sustainably or catastrophically American interests are damaged by the war on Iran, there is one Israeli objective that it serves—one that goes beyond Netanyahu’s own personal and political interests. By insisting on maintaining its own uninspected nuclear arsenal, Israel made a nonstarter of the idea of the Middle East as a nuclear weapons-free zone. But its strategic objective goes well beyond preserving its regional nuclear monopoly. It aspires to subdue or destroy the military capabilities of all potential adversaries in the Middle East so as to be able to use military force anywhere and against anyone in the region without significant risk to its forces and without fear of escalation. Such a posture enables it to avoid any genuine attempt to achieve peace and reconciliation with Palestinians or to limit its own territorial ambitions.

By preventing or sabotaging negotiations with Iran with respect to limiting its nuclear program, Israel and its Lobby prevented a warming of US-Iran relations that could have encouraged necessary reforms and opened paths to peaceful and productive change in Iran. By casting Iran as an octopus of aggression threatening the Western Hemisphere as well as the Middle East, Israel drew the United States beyond the dropping of bombs on Iran’s nuclear facilities into a full-scale war. In the context of the messy and increasingly predatory multipolar world of the early twenty-first century, this means neither American diplomats nor American military leaders can pivot away from that region toward the variety of challenges they face in Asia and Europe.

To be sure, Washington’s failure to pivot away from the Middle East toward Asia or Europe or both has been an explicit but unaccomplished goal of US administrations since Obama’s first term and cannot be understood only as a function of the Lobby’s discursive innovations or specific ties between it and the

second Trump administration. Although the chronic propensity for American military intervention in the Middle East—in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Iran, and Somalia—and the demands thereby made on the attention of US policymakers are often explained by allusions to the importance of Middle Eastern oil or the intrinsic danger of Muslim fanaticism, these are far from adequate and usually wrong. An often unnoticed but weighty cause has been the pressure of Israel’s Lobby to weaken or destroy Israel’s enemies (as in Iraq and Iran) and to prevent or end negotiated compromises for ameliorating conflicts (with Iran, with the Palestinians, in Lebanon, in Syria, or in the Arabian Peninsula). By keeping pots boiling in the Middle East, Israel and its boosters in America have been able to trigger US strikes against its foes there and arrange with its supporters in Congress to keep increasing already-enormous amounts of American military aid.

A special danger makes US overinvolvement in Israeli ambitions particularly fraught. It is the way Israel’s regional hegemony, justified to Americans as a defense of “the West,” holds special significance to many American evangelicals and the politicians and policymakers who share their views. For many of them, risky and violent American policies in support of Israeli maximalism are appealing because they suggest the possibly imminent realization of their most extravagant fantasies—an Israel-at-war-triggered Armageddon, preceded by their own “rapture” into heaven, and followed by the conversion of the doomed Jews of Jerusalem and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the early days of the Iran War, over one hundred American soldiers filed complaints against commanders who described the war as meant to bring about Armageddon and the return of Christ. But employment of metaphysical and biblical justifications for Washington’s largely unbounded support for Israel’s military adventurism is insufficient to counter the damning reality of Israel’s assault on Gaza and its enlistment of the United States in a full-scale war against Iran. This is particularly true of members of the broader American public, who are less steeped in evangelical End of Times eschatology, disturbed by the use of their tax dollars to fund a genocide against civilians, and who view images and videos of Gazans subjected to horrifying conditions and a regime of indiscriminate punishment. In the face of this change in public opinion, Israel’s defenders have

become desperate, mocking the images that drive outrage, denying the ample evidence of atrocities and famine, and leading campaigns against even the smallest forms of accountability for Israel.

Despite the work of Tikvah and other Lobby groups, defense of Israel as a paragon of civilization or an embodiment of Judeo-Christian values has proven difficult. Even American evangelicals, a community typically viewed as a bedrock of support for Israel and a voting bloc comprising 23 percent of the electorate, have shown cracks in that support when faced with evidence of Israel's tactics. Overall, white evangelical support for Israel dropped from 71 to 61 percent between February 2024 and September 2025, and while older evangelicals still hold highly favorable views of Israel, only 39 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-old evangelicals do so. Over the course of the Gaza War, Israel's losses on its self-proclaimed "eighth front," where it faces a rising tide of anti-Israel sentiment, have provoked desperate efforts with little evidence of success in shifting public opinion.

The Lobby's new tactics, and the backlash they now engender, were evident when CNN contributor and former Obama adviser Van Jones drew criticism for an October 2025 riff on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, in which he blamed Iran and Qatar for orchestrating a social media disinformation campaign to make young Americans sympathize with civilians facing Israeli attacks in Gaza. Joking about social media feeds, Jones said, "Dead Gaza baby, dead Gaza baby, dead Gaza baby, Diddy, dead Gaza baby, dead Gaza baby," to laughter from Maher and the audience.

Outright denial of Palestinian suffering and efforts to obfuscate Israel's responsibility in the deaths of tens of thousands of people in Gaza aren't just a tactic to deny demonstrable evidence of Israeli crimes against Palestinians. The impunity with which orchestrators of these efforts operate sends a clear message that many media and political elites tolerate, if not welcome, defenses of Israel that ruthlessly minimize or dismiss evidence of Israeli war crimes. This tactic was exemplified in an August 17, 2025, article examining photos published by the *New York Times*, CNN, and NPR, among other outlets, showing Palestinian children afflicted by malnutrition. The article was published in the Free Press startup news outlet. The Free Press claimed that the publications exaggerated the

hunger crisis in Gaza by failing to disclose that the photographed children were also afflicted by preexisting health problems. “The resulting investigation reveals how some of America’s biggest newsrooms misled the public about Gaza’s hunger crisis, using images of gravely ill children to create the false impression that an entire population was starving,” said the Free Press, in direct contradiction of the determination two days earlier by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), a system developed by the United Nations to determine levels of food security, that Gaza was experiencing widespread famine conditions.

Downplaying or denying a famine and its impact on children, particularly in an era when photographic and video evidence is disseminated widely by smartphones, is not a typical path to advancement within the mainstream media. However, the Free Press and its editor and founder, Bari Weiss, faced no meaningful repercussions. Less than two months after the publication’s denial of widespread famine conditions in Gaza, CBS News bought the Free Press for \$150 million. The acquisition sent a clear political signal from David Ellison, the son of Larry Ellison and the new owner of CBS News, that the organization endorsed both the outlet’s reporting and its methods. Underscoring that approval and the value that pro-Israel media moguls placed on Weiss, Ellison installed her as editor in chief of CBS News.

These desperate efforts to cut off debate and deny verifiable facts require significant resources, and as Israel suffers more public relations losses, the scope of the battle has necessarily expanded.

The Brandeis Center, a central node in the effort to use litigation to curtail debate about Israel, increased its revenue from \$3.9 million in the 2023 tax year to \$18.7 million in the 2024 tax year. The group also received indirect support from the US government in the form of a settlement with nine prominent law firms, targeted by the White House as political enemies for representing people or causes in opposition to Trump’s agenda, to conduct \$940 million in pro bono work with a focus on combating antisemitism. In practice, that settlement was revealed to include work for the Brandeis Center, StandWithUs, and the ADL on federal civil rights complaints, organizing and staffing reporting hotlines for students alleging antisemitic incidents on campuses, and engaging in litigation.

In art and culture, films such as *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, depicting the desperate efforts by Palestinian Red Crescent volunteers to save the life of a six-year-old girl in Gaza, and the Academy Award–winning *No Other Land* were forced to self-distribute after major US film distributors shied away from buying either project. “Buyers are passing out of fear and/or they disagree with [*The Voice of Hind Rajab*’s] politics,” an anonymous “leading U.S. buyer” told *Deadline*. “I am very surprised.”

And in the weapons and surveillance business, the ADL is now quietly directing investments into arms and technology firms whose products have been used to surveil, target, or kill Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The ADL uses its role as an investor via JLens, a \$200 million ADL-controlled investment fund, to urge shareholders at public companies to oppose resolutions requiring increased reporting and due diligence about human rights impacts and accountability in how their products are used.

