

Chapter 4

American Jews and the International Arena (April 2016 – April 2017): US–Israel Relations and Obama’s Mixed Legacy Followed by the Uncertainty of Trump

Mitchell Bard

The year 2016 was dominated by the presidential campaign and the surprising emergence of Donald Trump as the Republican frontrunner, nominee, and ultimate victor in the election. Against this backdrop, however, the incumbent president continued to govern the country and, like many of his predecessors, hoped to create a legacy by facilitating a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. While his secretary of state gamely pursued this goal, President Obama signed a 10-year, \$38 billion military aid deal with Israel even as he continued to publicly criticize Israel’s “occupation” of “Palestinian land” and expansion of settlements. Israeli anger over the US-Iran nuclear deal lingered, with the Israelis still looking for ways to weaken it and strengthen non-nuclear sanctions against Iran. The bitterness also led Israeli officials and American Jews to worry that Obama might take some last-minute steps, most likely at the United Nations, to endorse Palestinian demands opposed by Israel and limit the negotiating options of his successor. Although he did not go as far as some feared, Obama did end his presidency with an abstention on an anti-settlement provision at the United Nations Security Council, thus allowing the anti-Israel resolution to pass.

4.1 Disagreements Over the Iran Deal Persist

While Obama continued to trumpet the nuclear deal with Iran as a success, many Israelis and their supporters maintained a steady drumbeat of criticism. Israel pointed to indications from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Iran was not fulfilling its obligations under the deal and harped on the provision (some would say loophole) that allowed Iran to maintain a large number of

M. Bard (✉)

American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, Jewish Virtual Library, Chevy Chase, MD, USA
e-mail: mitchellbard@gmail.com

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centrifuges, update them, and thus to prepare to resume its nuclear weapons program as soon as the agreement expired – if not before.¹

Although they recognized the chances of undoing the agreement were remote, pro-Israel lobbyists hoped Congress would take steps to strengthen existing sanctions or impose new ones. That effort suffered a setback when the Trump administration notified Congress in April 2017 that Iran was complying with the terms of the nuclear deal and would extend the sanctions relief approved under the agreement. Critics took solace in the simultaneous announcement by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the administration was reviewing the agreement.²

In testimony before Congress, one of the leading experts on the nuclear deal, David Albright, President of the Institute for Science and International Security, questioned the conclusion that Iran was complying with the agreement:

certain patterns of Iranian non-compliance are clear. Iran often conducts small-scale cheating on the JCPOA's [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] nuclear limitations. It misinterprets clauses to justify actions that should more properly be viewed as violations. A damaging pattern that developed during the Obama administration is that Iran would create a crisis over a potential violation, the US and allies would have to find a "solution," and Iran would cynically demand compensation as part of that solution. Throughout this process, Iran has demanded an unjustified amount of secrecy from the P5+1 and the IAEA, hiding many of its activities from governments and the public and thereby more easily accomplishing its deceptive and brazen goals.... In addition, Iran is not in compliance with UNSC [United Nations Security Council] resolution 2231's prohibition on conventional weapons sales and transfers and against making procurements for its military and missile programs without UN Security Council authorization.³

Critics also insisted the deal was flawed because it did not address Iran's ballistic missile research, sponsorship of terror or ongoing threats to its neighbors.

Regardless of whether one believed the deal would prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb, it was clear that the agreement had not modified Iran's non-nuclear behavior. Iran intensified its anti-American rhetoric and engaged in several provocative activities, such as sending patrol boats to harass US Navy ships in the Persian Gulf. Iran also remained the leading sponsor of international terror, sent more troops to Syria and Yemen, transferred weapons to Hezbollah for a future confrontation with Israel, continued efforts to destabilize the Sunni-led Gulf States and strived to undermine American interests in the region. Paradoxically, Obama was hamstrung by the nuclear deal. The Iranians effectively blackmailed the US by vowing to renege

¹ See, for example, "Iran Once Again Violates Nuclear Deal's Limit on Heavy Water," *The Tower*, (November 9, 2016); Fred Fleitz, "Obama Withheld from Congress Another Secret Side Deal with the Iranians," *National Review*, (July 19, 2016); Ryan Browne, "German intelligence: Iran may have tried to violate nuclear deal," *CNN Politics*, (July 8, 2016); Mortimer B. Zuckerman, "A Bad Deal Off to a Worse Start," *US News & World Report*, (January 21, 2016).

