

# Beyond the Speeches: Israel's Role in the 2016 Election

At the recent American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference, each of the remaining United States presidential candidates—except for Democratic contender Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), who did not appear—essentially laid claim to being the most pro-Israel candidate.

Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, the former Secretary of State and First Lady, told the crowd that she has the “steady hands” Israel needs and that Israel’s security “is non-negotiable.” Republican candidate Governor John Kasich of Ohio called his support for Israel “firm, and unwavering for more than 35 years of my professional life.” Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) said he would “stand unapologetically with the nation of Israel” and would “not be neutral” on the issue, a swipe at his GOP opponent businessman Donald Trump, who has in the past said he would be a “neutral” peace broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But at the AIPAC conference, Trump instead promoted himself as a “lifelong supporter and true friend of Israel,” repeatedly urging the audience to “believe me.”

Yet the AIPAC speeches were just that—speeches. What candidates espouse on the campaign trail is almost never a fully accurate foreshadowing of what their policies will be once they’re in office. When it comes to Israel, which has long been touted by the AIPAC lobby and other pro-Israel groups as a bipartisan issue, there have been some shifts in policy of late, says Amnon Cavari, a lecturer at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya, Israel.

Cavari—who completed his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin and focuses on American politics, with a specific focus on the

presidency, public opinion, and political parties—says there is a documented growing gap between Republican and Democratic support of Israel. He notes that a poll he recently conducted found that when Republicans were asked whether their sympathies lie more with Israelis or Palestinians, more than 80 percent sided with Israel. In contrast, only around 55 percent of Democrats said the same.

“Democrats are still more supportive of Israelis than Palestinians, but the gap is smaller [than it is for Republicans],” Cavari tells . “We started to see Democratic support for Israel slip in the 1990s, and it has dropped dramatically during the 2000s.”

The causes for this trend are complex, he says. First, a decision in the late 1970s for evangelical Christians to get involved in politics through the Republican party has led to the rise of today’s Evangelical party leaders like Cruz and Kasich. Evangelical Christians tend to have religiously rooted pro-Israel views.

Second, American policy during the Cold War tried to prevent Soviet Union influence by supporting anti-communist regimes and backing Israel against Soviet-sponsored Arab countries. But when the Cold War ended, the U.S. entered into what Cavari calls “a small theatre of war,” in an attempt to manage affairs in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. President George H.W. Bush sacrificed American lives to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait, in order to restore the “legitimate” government of that feudal monarchy and create a “new world order,” says Cavari.

Then the war on terror began.

“People started to get clearer views of what was happening, and people and politicians started to struggle over American foreign policy decisions,” Cavari says. “Israel is considered to be on the side of the U.S., but Israel is inherently tied

to the challenges in the Middle East.”

Finally, as polarization between American political parties became more acute in recent years, party leaders increasingly took stances that were as antithetical as possible to the positions of the other party—whether it be for a good reason or not.

“This is even the case for things about which in the past they (the parties) would have been agreeable, like Israel,” says Cavari.

Nonetheless, this information might not sway American Jewish voters. Cavari says that American voters, including American Jews, tend not to vote based on issues like Israel. A 2012 Public Religion Research Institute Jewish Values Survey showed that American Jews felt candidates’ stances on the economy (50 percent), the growing gap between rich and poor (15 percent), health care (9 percent), and the federal deficit (7 percent) would factor more into their voting decisions than Israel (4 percent).

And how will Muslim voters be swayed? Rania Khalek—a 29-year-old Muslim from the Washington, D.C., area who has become somewhat of an unofficial spokesperson on issues relating to Bernie Sanders for the American Muslim community—says Muslims are generally supporting Sanders. She tells that Hillary Clinton has a history of “vilifying Muslims and Arabs in an attempt to court pro-Israel voters.... A big part of her platform is unconditional, hardline support for Israel that doesn’t take into account the existence of Palestinians. Clinton’s outlook on Middle East policy is incredibly hawkish.” Jewish Republicans, naturally, would disagree.

### **Who’s the best candidate for Israel?**

Dennis Ross, who has served as a key Middle East adviser for both Democratic and Republican presidential administrations, believes that a president’s Israel policy depends less on the

president and more on the president's advisers. In each of the five administrations Ross has worked for, he recalls, there was a constituency within the generally pro-Israel national security apparatus that looked at Israel through a relatively negative lens and felt that American association with the Jewish state had to be qualified.

"In every administration, there was a group that saw Israel as more of a problem than a partner," says Ross, making the remarks at a Jewish People Policy Institute event in March.

Each president, even those who are today remembered fondly by Israel, gave into this skeptical constituency at one time or another—except for Bill Clinton, according to Ross. Despite the 9/11 attacks, former president George W. Bush pushed Israel's then-prime minister Ariel Sharon to negotiate with the Palestinians. Sharon unilaterally withdrew Israel from Gaza in 2005. President Ronald Reagan suspended weapons sales to Israel twice in response to policy disagreements.

But Bill Clinton stood out from the other administrations in this realm, says Ross.

"Clinton said, 'We can have differences with Israelis, but we don't want to broadcast those differences,'" Ross explains. "He said that because he believed that if the U.S. created a wedge between the U.S. and Israel, as Israel's only friend in the world, this would strengthen Israel's enemies and make peace less likely."

Ross says presidents make mistakes with Israel because they each come into office carrying one of three assumptions. First, that distance from Israel will help them gain ground with the Arabs, which Ross says was the case for Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush and current President Barack Obama.

"Every single president who engaged in distancing never produced what it wanted from the Arabs. They usually got more

Arab demands," says Ross.

Second is the assumption that cooperating with Israel will lead to a loss of relations with the Arabs, which Ross links with John F. Kennedy.

"Wrong—what matters most to the Arabs is their own survival," says Ross.

Third, some presidents believe they cannot have any impact on the region if they don't first solve the Palestinian issue.

"War in Syria. War in Yemen. ISIS. Iraq. None of that is related to Israel and the Palestinian issue," Ross says.

Israelis, in Ross's estimation, should have hope regardless of who assumes the Oval Office next year.

"In a period of turmoil and uncertainty and next administration's instinct is going to be to improve things with Israel," he says. "The president will not need problems with Israel when it is dealing with all the other problems around Israel."

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