“The JLens 500 Index provides exposure to the five hundred largest public companies and reflects JLens’s rigorous Jewish values–inspired research on corporate behavior,” is how the ADL describes the fund. That includes investments in Palantir, Lockheed Martin, RTX, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics.

In November 2025, JLens opposed a shareholder proposal led by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, an international Catholic women’s organization, which called on Microsoft to assess the effectiveness of its human rights due diligence processes. The resolution requested that “the [Microsoft] Board of Directors publish a report, at reasonable cost and omitting proprietary information, assessing the effectiveness of Microsoft’s human rights due diligence (‘HRDD’) processes in preventing, identifying, and addressing customer misuse of Microsoft artificial intelligence (‘AI’) and cloud products or services that violates human rights or international humanitarian law.” The proposal cited China’s use of Microsoft services in Xinjiang for persecuting the Uyghurs and, to the great concern of JLens, Israel’s use of Microsoft products in Gaza. Microsoft had already admitted that their cloud services had been used by the IDF to surveil civilians in Gaza and the West Bank and terminated Israeli government access to certain Microsoft products.

Despite Microsoft's own admissions that its services had been used in ways that violate the company's human rights standards, the ADL and JLens denounced the resolution as "an ideologically motivated campaign designed to advance the antisemitic BDS movement rather than improve corporate human rights reporting." The resolution ultimately failed but garnered 26.34 percent support among shareholders, an unusually high level for an activist shareholder resolution and evidence of the weakening opposition to implementing exactly the types of corporate human rights reporting and due diligence feared by the Lobby.

These efforts to control the public narrative, grossly epitomized by Jones's belittling of "dead Gaza babies," are easy to dismiss as the last gasps of increasingly fringe voices. But the resources supporting these efforts pose serious threats to the ability of Americans to advocate for policies reflecting their values and interests. Those resources take many forms: an NEH grant to Tikvah, the Ellison family's roles in the purchase of CBS News and TikTok, the Trump administration's deployment of top law firms to support Lobby organizations, and the ADL now directly working to protect technology and weapons firms from shareholder accountability. Enormous sums of money, and the power and funds of the federal government, are being mobilized in unprecedented ways to constrain and limit speech critical of Israel across all venues for public debate. Since success in this domain will lead to attempts by those with power to restrict and punish free speech in others, the threat posed by Israel's increasingly desperate Lobby poses serious dangers for our most cherished liberties.

The Lobby's attempt to wrestle back control of the public debate over Israel's behavior and the political, financial, and military support provided by the United States requires a rapidly expanding and costly effort to blunt criticisms of Israel in academic, media, corporate, and cultural spaces. These efforts are hamstrung by Israel's own actions in Gaza, the West Bank, and the broader Middle East, leaving representatives of the Lobby—be they television pundits, Hollywood power brokers, journalists, or investors—to rely on mockery, falsehoods, and, when all else fails, emotional outbursts of rage. In 2024, Tikvah's Ruth Wisse, expressing her fury toward Jewish anti-Netanyahu demonstrators in New York, told an Israeli audience that "if you are a Jew

anywhere, if you are a Jew anywhere, Mr. Netanyahu is the head of the Israeli government, and you stand up and salute. And you ask everyone else in the whole world: Don't you dare minimize our prime minister. Don't you dare call him a chickenshit."

The world has changed in many fundamental ways since the late eighteenth century. But the constitutional order established by the country's founders remains vulnerable to the danger epitomized in Wisse's exhortation and identified by President Washington 250 years ago. It has suffered from and is still threatened by foreign entanglements and domestic distortions arising from the "passionate attachment" of a domestic faction to a foreign power. Yet these very changes in international affairs, in Israel and in the United States, that have made the Lobby more dangerous have also led to its embrace of ideas and appeals too grotesque and too extreme to be successfully promoted across broad swaths of American society. Over the coming decade, the results of that error will open opportunities for the leaders of America to escape from the "special relationship" with Israel.

The political landscape across which this battle will be fought is changing rapidly and cannot be traced in its entirety. But current trends highlight where hope for a rational US policy in the Middle East and protection of American liberties from foreign threats may be found. It is quite certain, as certain as anything can be in politics, that Israel will not suddenly or even gradually transform itself into the kind of peaceable, compromise-oriented, and liberal polity whose need for American support would no longer require us to defy our allies, commit substantial sums of US tax dollars, and risk our national security and even our ethics or our democracy.

Even before the Gaza War, Israel's settlement of 780,000 Jews in the West Bank, including expanded East Jerusalem, and the real but unformalized administrative and legal incorporation of those territories and the 3.4 million noncitizen Palestinians who live there, had transformed the idea of a separate state of Palestine alongside a Jewish state of Israel into nothing more than a pretty but unattainable future—a kind of political unicorn. In addition to the psychic scars of the genocide in Gaza, which make it difficult to imagine successful negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders for decades to

come, the exodus from Israel of tens of thousands of its most progressive and compassionate elites will consolidate what already was the political hegemony of right-wing parties and the Jewish chauvinism and supremacist thinking that guide them.

In the context of a continuing and polarized struggle in the United States between nationalistic, authoritarian populism and liberal Democrats committed to multicultural progressivism, Israeli realities and policies will deprive the Lobby of the reliable support of either the Democratic or Republican Parties. Instead of a unifying issue, support for Israel will fuel greater divisions within both parties.

Among many Democratic politicians, endorsement of a two-state solution has served as a mantra and safe harbor protecting them from attacks by the Lobby (since their position could be sold as popular among many Israelis and in the long-run interests of a “Jewish state”) and from constituents outraged at settlements and other policies of Israeli governments designed to prevent creation of a Palestinian state. But as the two-state option has disappeared, and as it is publicly acknowledged to have done so, that safe harbor will also disappear. While more establishment Democrats are likely to stick with their strong support of Israel, regardless of Israeli government policies, a growing majority of recently elected Democrats and candidates will discard the two-state idea in favor of positions that reflect reality on the ground. That would be based not on ending the occupation of Palestinian territories by achieving Israeli withdrawal from them but ending the occupation by including those areas and their Jewish and Palestinian populations on the basis of equal citizenship within a transformed liberal and democratic polity. As a result of this split, fierce battles can be anticipated within the Democratic Party over American military interventions on Israel’s behalf, arms deliveries, and unconditional diplomatic support.

Splits in the Republican Party over Israel that appeared during the Gaza War will also get deeper and wider. An important section of the Republican Party, and a substantial number of senators and representatives, share strong personal and religious bonds to historically pro-Israel evangelical communities. But increasingly potent strains of Christian nationalism within the party’s base,

given voice by the likes of commentator Tucker Carlson, Vice President J. D. Vance, and former congresswoman Marjorie Tay-lor Greene, portend angry splits within the party over whether the US relationship to Israel is to be treated as a divinely sanctioned covenant with eschatological significance or as one marked by endless, impertinent, and burdensome demands for extraordinary amounts of aid, special privileges, and tolerance of civilian casualties, both Muslim and Christian.

Bereft of a reliable political base, the Lobby will be forced to adjust its modes of operation. With opposition to its agenda coming from within both the Democratic and Republican Parties, it will be unable to present its positions and demands as reflecting an obvious consensus on either side of the spectrum. Nor will it be able to rely on accusations of antisemitism to quell opposition. There will simply be too many politicians whose support it will desire who would fall within the category of critics of Israel and Zionism. Accordingly, political dark money, used in ever more transactional but hidden ways, will be used to promote the Lobby's chosen candidates and defeat those it deems most dangerous.

In these circumstances, Israel's Lobby will become more like any other, as it will be faced with countervailing interests whose opposition to Israeli policies will be a function of commitments to multicultural values, the protection of civil liberties, and the redirection of funding to domestic programs. The Lobby's loud cries against the flow of Qatari and other non-Israeli Middle Eastern money into American universities are evidence that it fears what will happen when advocates are confronted with the need to publicly defend Israeli policies, something they have neither tried nor been able to do for many years. Israel studies programs, chairs of Israel studies, semester-abroad programs in Israel, and courses on Israel still far outnumber offerings and opportunities related to Palestine or to any other Middle Eastern country, but enrollments and interest in approaches to Israel that accept Zionist presumptions (that a state that is 50 percent non-Jewish should be studied only as "Jewish") will mean Israel-oriented programs are likely to wither away or become embattled, albeit well-funded and isolated, pockets of pedagogy and scholarship.