² Matthew Lee, "Trump administration: Iran complying with nuclear deal," *USA Today*, (April 19, 2017).

³ **Testimony** of David Albright, President of the Institute for Science and International Security, before the House Subcommittee on National Security, Committee of Oversight and Government Reform Assessing the Iran Deal: Examining Iranian Non-Compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, (April 5, 2017).

on the agreement if Obama did anything to upset them. Consequently, to the dismay of Israel and America’s other regional allies, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States, Obama did nothing to interfere with Iran’s hegemonic designs and, worse, some would argue, facilitated them by providing billions of dollars as ransom for Americans held hostage in Tehran, and billions more to fulfill obligations he agreed to in the negotiations, money that underwrites Iran’s nefarious goals.⁴

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not retreat from his criticism of the “bad deal.” Though some former officials from Israel’s security establishment argued he should accept the agreement as a “done deal,”⁵ former Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Oren explained that the prime minister could not let go of the issue because he “sees himself as a man in history, sees himself in the Churchillian sense, and sees himself as a man with a mission, which is to save this country from what he calls a ‘messianic’ genocidal ‘cult’ that runs Iran.... He sees himself as this man with a mission to save the country from a recurrence of a Holocaust-like occurrence.”⁶

Though Netanyahu received the brunt of Obama’s anger over what the president viewed as the prime minister’s condescending suggestion that he did not appreciate the Iranian threat because he did not understand the Middle East, other leaders shared Netanyahu’s assessment. Jordan’s King Abdullah, for example, lamented that the US thinks it knows the region better than the people who live there. “The ethnic makeup of the region is pretty glaringly obvious for us that live in the region,” Hussein said, but “advisers and think tanks in the West seem to know us better than we supposedly know ourselves.”⁷ Similarly, while Obama dismissed warnings from Netanyahu of the global threat of radical Islam as an attack on Islam, King Abdullah bluntly stated a year earlier, “We are facing a Third World War.”⁸

4.2 Disputes Over Billions in Aid to Israel

While many pro-Israel activists and Israelis frequently criticized Obama’s policies and questioned his commitment to Israel, the president and his supporters acted astonished by the attacks, insisting that the administration’s commitment to Israel was ironclad as reflected by unprecedented military cooperation and arms sales. “Obama’s near parting gift to Israel, a guarantee of \$38 billion in defense assistance

⁴David E. Sanger, “US Concedes \$400 Million Payment to Iran Was Delayed as Prisoner ‘Leverage,’” *New York Times*, (August 18, 2016).

⁵“Former Top Brass to Netanyahu: Accept Iran Accord as ‘Done Deal,’” *Haaretz*, (August 3, 2015).

⁶Sarah Moughty, “Michael Oren: Inside Obama-Netanyahu’s Relationship,” *PBS Frontline*, (January 6, 2016).

⁷Jessie Hellmann, “Jordanian king: US thinks it knows Middle East better than its residents,” *The Hill*, (September 25, 2016).

⁸“Jordan’s King Abdullah: We Are Facing A Third World War,” *Reuters*, (November 17, 2015).

over a decade, distills into a single document what he's been saying through eight fraught years: I have your back, but on my terms."⁹ Even that seemingly favorable decision, however, was fraught with tension.

The existing agreement, expiring in 2018, was already the largest aid deal between the US and any other country. At the end of that 10-year agreement, Israel will have received \$31 billion worth of arms plus several additional billion allocated by Congress to develop three anti-missile defense systems, Iron Dome, which intercepts short-range rockets up to 40 KM, David's Sling, a joint US-Israel project to destroy rockets with ranges up to 200 KM and the Arrow, meant to intercept long-range missiles.

