

UK PM Theresa May Promises to 'Stand by the Jewish Community'

The names of former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher are familiar as prominent symbols of strong female leadership in times when women heads of state were rare.

By 2015, however, the number of female leaders of nations reached 19, according to the United Nations. On July 13, British Home Secretary Theresa May joined the club by replacing outgoing U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, becoming the U.K.'s second female prime minister after Thatcher.

As America waits to see if Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton becomes the country's first female president in the November 2016 election, provides eight examples of current and former non-Jewish female heads of state, their relations with Israel and the Jewish community, and how they embody *tikkun olam*—the Jewish value of repairing the world.

Angela Merkel

The daughter of a Lutheran pastor, Merkel has been the chancellor of Germany since 2005. She has spoken out many times about her commitment to fighting anti-Semitism in a country carrying the notoriety of Holocaust history, calling Germany's current community of 100,000 Jews a "national treasure" at a 2014 rally and saying that it is "every German's duty" to take a stand against anti-Jewish threats. The same year, she received Israel's Presidential Medal of Distinction.

Back in Germany, using the German slogan "wir schaffen das" ("we can do this"), Merkel has steadfastly expressed her

commitment to the acceptance and integration of Syrian and other Middle Eastern refugees in Germany. Her political rivals have criticized her for this refugee policy due to the growth of Islamic extremism in Germany, a trend many have blamed on the refugees.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Sirleaf, the president of Liberia since 2006, is Africa's first democratically elected female president. She was imprisoned in the 1980s and also lived in exile to avoid persecution for criticizing the government. She shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her promotion of women's rights and women's safety.

In June 2016, Sirleaf visited Israel for the second time and thanked the Jewish state for its help during the Ebola crisis of 2015.

"We want to share in the tremendous progress that Israel has made especially in the field of agriculture, where your achievements continue to amaze us," she said.

Theresa May

Before becoming prime minister last week, in her capacity as home secretary—a position responsible for the internal affairs of England and Wales—May had promised to defend the country's Jewish community and wipe out anti-Semitism.

"No one wants the school where they send their child to need security guards, or have their place of worship be fitted with security alarms and blast-resistant glass. But until that changes, the government is clear—we will stand by the Jewish community," May said.

May has also been known for supporting religious freedom, particularly the Jewish practices of shechita (kosher slaughter) and brit milah (ritual circumcision), and has

advocated for greater British-Israeli ties in homeland security.

Tsai Ing-wen

Ing-wen became the first female president of Taiwan in January 2016. During the election campaign, she focused strongly on a platform advocating for more women leaders and workplace equality, and expressed support for same-sex marriage.

“When it comes to love, everyone is equal. I am Tsai Ing-wen, and I support marriage equality. Every person should be able to look for love freely, and freely seek their own happiness,” she said.

In 2013, Ing-wen praised Israel and its citizens’ ability to lead normal lives amid a reality of ongoing terrorism, in addition to lauding the Jewish state’s high-tech industry.

Benazir Bhutto

Bhutto, as Pakistan’s prime minister, was the first democratically elected female president of a Muslim country. She served as prime minister for two terms in the 1990s before being accused and tried on charges of corruption. After several years in exile, she returned to Pakistan but was assassinated in 2007.

In 2008, Bhutto was posthumously awarded the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights. “My mother always said, democracy is the best revenge,” said Bhutto’s son, Bilawal, after her death.

As prime minister of Pakistan, a Muslim country in a region typically hostile to Israel and Jews, Bhutto developed surprisingly positive relations with both Jews and Israel. The Israeli newspaper *Ma’ariv* reported that she had asked Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency, along with the U.K.’s Scotland Yard and America’s CIA, for protection.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had called the assassination of Bhutto a “great tragedy.” Mark Siegel, a Democratic Party consultant and Jewish community liaison who knew Bhutto, said the Pakistani leader “was the most tolerant person I know ... She was at my daughter’s bat mitzvah. Her husband came to my daughter’s wedding.”

Michelle Bachelet

Bachelet has been the president of Chile since 2014. She was also president from 2006-2010, when she was the first female president in her country’s history.

A socialist politician, Bachelet began her second presidency by promising to tackle economic and social inequality, education reform, and human rights abuses by police.

“We need to ensure that everyone has the same rights and opportunities,” Bachelet said in 2014.

During her first term as president, Bachelet garnered praise from the Jewish community for appointing three Jews as government ministers. At the time, the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Achronoth* referred to her cabinet as “the most Jewish government in the world.”

Yet Bachelet’s government has had a strained relationship with Israel. During Israel’s 2014 war with Hamas in Gaza, Chile recalled its ambassador to the Jewish state and referred to Operation Protection Edge as “collective punishment” for the Palestinians.

Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović

Grabar-Kitarović, the president of Croatia since 2015, is the first woman elected to that post in her country. At age 46, she was also the youngest president-elect in Croatian history.

“I would like to see more effort on preventing organized crime, co-operation on matters of security, but also a more

vigorous fight against corruption, media freedoms, democratic systems, control of the intelligence sector, and the proper usage of the intelligence sector in accordance with the law," she said in 2015.

In 2015, Grabar-Kitarović visited Israel, participating in a ceremony at the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in which Croatian-American film producer Branko Lustig donated the Oscar he received for "Schindler's List" to Yad Vashem. Grabar-Kitarović told Israel's *i24news* that Croatia's collaboration with the Nazis is "a dark period in our history that casts a shadow on Croatia's past."

Dalia Grybauskaite

Grybauskaite, in her second term, is Lithuania's first woman president.

In 2015, she spoke out several times against Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine.

"It is our duty to uphold the international, humanitarian, and human rights laws, and to seek accountability when these laws are violated," she said.

Grybauskaite visited Israel in 2015. In a meeting with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, she said, "Lithuania and Israel are facing difficult challenges. Lithuania is well aware of what unrest and military threats in the region mean and how much effort it takes to ensure peaceful national development. Therefore, we must do everything we can to prevent provocations and protect peaceful populations. Aggression, coercion, and violence cannot be justified."

Grybauskaite and Rivlin discussed Israeli-Lithuanian economic, financial, and high-tech cooperation. The Lithuanian leader also visited Yad Vashem and planted an olive tree in the Grove of Nations, where more than 700 commemorative trees are planted in honor of Lithuanian citizens who saved Jews during

the Holocaust. {eo}

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