Espousing positions most Americans find unattractive will draw the Lobby closer to a wing of the Republican Party composed of a shrinking portion of Christian evangelicals who prioritize their theology over the well-being of Palestinians (including approximately fifty thousand Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and one thousand in Gaza) and generally reject secular culture and the standards for success governing the professions and American higher education. Among Democrats, the Lobby will be forced to rely on those still fired by myths of a liberal democratic Israel who cling to the “progressive except for Palestine” moniker and who find ways to justify the apartheidist policies of ethno-religious governments in Jerusalem. Indeed, we can expect that Israel’s Lobby and its supporters in America will increasingly portray Israel not as a client of the United States or even as a partner but as the model for what this country should become—a nation insistent on dominating its region militarily, defiant in its attitude toward international law and global public opinion, intolerant toward domestic out-groups, and enforcing norms of deference toward those exercising state power in the name of a chosen national fantasy.

This means that theorists on the Israeli Right are correct that the decisive battle over whether Israel will survive as a state that privileges Jews and dominates the Palestinian half of its population will be one fought out over many years on university campuses, in editorial board meetings, in campaigns for public office, around dinner tables, and on social media. But they are wrong to think this battle over control of civil society is one they can win. Both America and the rest of the world are too dynamic, too multicultural, too complex, too comprehensively interdependent, and too readily mobilized for the tribalism that Israel’s Lobby advocates to prevail or for the diktats of the powerful to be accepted in the face of torrents of contrary information.

This struggle will be long. It will be painful and dislocating for many. It will be scary and enraging for some. And it will have its own dangers. We have called the campaign of calumny and cancellation waged by the Lobby against critics of Israel and supporters of Palestinians a witch hunt. That’s what it is. But it differs from the witch hunts of Salem and Europe in medieval and early modern times because there really are “witches” in America. That is to say, there really are antisemites.

There are and there always have been Americans with abiding hostility toward and prejudice against Jews simply because they are Jews. They will have no compunction about exploiting disillusionment with Israel and with the Lobby's conflation of Jewishness with Zionism as validation for their rants against Jewish plots to "replace" whites, swamp the country with foreigners, and master its resources. Indeed, as the extent to which American policies have been distorted to serve the interests of a state that calls itself Jewish, as the exploitation of the emotions and loyalties of American Jews and Christian evangelicals by Israel's Lobby becomes better understood, and as the spectacle of Israeli-enforced chaos and suffering by Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank continues, we can expect that the receptivity to antisemitic rhetoric will increase, that inhibitions against the flagrant exhibition of antisemitism will weaken, and that real threats to the security and well-being of Jews in the United States will materialize.

One particularly upsetting consequence of all the false accusations of antisemitism that have and are being made by the Lobby will be that when rising antisemitism in the United States becomes the menace that history shows it can become, those who fight against the bigotry will be challenged to convince the public that they are not launching yet another witch hunt. The Lobby will again be a problem, not an ally, in this fight. More than likely, it will exploit this upsurge in real antisemitism and real dangers for Jews as proof that Jews in the diaspora will never be secure, thereby justifying the need for a Jewish state.

Israel's Lobby is scared. The very changes in the world, in Israel, and in the United States that have made the Lobby more dangerous have also led its ultra-wealthy power brokers to overplay their hand. Public opposition to its Israel-first catechisms has become more prominent on both sides of the political spectrum. As its grip on America has loosened, Israel's Lobby has become both more desperate and more ruthless.

In the long run, the Lobby simply cannot silence the American people. It cannot prevent the country's professors, students, journalists, and activists from applying their critical faculties to Israel's behavior or force them to suspend the

empathy for Palestinian suffering that human beings cannot help but experience. It cannot bludgeon an entire generation of Americans into an Orwellian view of genocide as self-defense, tribalist violence as civilized behavior, or apartheid as liberal democracy.

As the Israeli government and the Lobby come to realize the diminishing returns of campaigns to suppress critics and silence Palestine's supporters, they are forced to embrace a radically new propaganda line. To do so, they need both an enemy and a narrative—an enemy to portray Israel as a crucial American ally and a narrative to transform the rationale for a special relationship. The chosen enemy is radical Islam and “jihadi terrorism.” The new narrative is to save Judeo-Christian values and Western civilization by whatever means necessary.

Part of the analytic basis for this shift came in July 2025 in a study by the New York firm Stagwell Inc. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs secretly contracted with the company to measure American and European sentiment toward Israel and Palestinians and test different messaging techniques for repairing Israel's brand. In September, Stagwell's confidential study leaked. Its conclusions, based on 15 focus groups and 8,050 interviews in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Spain, were that indeed Israel's standing among Western publics had plummeted and that sentiment in favor of Palestinian rights was strong. None of the messaging it recommended for combating these realities involved defending Israeli policies in Gaza or toward the Palestinians. Instead, Stagwell recommended portraying Palestinians as terrorists, emphasizing “the notion of radical Jihadism,” which was “universally effective,” and exploiting the fact that both European and US publics “recoil against both Hamas and Iran.”

Unable to convincingly portray the extremes of Israeli violence as self-defense or as a response to antisemitism, the Lobby's discourse has moved toward depicting attacks on Jews as attacks on civilization itself, by which they mean “Western civilization.” The Jewish and American states are then partners in an epic struggle to preserve Western civilization and the Judeo-Christian values on which it is said to be based against radical-Islamo-neo-Marxist barbarism. In this regard, there is a mutually reinforcing and dangerous convergence of the Lobby's use, under Israeli influence, of apocalyptic language to describe what is

at stake in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Trump administration's impulsive use of American power and its self-promotion as the defender of Jews and Christians around the world. Yet that also means that Trump's hyperactive overreach and the unpopularity of its consequences will expose the Lobby's cosmic trumpeting as propaganda for obviously aggrandizing and gratuitous uses of American power.

In the complex multipolar and predatory world of the twenty-first century, government officials, the political class, and the public as a whole are increasingly skeptical of Israeli propaganda casting the fate of the United States and "Western civilization" as dependent on an Israeli-American alliance and on the satisfaction of whatever ambitions an Israeli government might entertain. The transformation of Israel into a crazy state—one consigned, or nearly so, to pariah status by the viciousness of its behavior and its defiance of international norms—has shifted the center of gravity of public opinion against it. This creates unprecedented opportunities for politicians to defy Lobby hectoring, sharpen public debate over American policy toward Israel, and win elections despite, or perhaps because of, doing so. Virtual elimination of limits on political contributions by the ultra-wealthy have empowered Lobby-affiliated plutocrats to exhibit arrogance corresponding to the scale of their riches. But replacement of grassroots activism with plutocratically financed campaigns targeting politicians unwilling to follow its line on Israel unmoored the Lobby from the real opinions of masses of citizens.

Three transformations—in world politics, in Israeli politics, and in the political economy of American elections—produced a seemingly unsustainable gap between public opinion, both on the right and left, and the stubborn decisions by policymakers to maintain status quo political and economic support for Israel. To be sure, dramatic erosion of support for Israel by the American public has already begun and shows little sign of slowing. But the Lobby has many tools in its arsenal to deflect, delay, and deny the transmission of these public sentiments into policy implemented by elected officials. Its success or failure will be a litmus test for American democracy, a test of whether American politicians can implement policies reflecting the beliefs, ideals, and interests of their constituents or prove themselves unable to shake the

plutocratic interests of a handful of donors with great affinity for a foreign power. Therein lies hope—hope that America can escape from a relationship that is not so much special as toxic.

By applying the values central to the meaning and promise of America—equality, democracy, pluralism, and opportunity for all—the United States can unshackle itself from Israel even as it helps that country, and all who live within it, to find the security and freedom they have never had.

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Chapter 1: A Lobby Like No Other

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Chapter 2: Israel and America in a Messy World

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Conclusion: Desperation, Danger, and Hope

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INDEX

A note about the index: The pages referenced in this index refer to the page numbers in the print edition. Clicking on a page number will take you to the ebook location that corresponds to the beginning of that page in the print edition. For a comprehensive list of locations of any word or phrase, use your reading system's search function.