The new agreement offers more funding for Israeli military needs but also imposes several new restrictions on how aid is allocated. In particular, Israel is forbidden to ask for additional funds, and if Congress allocates any additional amount, that amount is deducted from the \$31 million deal. Israel reluctantly agreed to this clause to secure a predictable aid stream. Obama's objective, however, appears to have been to strengthen Israel while weakening the pro-Israel lobby. First, the entire agreement is with the Executive Branch where AIPAC has little influence. Second, by usurping financial power from Congress, AIPAC's ability to lobby for assistance to Israel – its principal mission – is weakened. This power play by the White House is also meant to avoid what presidents view as the annoyance of Israel and its supporters circumventing them to procure from Congress what the president prefers to withhold. The agreement does provide an exception that allows Israel to go to Congress for additional aid in case of war, though what constitutes a "war" is undefined.

A major change that takes effect within 6 years phases out the existing arrangement whereby Israel can spend up to 26% of US aid in Israel. These funds have been crucial in helping Israel to develop its own weapons systems, to modify existing US systems, and to pay for jet fuel for the Air Force. The Israeli recipients of defense contracts also benefitted by adding to their bottom line, creating jobs, and having additional incentives to innovate.

The deal was controversial in Israel primarily because of the belief by opponents of the Netanyahu government that his poor relationship with Obama weakened his bargaining position. Netanyahu had hoped to secure a package worth \$45 billion, which was probably unreasonable given the US economy and America's commitments to wars in the Middle East; nevertheless, his political rivals insisted the smaller deal was an indication of the cost of 7 years of hostility between the two leaders and his alliance with Republicans to fight the Iran deal.

While short of Israeli desires, the deal is still substantial and further solidifies the alliance with the US from 2018 until 2028. The agreement provides \$3.3 billion annually for weapons, including America's new top-of-the-line F-35 fighter jets, with a guarantee of \$500 million more every year for missile defense.

It is also conceivable that under President Trump, the agreement could be renegotiated on more favorable terms for Israel. Support could be found in Congress for

⁹Ron Kampeas, "Obama's \$38B aid package to Israel comes with caveats: It's generous, but on his terms," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, (September 14, 2016).

this idea as members such as Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-SC, the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee’s subcommittee dispensing foreign aid, objected to the deal and said he would seek additional funds through Congress because Israel needs even more aid to help protect itself from Iran and its proxy groups, Hamas and Hezbollah.¹⁰

Unquestionably, the arms package was beneficial for Israel, but it did not undo the damage created by the Iran deal. As David Hazony noted, “by maintaining military aid and cooperation with Israel, and by occasionally voicing his commitment to Israel’s security, Obama could still claim to be pro-Israel while in fact empowering its greatest enemy.”¹¹

4.3 Obama Gets the Last Word

The positive feelings created when the foreign aid deal was finalized were short lived. Israelis were publicly speculating that Obama would try to “level the playing field” between the Palestinians and the Israelis before leaving office by an executive order, speech, or UN action that would castigate Israel, bolster the Palestinian demand for statehood, or set the parameters for a future peace agreement aimed at limiting the flexibility of Israel and the next president. Members of Congress were so concerned that 88 senators signed a letter to Obama in September asking him to restate America’s commitment to Israel and to veto one-sided anti-Israel resolutions at the UN.

The suspicion was that Obama would feel free to express his anger and frustration with Israel because he no longer had to worry about reelection. The expectation was that he would wait until after the election to avoid damaging Clinton’s support among pro-Israel voters. These fears were heightened in early October 2016 when the administration condemned Israel in especially harsh terms for announcing plans to construct new housing in the settlement of Shvut Rachel. The White House accused Netanyahu of renegeing on a promise to Obama not to build any new settlements, but the government considered it part of the normal growth of an existing settlement. The timing also angered Obama, as it came just after the military aid agreement was signed and the day Shimon Peres died.

Even Obama’s appearance at the memorial service for Peres proved controversial. At 8 AM on September 30, 2016, the White House posted the official transcript of the president’s remarks, which it said were delivered on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, Israel. At 4:30 PM, a “corrected” version deleted the reference to Israel to conform to the refusal of the US to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Thus, the anomalous situation was created whereby the president had spoken in a city without a country.

A few months later, Israeli anxieties over a December surprise were proven justified when Obama decided to abstain on a UN resolution condemning Israeli settlements.

¹⁰“The Contest Over Israel Aid,” Editorial, *New York Times*, (September 16, 2016).

¹¹David Hazony, “The Mind of the President,” *The Tower*, (June 2016).

4.4 The US Abstains on UN Settlement Vote

When Obama came into office promising to dramatically reverse his predecessor's policies, court the Muslim world, cease to behave like Israel's "lawyer" and vigorously advocate for a Palestinian state, the Palestinians were hopeful they would have an ally in the White House who would finally use the power of the presidency to help them achieve their short-term goal of independence.

Mahmoud Abbas recognized within the first year of the Obama administration, however, that, despite his expressed interest in facilitating the establishment of a Palestinian state, the president did not have the will to use the full weight of American influence to force Israel to accept Palestinian demands. This first became evident when Obama demanded that Israel freeze settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Tactically, this was a grave error that doomed Obama's peace efforts and set relations with Israel on a downward spiral. Netanyahu agreed to a 10-month freeze, but only in the West Bank. By failing to punish Israel for continuing to build in East Jerusalem, Abbas became convinced the president's goodwill was not sufficient to change the situation on the ground in the Palestinians' favor. Sensing weakness, Abbas also found he could ignore Obama's entreaties with impunity, repeatedly refusing to enter talks with Netanyahu and then seeking recognition of "Palestine" from the UN.

Abbas subsequently adopted the strategy of enlisting international support to isolate and ostracize Israel. Seeking to emulate what the Palestinians believed was a successful model for bringing down the Afrikaner regime in South Africa, Abbas hoped the UN would impose sanctions aimed at forcing Israel to capitulate to Palestinian demands. This strategy was accompanied by the global delegitimization campaign – the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement – that seeks to isolate Israel in every sphere: diplomatic, economic, academic, and culturally.

Abbas's UN gambit ran into problems, however, when Obama rebuffed calls to support a UN resolution that would recognize a state of Palestine, dictate the terms of a future agreement, or declare Israeli settlements illegal. Obama's reaction may have been shaped by his desire to avoid angering voters supportive of Israel whom Hillary Clinton needed to be elected.

Israel and some of its supporters, however, sensed throughout the year that Obama was seeking some way to punish Netanyahu for what the president saw as his truculence, and that he might use the UN to create a framework favorable to the Palestinians that would serve as the basis for future talks and make it easier for Hillary Clinton to pursue policies that would have otherwise been difficult to get by the pro-Israel lobby if she was the initiator. Obama was also thought to be looking for a way to add to his legacy by being the midwife to a future Palestinian state. Abbas wanted nothing less than a UN resolution declaring the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1949 armistice line with East Jerusalem as the capital and the right of Palestinians to return to their homes inside pre-1967 Israel. Israel adamantly opposed any resolution whatsoever, insisting the dispute with the Palestinians could only end as a result of direct negotiations.

Deliberations at the UN reached a climax on December 23, 2016, after the failure of Kerry’s quixotic diplomacy and after Trump defeated Clinton. To the shock of many, Obama ordered the US to abstain rather than veto Security Council Resolution 2334, a one-sided measure labeling Israeli settlements “a flagrant violation of international law” that damage the prospects of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As recently as 2011, Obama vetoed a similar resolution on settlements but now claimed the vote simply reflected longstanding US policy when, in fact, American opposition to settlements has been predicated on their possible implication for a peace agreement not their legality.

The vote should not have been a surprise given that the administration had telegraphed its position earlier in the summer. Even as ISIS was on the march, the slaughter in Syria was escalating and the US confronted a host of serious economic and strategic challenges around the world, the State Department issued a scathing public condemnation of Israel in July 2016 for announcing plans to build homes in Kiryat Arba near Hebron and additional housing in East Jerusalem.