A

Abboud, Andrew, [134](#)

Abdullah of Jordan, [46](#)

Abrams, Elliott, [37](#)

Acheson, Dean, [41](#)

Ackman, Bill, [192](#)

ACLU, [190](#)

Adelson family, [1–4](#), [8](#), [110](#), [113](#), [114](#), [116–18](#), [133–38](#), [140](#), [143](#), [147–51](#), [163](#), [181](#), [182](#), [187](#), [211](#)

Afghanistan, [4](#), [63](#), [64](#), [112](#)

Africa, [62](#), [74](#), [97](#), [210](#)

Ailes, Roger, [150](#)

Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), [23](#), [38](#)

Aish HaTorah, [110](#)

Allen, George, [137](#)

Allon, Yigal, [50](#), [83](#)

Aloni, Shulamit, [103](#)

al-Qaeda, [62–63](#), [107](#), [130](#)

Altman, Sam, [105](#)

AMCHA Initiative, [124](#), [182](#)

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), [19](#), [20](#)

American Israel Education Foundation (AIEF), [21](#), [127–29](#), [142](#)

American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), [18–28](#), [31–34](#), [37](#), [40](#), [49](#), [53](#), [59](#), [106](#), [107](#), [117–18](#), [141](#), [143](#), [158](#), [159](#), [169](#), [170](#), [208](#)
AIEF, [21](#), [127–29](#), [142](#)
fundraising strategy of, [129–31](#)
growth of, [127–29](#)
Iran nuclear deal and, [111](#), [112](#), [114–16](#)
UDP Super PAC, [153–55](#), [159](#)
American Jewish Committee (AJC), [21](#), [120](#), [123](#), [124](#), [178](#)
American Psychological Association (APA), [201–3](#)
Amitai, Morris, [22](#)
Anti-Defamation League (ADL), [124](#), [170–74](#), [177](#), [178](#), [188](#), [198](#), [201–2](#), [217–19](#)
antisemitism, [166](#), [169–205](#), [210](#), [222–24](#)
 BDS movement as, [171](#), [176–77](#), [179–81](#), [218](#)
 colleges and, [120](#), [123](#), [125–26](#), [169–70](#), [174](#), [180–95](#), [197](#), [204](#), [205](#)
 criticism of Israel as, [119–21](#), [124–26](#), [139](#), [165](#), [169–70](#), [172–79](#), [181–83](#), [185](#), [186](#), [188](#), [189](#), [191](#), [195](#), [197–99](#), [211](#), [222](#)
 criticism of Zionism as, [119–20](#), [123](#), [126](#), [171–75](#), [188](#), [189](#), [222](#)
 definitions of, [119–26](#), [169–72](#), [177](#), [186–88](#)
 entertainment industry and, [198–99](#)
 Gaza War and, [172](#), [177](#), [184](#), [186](#)
 law firms and, [196–97](#)
 media and, [195–96](#)
 medical professionals and, [199–201](#), [204](#)
 slogans as, [173–74](#), [186](#), [189](#), [190](#)
 Trump administration and, [123–24](#), [126](#), [171](#), [178](#), [184–86](#), [191](#), [205](#)
Antisemitism Awareness Act, [126](#)
Arab-Israeli conflict, [9](#), [31](#), [33–36](#), [39](#), [47–58](#), [61](#), [65](#)
 Abraham Accords and, [152](#)
 fatality ratio in, [91](#)
 Geneva Conference on, [49](#), [51–53](#), [55–57](#)
 Six-Day War (1967), [31](#), [71](#), [79–80](#), [91](#)
 Suez Crisis, [36](#), [65](#), [73](#), [75](#)

War of Attrition, [91](#)

Yom Kippur War (1973), [47–49](#), [57–58](#), [69](#), [91](#)

see also [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)

Arafat, Yasser, [64](#)

Armistice Lines, [73](#)

Aspen Security Forum, [142](#)

Atlantic, [126](#)

B

Baker, James, [61](#)

Ball, George, [49](#), [53](#)

Bannon, Steve, [150](#), [159–61](#)

Bar, Tomer, [78–79](#)

Barak, Ehud, [2](#), [84](#), [100](#), [113–14](#), [161](#)

Bar-Ilan University, [111](#)

Barrera, Melissa, [199](#)

BDS movement, [158](#), [171](#), [176–77](#), [179–81](#), [184](#), [218](#)

Beame, Abe, [52](#)

Beattie, Kirk, [19](#)

Begin, Menachem, [53–54](#), [70](#), [71](#), [74](#), [75](#), [80–81](#), [84](#), [167](#)

Beilin, Yossi, [103](#)

Ben-Gurion, David, [57](#), [70–71](#), [73–74](#), [87](#), [89](#)

Ben-Gvir, Itamar, [3](#), [77](#)

Ben Hamu, Hiya, [97](#)

Benn, Aluf, [68](#)

Betar, [187](#), [195](#)

Biden, Hunter, [1](#)

Biden, Joe, [7](#), [126](#), [127](#), [143](#), [152](#), [153](#), [155–59](#), [161](#), [178](#), [184](#), [190](#)

bin Laden, Osama, [62–63](#)

Birthright Israel, [110](#)

Blitzer, Wolf, [146](#)

Black Lives Matter, [185](#)

Bloomberg, Michael, [138](#), [140–41](#)
Bloomfield, Douglas, [107](#)
Bollinger, Lee, [187](#)
Bowman, Jamaal, [22](#), [154](#), [159](#)
Brandeis Center, [124](#), [181](#), [217](#)
Brin, Sergey, [105](#)
Britain, [14](#), [16](#), [45](#), [46](#), [49](#), [57](#), [65](#), [73](#), [74](#), [84](#), [88](#), [99](#), [112](#), [174](#)
Brookings Institution, [37](#)
Brooks, Matthew, [139–40](#), [152](#)
Brzezinski, Zbigniew, [55](#)
Bundy, McGeorge, [48](#)
Bush, Cori, [22](#), [154](#), [159](#)
Bush, George H. W., [24](#), [35](#), [37](#), [38](#), [41](#), [59–63](#), [114](#)
Bush, George W., [5](#), [28](#), [63–65](#), [107–8](#), [161](#), [182](#)
Bush, Jeb, [147](#)

C

Cairo University, [109](#)
campaign finance laws, [132–33](#), [153](#)
Camp David Summit, [106](#)
Campus Trends Report, [170](#)
Canary Mission, [175](#), [195](#), [196](#), [199](#)
Carlson, Tucker, [159–61](#), [204](#), [221](#)
Carter, Jimmy, [35](#), [37](#), [53–57](#)
Catz, Safra, [161](#)
CBS News, [52](#), [216–17](#), [219](#)
Center for Combating Antisemitism, [179](#)
Center for Public Integrity, [179](#)
Center for Responsive Politics, [33–34](#)
Cheney, Richard, [63](#)
China, [1](#), [7](#), [61](#), [66](#), [97](#), [98](#), [112](#), [128](#), [161](#), [218](#)
Christians United for Israel, [142](#)

Churchill, Winston, [16](#), [43](#), [44](#), [63](#)
Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran, [115](#)
Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, [10](#), [132](#), [133](#), [137](#), [140](#)
Civil Rights Act, Title VI of, [124](#), [126](#), [174](#), [181–84](#), [190](#), [191](#)
Clarion Fund, [110](#)
Clifford, Clark, [46–47](#)
Clinton, Bill, [24](#), [37](#)
Clinton, Hillary, [147](#)
Coburn, Tom, [29](#)
Cohen, Eric, [211–12](#)
Cold War, [10](#), [41–42](#), [49](#), [57–60](#), [63](#), [66](#)
Coleman, Norm, [105–6](#), [139](#)
Columbia University, [125](#), [186](#), [187](#), [189](#), [190](#), [192](#), [193](#)
Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA), [165](#), [196](#)
Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, [21](#), [178](#)
Congress and the Shaping of the Middle East (Beattie), [19](#)
Congressional Research Service, [60](#)
Cooper, Anderson, [145](#)
Cooper, Milton, [129](#)
Cooperman, Leon, [193](#)
Crazy States (Dror), [69–70](#), [73](#), [75](#), [98](#)
Cruz, Ted, [146](#), [204–5](#)
Cuba, [17](#), [58](#)

D

Dagan, Meir, [113](#)
Dahiya doctrine, [90](#)
D’Amato, Alfonse, [24](#)
Dantchik, Arthur, [141](#)
David Horowitz Freedom Center, [141](#)
Dayan, Moshe, [55](#), [65](#), [73](#), [79](#), [80](#), [83–84](#), [89](#)
Defense Department, [2](#), [25](#)

Deir Yassin, [88–89](#)
Dermer, Ron, [176–77](#), [179](#)
DeVos, Betsy, [184](#)
Dewey, Thomas, [45](#)
Dillon, Douglas, [48](#)
Dine, Tom, [21](#)
Doctors Without Borders, [93](#)
Dorgan, Byron, [25](#)
Dror, Yehezkel, [68–70](#), [73](#), [75](#), [98](#)
Duke–UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies, [183–84](#)

E

Eban, Abba, [79](#)
economic inequality, [106](#), [126–28](#)
Edelstein, Yuli, [85](#)
Education Department, [123](#), [126](#), [191](#)
 Office for Civil Rights, [182–84](#), [190](#)
Egypt, [4](#), [16](#), [49–52](#), [54](#), [56–59](#), [73](#), [74](#), [79–80](#), [91](#), [98](#)
Eiland, Giora, [95–96](#)
Eisenhower, Dwight D., [36](#), [43](#), [57](#), [73](#)
Eitan, Rafael, [74](#)
Elad NGO, [143](#)
Ellison family, [142](#), [161](#), [216–17](#), [219](#)
Emergency Committee for Israel, [115](#)
Emmer, Tom, [188](#)
Eshkol, Levi, [79](#), [80](#)
European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), [121–23](#), [125](#)
Eychaner, Fred, [138](#)

F

Federal Election Commission (FEC), [132](#), [138](#), [140](#)
 Citizens United case, [10](#), [132](#), [133](#), [137](#), [140](#)
 SpeechNow case, [132–33](#), [137](#), [140](#)

Feith, Douglas, [65](#)
Fetterman, John, [166](#)
Fineman, Howard, [109](#)
Finkelstein, Norman, [186](#)
FIRE, [190](#)
Fire and Fury (Wolff), [150](#)
Fiserv Forum, [152](#)
Fleshler, Dan, [33](#)
Floyd, George, [185](#)
Forbes, [203](#)
Ford, Gerald, [28](#), [35](#), [47–50](#), [52–54](#), [57](#), [61](#)
Foreign Agent Registration Act, [162](#)
Forrestal, James, [44](#)
Fortune, [19](#)
Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), [113](#), [116–17](#), [128](#), [141](#), [142](#)
Foxman, Abraham, [171](#)
Fox News, [109](#), [150](#)
France, [14](#), [73](#), [99](#), [112](#)
freedom of speech, [10](#), [125](#), [126](#), [149](#), [164](#), [174](#), [181](#), [190](#), [195](#), [219](#)
Free Press, [216](#)
Freilich, Chuck, [118](#)
Friends of the IDF, [21](#), [141–43](#), [158](#)
Fuentes, Nick, [204](#)
Fundamental Rights Agency, [123](#)
Fusion GPS, [147](#)

G

Gaffney, Frank, [111–12](#)
Gahal, [71](#)
Galili Plan, [80](#)
Gallant, Yoav, [96](#)
Gaw, Lauren, [201](#)

Gay, Claudine, [189](#)

Gaza, [6](#), [20](#), [54](#), [56](#), [71–74](#), [76](#), [77](#), [79–86](#), [89–91](#), [93–96](#), [98](#), [99](#), [130](#), [131](#), [143](#), [155](#), [160](#), [167](#), [173](#), [175](#), [176](#), [218](#), [219](#), [222](#), [224](#), [225](#)

war of 2014 in, [29](#), [95](#), [101](#)

Gaza Freedom Flotilla, [176](#)

Gaza War (2023–), [5](#), [38](#), [76](#), [78](#), [91–92](#), [94–99](#), [126](#), [151–53](#), [155–59](#), [166](#), [185](#), [193](#), [197–98](#), [215–16](#), [220](#), [221](#)

antisemitism and, [172](#), [177](#), [184](#), [186](#)

ceasefire in, [22](#), [103](#), [151](#), [152](#), [155](#), [163](#), [180](#)

death rate of Palestinians in, [92](#)

media coverage of, [102](#), [196](#)

October 7 attack, [4–5](#), [76](#), [78](#), [86](#), [91](#), [93](#), [96](#), [101](#), [151](#), [156](#), [157](#), [172](#), [185](#), [188](#), [189](#), [196](#), [208](#), [210](#), [212](#)

protests against, [151–53](#), [155–56](#), [180](#), [184](#), [187](#), [190–92](#), [215](#)

and US aid to Israel, [11](#), [152](#), [155](#), [164](#), [180](#)

US presidential election and, [151–59](#)

Gemayel, Amin, [75](#)

Gemayel, Bashir, [75](#)

Germany, [99](#), [112](#), [205](#)

Nazi, *see* [Holocaust](#), [Nazi Germany](#)

Gingrich, Newt, [134–36](#), [169](#)

Golan, Yair, [96](#)

Goland, Michael, [23](#)

Golan Heights, [74](#), [79](#), [150](#), [151](#)

Goldberg, Jeffrey, [40](#)

Greenblatt, Jonathan, [171](#), [177–78](#)

Greene, Marjorie Taylor, [159](#), [221](#)

Green Line, [73](#)

Griffin, Kenneth, [192](#)

Gromyko, Andrei, [54](#), [56](#)

Guardian, [115](#), [125–26](#)

Gush Emunim, [81](#)

H

Haaretz, [68](#), [141](#)

Habsora, [94–95](#)

Haganah, [87](#), [88](#)

Halevi, Herzi, [93](#)

Halkin, Hillel, [102](#)

Hamas, [82](#), [92](#), [94–97](#), [101](#), [102](#), [130](#), [143](#), [155](#), [163](#), [185](#), [190](#), [198](#), [209](#), [212](#), [225](#)

October 7 attack by, *see* [October 7 attack](#)

Hannity, Sean, [109](#), [110](#)

Harriman, Averell, [49](#)

Harris, Kamala, [8](#), [152](#), [155–59](#), [190](#)

Harvard University, [186](#), [189](#), [192](#)

hasbara, [166–67](#), [211](#)

Hasbara Fellowships, [165](#)

Hasbara Handbook, The, [168](#), [169](#)

Hecht, Chic, [22](#)

Herman, Arthur, [212](#)

Herut Party, [70](#), [71](#)

Hezbollah, [76](#), [97](#), [102](#), [190](#)

Hillel, [124](#), [183](#)

Hitler, Adolf, [69](#), [71](#)

Hoffman, Reid, [142](#)

Hoffman Kofman Foundation, [142](#)

Holding, George, [184](#)

Hollings, Ernest (Fritz), [27–28](#)

Holocaust, Nazi Germany, [44](#), [49](#), [68](#), [69](#), [89](#), [90](#), [97](#), [101](#), [122–24](#), [157](#), [175](#), [185](#), [200](#), [205](#), [212](#)

HonestReporting, [196](#)

Horowitz, Ami, [183–84](#)

housing demolition, [92–94](#)

Houthis, [6](#), [102](#)

Huntsman, Jon, [193](#)

Hussein of Jordan, [80](#)

I

ICE, [187](#), [191](#), [194](#), [195](#)

Impact Forum, [165](#)

Inbar, Efraim, [76–77](#)

income inequality, [106](#), [126–28](#)

Indyk, Martin, [34](#), [37](#)

International Criminal Court, [6](#), [98](#)

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), [120–26](#), [170–73](#), [186–88](#), [202](#)

intifada, use of word, [173](#)

Iran, [5](#), [41](#), [62](#), [63](#), [68](#), [72](#), [78](#), [79](#), [97](#), [99](#), [102](#), [130](#), [131](#), [136](#), [142](#), [152](#), [160](#), [164](#), [214](#), [216](#), [225](#)