Elliott Abrams, a former deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor in the administration of President George W. Bush, said the criticism was “politically quite stupid.” He pointed out that the Israeli government announcements pertained to *tenders* that were needed, but did not guarantee future construction. Abrams also noted that Netanyahu had been sensitive to the administration’s objection to settlements and restricted building in areas outside the Israeli consensus (i.e., blocs of settlements close to the Green Line that are expected to be annexed to Israel in any future agreement). The State Department, he said, refused to “distinguish between construction in isolated settlements in the West Bank in areas that must become part of Palestine if a State of Palestine is ever created; construction in major blocs that Israel will obviously keep in land swaps; and construction in Jerusalem. It treats them all equally as the ‘steady acceleration of settlement activity that is systematically undermining the prospects for a two-state solution.’ Moreover, it refers to construction in Jerusalem, Israel’s capital, as settlement construction, and refers to Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem as ‘East Jerusalem settlements.’ There are no ‘East Jerusalem settlements;’ the term ‘settlement’ loses meaning when applied to Jews building homes in their nation’s capital city.”¹²

The reference to East Jerusalem was an illustration of how little Obama had learned in his 8 years in office. It was his insistence that the settlement freeze he called for in 2009 include Jerusalem that guaranteed the failure of his peace initiative. As Abrams pointed out following the State Department’s 2016 statement, “If the State Department criticized construction by settler groups in remote West Bank areas, it would actually have most Israelis [and American Jews] on its side. But when it treats Jerusalem neighborhoods and a place like Maale Adumim [the largest “settlement” in the West Bank, with roughly 40,000 residents, and a city Israel will undoubtedly annex if a peace agreement is signed] as indistinguishable

¹²Elliott Abrams, “The New State Department Assault on Israel,” [Council on Foreign Relations](#), (July 28, 2016).

from any and every settler activity no matter how remote, Israelis will mostly shrug and wonder why the Americans are so dumb.”¹³

Obama later explained his decision: “I did believe it was important to send a signal and to lift up the facts that so often get buried under other news in terms of what is happening with settlements in the West Bank,” he said. “I have an obligation to do what I think is right.”¹⁴

As Dennis Ross noted, Obama viewed Israel as the problem and was unwilling to hold the Palestinians accountable for the absence of peace. In an interview, Obama revealed one reason for this bias. Israel, he said is in a position of strength; consequently, Israelis “are in a position to take some risks for peace. Not stupid risks, not reckless risks, but some risks.”¹⁵

Speaking to the Security Council, Israel’s UN ambassador, Danny Danon, described the resolution as “evil” and likened it to condemning Americans for building in Washington or the French for building in Paris. “This resolution today will be added to the long and shameful list of anti-Israel UN resolutions,” Danon said. “Instead of charting a course forward, you are sending a message to the Palestinians that they should continue on the path of terrorism and incitement, that they should continue to hold people hostage, that they should continue to seek meaningless statements from the international community.”¹⁶

Donald Trump posted his reaction on Facebook:

As the United States has long maintained, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians will only come through direct negotiations between the parties, and not through the imposition of terms by the United Nations. This puts Israel in a very poor negotiating position and is extremely unfair to all Israelis.¹⁷

Obama’s opposition to settlements was no surprise; however, what particularly upset Israel was the resolution’s description of East Jerusalem as occupied territory, which some interpreted as meaning that the US disputes the right of Israelis, and the Jewish people, to their holy places. The vote also kept alive Palestinian hopes of controlling the Temple Mount (which along with its Western Wall are the two holiest places in Judaism), dividing Jerusalem, and establishing their capital in the city.

¹³Elliott Abrams, “The New State Department Assault on Israel,” [Council on Foreign Relations](#), (July 28, 2016).

¹⁴“Obama defends UN abstention, Iran deal and peace push in Israeli TV interview,” [JTA](#), (January 10, 2017).

¹⁵“Obama defends UN abstention, Iran deal and peace push in Israeli TV interview,” [JTA](#), (January 10, 2017).

¹⁶“UN passes anti-settlement resolution, US abstains,” [JTA](#), (December 23, 2016).

¹⁷“UN passes anti-settlement resolution, US abstains,” [JTA](#), (December 23, 2016).