Israeli-American war against, [76](#), [78–79](#), [207–9](#), [213–15](#)

nuclear program of, [6](#), [38](#), [111–19](#), [130–31](#), [139](#), [145](#), [148](#), [150](#), [159–60](#), [207–8](#), [213–14](#)

Iraq, [4](#), [64](#), [72](#), [73](#), [79](#), [102](#), [214](#)

Gulf War, [60–63](#)

Iraq War, [65](#), [66](#), [107](#), [108](#), [112](#), [113](#), [115–16](#)

Irgun, [87](#), [88](#), [174](#)

Iron Wall operation, [93](#)

Iron Wall strategy, [87–88](#), [90](#), [91](#)

Isikoff, Michael, [135](#)

ISIS, [131](#)

Islamic Jihad, [92](#), [151](#)

Israel

Basic Law of, [85](#)

Declaration of Independence of, [83](#), [97](#)

discriminatory laws in, [85](#)

founding of, [6](#), [11](#), [15](#), [43](#), [44](#), [46–47](#), [56–57](#), [103](#), [126](#)

nation-state law of, [141](#)

political party system of, [70–72](#)

rightward political shift in, [71](#), [103](#), [106](#), [107](#), [110](#), [138](#)

as surrounded by enemies, [100–103](#)

US relationship with, *see* [US-Israel relationship](#)

Israel Apartheid Week, [177](#), [180](#)

Israel Defense Forces (IDF), [69](#), [74](#), [78](#), [81](#), [87](#), [88](#), [91–96](#), [135](#), [142](#), [143](#), [209](#)

Israel Hayom, [3](#)

Israeli Air Force, [90](#)

Israeli-American Coalition for Action, [165](#), [179](#)

Israeli-American Council, [118](#), [151](#), [158](#), [163](#)

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, [82](#), [142](#), [167](#), [220](#), [226](#)

Camp David Summit on, [106](#)

fatality ratio in, [91](#)

First Intifada, [84](#), [173](#)

Oslo Accords and, [20](#), [81](#), [84](#), [100](#), [106–7](#), [138](#)

public sympathies in, [151](#), [153](#), [225](#)

Second Intifada, [72](#), [84–85](#), [100](#), [106](#), [107](#)

trilemma formula and, [83](#), [86](#)

Trump and, [68](#), [145–46](#), [148–50](#)

two-state solution to, [10](#), [81](#), [82](#), [107](#), [108](#), [139](#), [148](#), [149](#), [220](#), [221](#)

Israelism, [197](#)

Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, *The* (Mearsheimer and Walt), [9](#)

Israel on Campus Coalition, [165](#), [170](#)

Israel Prize, [68](#), [209](#)

Israel Project, [168–69](#)

Israel's Lobby, use of term, [9](#)

J

Jabotinsky, Vladimir, [84](#), [87](#)

Jabr, Hesén, [200](#)

Jackson, Henry, [55](#)

Jacobson, Jonathon, [129](#)

Jameson, J. Larry, [201](#)

January 6 Capitol riot, [204](#)

Jeffries, Hakeem, [166](#)
Jenin, [65](#)
Jerusalem, [38](#), [44](#), [45](#), [79–81](#), [119](#), [131](#), [143](#), [148](#), [167](#), [208](#), [212](#), [220](#)
 US embassy moved to, [149](#), [150](#), [152](#)
Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies, [76](#)
Jerusalem Post, [165](#)
Jewish Agency, [46](#), [119](#), [120](#), [166](#), [168](#)
Jewish Book Council, [35](#)
Jewish Communal Fund, [129](#)
Jewish Federation, [100](#), [204](#)
Jewish Federations of North America, [179](#)
Jewish Funders Network, [141](#)
Jewish Institute for National Security of America, [128](#)
Jewish Journal, [135](#)
Jewish News Syndicate (JNS), [105](#), [139](#), [142](#), [210](#), [211](#)
Jewish Telegraphic Agency, [19](#), [28](#)
JLens, [217–18](#)
Johnson, Lyndon B., [48](#), [79](#), [80](#)
Johnson, Mike, [188](#)
Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), [114–18](#), [130–31](#), [145](#)
Jones, Van, [215–16](#), [218](#)
Jordan, [16](#), [51](#), [59](#), [73](#), [79](#), [91](#)
Jordan, Hamilton, [54](#)
J Street, [108](#)
Judea, [74](#), [81](#), [84](#), [85](#), [102](#)
Judeo-Christian values and Western civilization, [30](#), [100](#), [110](#), [166](#), [210–12](#), [215](#), [225–26](#)
Justice Department, [1](#), [2](#), [149](#), [191](#)

K

Kahn, Herman, [68](#), [69](#)
Kaplan, Thomas, [113–14](#)
Kasich, John, [146](#)

Kasten, Bob, [25](#)
Katz, Israel, [78](#)
Katz, Haim (Harry), [24–26](#)
Kennan, George F., [41](#), [44](#)
Kennedy, Edward, [54](#)
Kennedy, John F., [48](#), [135](#)
Kennedy, Joseph P., Sr., [135](#)
Khalidi, Rashid, [125–26](#)
Khalil, Mahmoud, [187](#)
Khan, Amed, [158](#)
Kings of Capitol Hill, [131](#)
Kirk, Charlie, [160–61](#)
Kissinger, Henry, [28](#), [34](#), [35](#), [47–54](#), [58](#)
Knesset, [71–72](#), [79](#), [85](#), [86](#), [162–63](#)
Kohelet Policy Forum, [141](#)
Kohr, Howard, [26](#)
Koppel, Ted, [134](#)
Koret Foundation, [129](#)
Kosygin, Alexei, [79](#)
Koum, Jan, [105](#), [143](#), [154](#), [181](#)
Kraft, Robert, [193](#)
Kushner, Jared, [203](#)
Kuwait, [60](#), [61](#)

L

Labor Party, [70–71](#), [83](#)
Lapid, Yair, [101](#)
Las Vegas Review-Journal, [126](#)
Lauder, Ronald S., [8](#), [193](#)
Lebanon, [5](#), [41](#), [58–59](#), [72–76](#), [79](#), [82](#), [90](#), [160](#), [164](#), [214](#)
Lehi, [87](#)
Levendusky, Matthew, [109–10](#)

Levin, Andy, [22](#)
Lewis, Samuel, [33](#), [37](#)
Likud Party, [20](#), [53](#), [66](#), [71](#), [75–76](#), [110](#), [167](#), [174](#)
Lincoln, Abraham, [13](#)
Lofgren, Mike, [28–29](#)
Los Angeles Times, [126](#)
Lovett, Robert, [44](#), [46](#)
Lowenthal, Max, [46](#)
Luntz, Frank, [169](#)

M

Maccabee Task Force, [143](#), [181](#), [187](#)
Mack, Connie, [137](#)
Madison, James, [13](#)
Magerman, David, [193](#)
Magill, Liz, [189](#), [201](#)
Maher, Bill, [216](#)
Mamdani, Zohran, [165](#), [166](#)
Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, [185](#)
Manocherian, Bernice, [19](#)
March of Return, [94](#)
Marcus, Bernie, [113](#), [114](#), [116](#), [117](#), [141–42](#), [147–49](#), [154](#), [160](#), [181](#), [191](#)
Marcus, Billi, [142](#)
Marcus, Kenneth, [181–84](#)
Marshall, George C., [43–44](#), [46–47](#)
Marya, Rupa, [201](#)
Massad, Joseph, [186](#)
Massie, Thomas, [159](#)
Mathias, Charles “Mac,” [28](#)
Mavi Marmara, [176](#)
McCloy, John, [49](#)
McNamara, Robert, [48](#)

McNulty, Mark, [146–47](#)
Mearsheimer, John, [9](#), [108](#), [171](#), [186](#)
Meir, Golda, [80](#)
Microsoft, [218](#)
Middle East Forum, [21](#)
Miller, Aaron David, [33](#), [34](#), [37](#)
Miller, Stephen, [191](#)
Milstein, Adam, [165–66](#), [181](#)
Moore, Blake, [188](#)
Moran, Jim, [27](#)
Morris, Benny, [102](#)
Mosaic, [212](#)
Mossad, [113](#), [176](#)
Mothers Against College Antisemitism, [197](#)
mow-the-grass operations, [90–92](#), [95](#)
MSNBC, [109](#), [145](#)
Musk, Elon, [142](#), [205](#)
MZ Foundation, [182](#)

N

Nasser, Abdel, [73](#)
National Brands Index (NBI), [98](#)
National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), [211–12](#), [219](#)
National Institutes of Health, [189](#)
National Rifle Association (NRA), [19](#), [20](#), [203](#)
National Security Agency, [2](#)
National Security Council, [37](#)
Nation Central, [141](#)
Nazi Germany, *see* [Holocaust, Nazi Germany](#)
Near East Report, [107](#)
Netanyahu, Benjamin, [20](#), [27](#), [65](#), [66](#), [70](#), [72](#), [75–77](#), [84](#), [96](#), [99](#), [101–3](#), [105–6](#), [110](#), [117](#), [118](#), [155](#), [160](#), [167](#), [175](#), [176](#), [208](#), [210–13](#), [219](#)

Gaza War and, [76](#), [78](#), [208–10](#)
housing demolitions and, [93](#)
Iran's nuclear program and, [112–15](#), [118–19](#)
Iraq and, [107](#), [115](#)
Pollard and, [2](#), [3](#)
TikTok and, [162](#)
Trump and, [149–51](#), [159](#), [160](#), [209–10](#)
United Nations and, [97–98](#), [100](#), [104](#)
US Congress addressed by, [16](#)
Netanyahu, Sara, [78](#)
Newell, Jim, [29](#)
Newsom, Gavin, [187](#)
New York Times, [37](#), [136–37](#), [195](#), [196](#), [216](#)
Nigeria, [209–10](#)
Niles, David, [46](#)
9/11 attacks, [58](#), [62–64](#), [107](#), [109](#), [112](#), [138](#)
Nixon, Richard, [58](#), [61](#)
No Other Land, [217](#)
nuclear weapons, [2](#), [41](#), [48](#), [57–59](#), [68](#), [69](#), [78](#)
 Iran and, [6](#), [38](#), [111–19](#), [130–31](#), [139](#), [145](#), [148](#), [150](#), [159–60](#), [207–8](#), [213–14](#)
 of Israel, [208](#), [213](#)

O

Obama, Barack, [5](#), [7](#), [17](#), [28](#), [35](#), [37](#), [108–11](#), [127](#), [131–32](#), [136–38](#), [124](#), [215](#)
 Iran and, [38](#), [111–15](#), [117–19](#)
Obsession, [110](#)
Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria, [139](#), [166](#)
October 7 attack, [4–5](#), [76](#), [78](#), [86](#), [91](#), [93](#), [96](#), [101](#), [151](#), [156](#), [157](#), [172](#), [185](#), [188](#), [189](#), [196](#), [208](#), [210](#), [212](#)
Office for Civil Rights (OCR), [182–84](#), [190](#)
Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing, [111](#)
Olmert, Ehud, [2](#)

Omar, Ilhan, [139](#), [159](#)
Oracle Corporation, [142](#), [161](#)
Orden, Hedy, [129](#)
Oren, Michael, [32](#)
Oren, Neta, [100–101](#)
Organski, A. F. K., [30–31](#), [35](#), [58](#)
Orthodox Union, [178](#)
Oslo Accords, [20](#), [81](#), [84](#), [100](#), [106–7](#), [138](#)
Other Arab-Israeli Conflict, The (Spiegel), [34–36](#)
Owens, Candace, [160](#), [161](#)
Oxfam, [92](#)

P

Pakistan, [99](#)
Palestine
 British mandate in, [84](#), [88](#)
 civil war in, [45–46](#), [88–89](#)
 Israel established in, [6](#), [11](#), [15](#), [43](#), [44](#), [46–47](#), [56–57](#)
 partition of, [45–46](#), [88](#), [97](#)
 trusteeship proposal for, [46](#)
Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), [51](#), [53–54](#), [56](#), [69](#), [74](#), [75](#), [84](#)
Palestinian Authority, [64](#), [81](#)
Palmach, [87](#)
Paul, Rand, [145](#), [159](#)
Pepper, Claude, [45](#)
Percy, Charles, [23](#)
Peres, Shimon, [2](#), [83–84](#)
Perle, Richard, [65](#)
Perry, Bob and Doyle, [138](#)
Pershing, John J., [43](#)
Pew Research Center, [99](#), [108](#)
Phalange, [75](#)

Philos Project, [141](#), [142](#)
Pincus, Mark, [157](#)
plutocracy, [127](#), [134](#), [153](#), [226](#), [227](#)
Pocan, Mark, [159](#)
political polarization, [106](#), [108–9](#), [119](#), [126–28](#), [138–39](#)
Pollard, Jonathan, [1–4](#), [39](#), [75](#)
Powell, Colin, [63](#)
presidential elections
 of 2008, [107–8](#), [110](#)
 of 2012, [134–38](#)
 of 2016, [145–50](#), [203](#)
 of 2020, [1](#), [2](#), [140–41](#), [159](#)
 of 2024, [4](#), [7](#), [8](#), [141](#), [151–60](#), [184](#), [203](#)
Project for the New American Century, [66](#)

Q

Qatar, [5](#), [72](#), [76](#), [216](#), [222](#)
Qibya, [89](#)
Quandt, William, [55](#)
QXZ Inc., [115](#)

R

Rabin, Yitzhak, [2](#), [48](#), [50](#), [54](#), [80](#), [84](#)
Raizen, Claire, [200](#)
Ramon, Haim, [103](#)
Reagan, Ronald, [18](#), [37](#), [38](#), [49](#), [61](#)
Recanati family, [113](#)
Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC), [105](#), [110](#), [113](#), [115](#), [118](#), [139](#), [140](#), [146–48](#), [152](#)
Rice, Condoleezza, [64](#)
Rice, Susan, [5](#), [114](#)
Ricketts, John and Marlene, [138](#)
Robbins, Rami Chris, [100](#)
Roberts, Kevin, [204–5](#)

Rochios, Bridget, [200–201](#)
Rogich, Sig, [135](#)
Romney, Mitt, [136](#), [138](#)
Roosevelt, Franklin D., [43](#), [44](#), [46](#), [49](#)
Rosen, Steven J., [25–26](#), [40](#), [118](#), [131](#)
Rosenberg, M. J., [26](#)
Ross, Dennis, [37](#)
Rouhani, Hassan, [130](#)
Rowan, Marc, [192–94](#)
Rubio, Marco, [146](#), [147](#), [187](#), [194](#), [207](#)
Rufo, Christopher, [185](#)
Rumsfeld, Donald, [63](#)
Rusk, Dean, [48](#), [80](#)
Russia, [1](#), [6](#), [66](#), [97](#), [98](#), [112](#), [147](#), [149](#), [152](#)
Rynhold, Jonathan, [32–35](#)

S

Saban, Cheryl, [137](#), [142–43](#), [157](#)
Saban, Haim, [8](#), [114](#), [118–19](#), [136–37](#), [142–43](#), [157](#), [163–64](#)
Sadat, Anwar, [52](#), [53](#), [56](#), [74](#), [80](#)
Saddam Hussein, [60–62](#), [107](#), [116](#)
Salaita, Steven, [186](#)
Samaria, [74](#), [81](#), [84](#), [86](#), [102](#)
Sanders, Bernie, [8](#), [139](#), [166](#)
Sapir, Pinchas, [83](#)
Sarandon, Susan, [199](#)
Sarid, Yossi, [103](#)
Saudi Arabia, [23](#), [38](#), [60–62](#), [105](#), [113](#)
Scalise, Steve, [188](#)
Schelling, Thomas, [69](#)
Schumer, Charles, [24](#)
Schusterman, Charles and Lynn, [129](#), [170](#)

Segev, Tom, [102](#)

Seid, Barre, [110–11](#)

Sella, Aviem, [3](#)

Sentelle, David, [133](#)

Shafik, Minouche, [189](#)

Shamir, Yitzhak, [61](#), [167](#)

Shapiro, Ben, [157](#)

Shapiro, Peggy, [179](#)

Sharansky, Natan, [119–20](#), [123](#), [125](#), [170](#), [177](#)

Sharon, Ariel, [64–65](#), [74](#), [75](#), [80–81](#), [89](#), [167](#)

Shavit, Ari, [99](#)

Sheehan, Edward, [50–51](#)

Shenker, Joseph, [197](#)

Sher, Neal, [117](#)

Shillman, Robert J., [160](#)

Shirion Collective, [195](#)

Shultz, George, [18–20](#)

Siegel, Dan, [201](#)

Siegel Marketing Group, [129](#)

Silver, Abba Hillel, [45](#)

Simmons, Harold and Annette, [138](#)

Simpson, Allan K., [23](#)

Sinai Peninsula, [36](#), [50](#), [57](#), [73–74](#), [79](#), [80](#)

Singer, Paul, [116](#), [117](#), [129](#), [141](#), [147](#), [150](#), [154](#), [169](#), [185](#)

Slate, [29](#)

Smotrich, Bezalel, [77](#)

Soffer, Arnon, [94](#)

Soviet Union, [2](#), [30–32](#), [35](#), [41](#), [44](#), [47–49](#), [51](#), [54](#), [57–59](#), [61](#), [73–75](#), [79](#), [119](#)

[SpeechNow.org](#) v. FEC, [132–33](#), [137](#), [140](#)

Spiegel, Steven, [34–36](#)

Stagwell Inc., [225](#)

StandWithUs, [124](#), [158](#), [165](#), [179](#), [199](#), [217](#)

Steering Human Evolution (Dror), [68](#)

Stefanik, Elise, [188](#)

Stein, Shimon, [175](#)

Steiner, David, [24–26](#), [40](#)

Stephens, Bret, [8](#)

Stern, Kenneth, [120](#), [125](#)

Stevens, Ross, [193](#)

Strook, Orit, [102](#)

Sullivan & Cromwell, [197](#)

Super PACs, [4](#), [21](#), [127](#), [133–34](#), [138](#), [140–43](#), [153–55](#), [159](#)

Supreme Court, US, [111](#)

Citizens United, [10](#), [132](#), [133](#), [137](#), [140](#)

Swartz, Sidney, [129](#)

Syria, [5](#), [41](#), [54](#), [59](#), [72–75](#), [79–80](#), [91](#), [102](#), [130](#), [164](#), [214](#)

T

Taub, Gadi, [102](#)

Terrell, Leo, [191](#)

terrorism, global war on, [63–65](#), [97](#), [112](#), [113](#), [138](#)

3 D's formula, [119–20](#), [123](#), [125](#), [171](#)

Tikkun, [27](#)

TikTok, [115](#), [161–62](#), [219](#)

Tikvah, [177](#), [184–85](#)

Tikvah Fund, [124](#), [211–12](#), [215](#), [219](#)

Time, [43](#), [126](#)

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, [124](#), [126](#), [174](#), [181–84](#), [190](#), [191](#)

Tlaib, Rashida, [139](#), [159](#), [166](#)

Torres, Ritchie, [22](#), [143](#), [166](#), [202](#)

Tree of Life synagogue massacre, [178](#), [204](#)

Truman, Harry, [35](#), [41](#), [43–47](#), [49](#), [56–57](#)

Trump, Donald, [1–4](#), [6–8](#), [36](#), [127](#), [145–52](#), [159–161](#), [181](#), [183–85](#), [191](#), [194](#), [196–97](#), [211](#), [212](#), [214](#), [217](#), [219](#), [226](#)

antisemitism and, [123–24](#), [126](#), [171](#), [178](#), [184–86](#), [191](#), [205](#)
in election of 2016, [145–50](#), [203](#)
in election of 2024, [8](#), [151](#), [157–58](#), [184](#), [203](#)
Iran war and, [207–9](#), [213–14](#)
Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, [68](#), [145–46](#), [148–50](#)
Knesset addressed by, [162–63](#)
Netanyahu and, [149–51](#), [159](#), [160](#), [209–10](#)
net worth of, [203](#)
Russia and, [147](#), [149](#), [152](#)
Trump family, wealth of, [203](#)
Turning Point USA, [160](#)

U

Ukraine, [1](#), [6](#), [155](#)
United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), [113](#)
United Democracy Project (UDP) Super PAC, [153–55](#), [159](#)
United Nations, [6](#), [17](#), [58](#), [61](#), [86](#), [97](#), [102](#), [103](#), [120](#), [138](#), [149](#), [216](#)
 Gaza War and, [92](#)
 General Assembly, [17](#), [103–4](#), [137](#)
 Goldstone Report of, [130](#)
 Human Rights Council, [97](#), [149](#)
 Iran and, [114](#)
 Netanyahu and, [97–98](#), [100](#), [104](#)
 partition resolution of, [45–46](#), [88](#), [97](#)
 Security Council, [51](#), [52](#), [57–58](#), [103](#), [112](#)
Unite the Right rally, [178](#)
University of California, Berkeley, [182](#), [194–95](#)
U.S. House of Representatives Staff Report on Antisemitism, [188–91](#)
US-Israel relationship
 aid to Israel in, [4–7](#), [15–17](#), [19](#), [30–32](#), [51](#), [57](#), [58](#), [106](#), [152](#), [155–57](#), [180](#)
 benefits to US in, [58](#)
 cultural affinity in, [32](#), [34](#)

Israel's contribution to US in, [30](#), [31](#)
as liability to US, [58–59](#), [66–67](#)
memorandums in, [5](#), [50–51](#)
as special, [15](#), [32](#), [38](#), [58](#), [66](#), [104](#), [220](#)
US National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, [178](#)

V

Vaknin-Gil, Sima, [116](#)
Vance, Cyrus, [54–56](#)
Vance, J. D., [205](#), [221](#)
Variety, [143](#)
Vaturi, Nissim, [96](#)
Vietnam War, [187](#)
Voice of Hind Rajab, The, [217](#)

W

Walberg, Tim, [174](#)
Walker, Scott, [147](#)
Wall Street Journal, [126](#), [134](#)
Walt, Stephen, [9](#), [108](#), [171](#), [186](#)
Washington, George, [13–15](#), [34](#), [39](#), [43](#), [219](#)
Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), [21](#), [36–37](#), [128](#), [158](#)
Washington Political Action Committee, [22](#)
Washington Post, [23](#), [37](#), [126](#), [136](#), [148](#)
Washington Times, [24](#)
wealth inequality, [106](#), [126–28](#)
Weekly Standard, [66](#)
Weissman, Keith, [25](#)
Weiss, Bari, [216](#), [217](#)
Weiss, Daniella, [77](#)
Weizmann, Chaim, [45](#)
West Bank, [6](#), [20](#), [22](#), [54–56](#), [58](#), [65](#), [71–74](#), [77](#), [80–83](#), [86](#), [88–90](#), [93](#), [159](#), [167](#), [173](#), [217–20](#), [222](#), [224](#)

Wexler, Robert, [118](#)

Wisse, Ruth, [212](#), [219](#)

Wolff, Michael, [150](#)

Wolfowitz, Paul, [64](#)

Woodcock, Ramsi, [125](#)

World Jewish Congress, [8](#), [193](#)

World Union of Jewish Students, [168](#)

World War I, [43](#)

World War II, [40](#), [43](#), [49](#)

World Zionist Organization (WZO), [45](#), [166](#)

Jewish Agency, [46](#), [119](#), [120](#), [166](#), [168](#)

Wurmser, David, [65](#)

Y

Yass, Jeff, [115](#), [141](#)

Yemen, [5](#), [6](#), [72](#), [79](#), [102](#), [214](#)

Yesh Atid, [101](#)

Z

Zeidman, Fred, [136](#)

Zimmerman, Myron, [182](#)

Zimmermann, Moshe, [175](#)

Zionism, [2](#), [22](#), [44–46](#), [68](#), [76](#), [77](#), [81](#), [83–84](#), [86–88](#), [90](#), [99](#), [100](#), [102](#), [107](#), [108](#), [125](#), [135](#), [155](#), [167](#), [182](#), [186](#), [187](#), [201](#), [202](#), [222](#), [223](#)

criticism of, [119–20](#), [123](#), [126](#), [171–75](#), [188](#), [189](#), [222](#)

Zionist Organization of America, [142](#), [182](#), [196](#)

Zorinsky, Edward, [22](#)

Zuckerberg, Mark, [105](#)



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