4.5 Kerry's Sisyphean Pursuit of Peace

Throughout the year, Secretary of State John Kerry continued a diplomatic effort to bring Israel and the Palestinians together for peace talks. Though he worked tirelessly, Kerry could not overcome Mahmoud Abbas' resistance to engaging in any direct talks with Netanyahu and the Palestinians' determination to build an international consensus against Israel. As he had throughout Obama's term, Netanyahu offered to meet with Abbas, but the Israeli still became the object of Kerry's ire because of what the secretary saw as the prime minister's uncompromising attitude and unwillingness to curb settlement expansion. Later, it was reported that Netanyahu rejected Kerry's proposal for a regional peace initiative (which the Palestinians were not informed about and other regional actors had not agreed to at that point) during a secret meeting February 21, 2016, in Aqaba that was also attended by Jordanian King Abdullah and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Netanyahu, however, intimated he had been the one who initiated the proposal not Kerry, which made his opposition even more surprising.¹⁸

In his final foreign policy address on December 28, 2016, Kerry summarized the state of the US-Israel relationship by assailing America's closest ally in the Middle East for more than an hour.¹⁹ Remarkably, he ignored all of America's foreign policy concerns and devoted the entire address to lambasting Israel for its treatment of Palestinians. He ignored the fact that the Palestinian Authority governs more than 98% of the Palestinians in the territories and it is Mahmoud Abbas who denies them freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, women's rights, and gay rights. Furthermore, while Kerry heaped scorn on Israeli democracy, he had nothing to say about Abbas canceling elections and arresting, exiling or killing his opponents. He also made several factually inaccurate statements about settlements and Israeli policy. Overall, the speech was one of the harshest critiques of Israel ever delivered by a Secretary of State.²⁰

Much of the speech was devoted to rewriting Middle East history. He ignored the fact that a Palestinian state has never existed in recorded history, that the Palestinians' claims to the West Bank are no better (actually they are weaker) than those of the Israelis, and that the Palestinians missed opportunities for statehood in 1937, 1939, 1947, 1949–1967 (when Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt occupied the Gaza Strip and they never claimed the right to a state in either area), 1979, 1993, 2000, and 2008. Kerry also failed to acknowledge that settlements have never been

¹⁸“Report: Netanyahu Rejected Peace Plan Proposed By Kerry At Secret 2016 Meeting,” *Jerusalem Post*, (February 19, 2017); Itamar Eichner, Roi Kais and Reuters, “Netanyahu admits attending secret peace summit,” *Ynet News*, (February 19, 2017).

¹⁹Secretary of State John Kerry, [Remarks on Middle East Peace](#), US Department of State, Washington, DC, (December 28, 2016).

²⁰“John Kerry defends UN vote, Israel decision ‘in accordance with’ US values,” *The Hill*, (December 28, 2016); Glenn Kessler, “Fact-checking John Kerry’s speech on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” *Washington Post*, (January 3, 2017).

the reason for Palestinian rejectionism, and that settlement construction would have ended if the Palestinians had taken advantage of any of these opportunities.

Kerry never understood that the conflict is more complex than a geographical dispute; it has always had historical, psychological and, especially, religious dimensions. Today, the religious factor has become dominant as some Palestinian leaders have adopted the radical Islamic views championed by Hamas, which hold that Jews have no place on Islamic territory, except as *dhimmis* – second-class citizens with limited rights living as a subservient minority under Muslim rule as they did for centuries during the Muslim Empire.

Kerry's remarks were consistent with the discredited views of officials in the State Department referred to as "Arabists." These officials, who first tried to prevent the creation of Israel, then sought to undo its establishment, now maintain the fiction that Israeli policy is the root of all problems in the Middle East. Israelis did not have the good sense to allow the Arabs to drive them into the sea, but the Arabists argue they should now capitulate to Palestinian demands, without regard for their security, so they will cease to be an irritant in Western relations with Arab states.

Kerry's timing was particularly ironic given that the policies of his administration alienated US Arab allies, who now find more in common with Israel than the US. Kerry acknowledged that Israel lives in a dangerous neighborhood but not the fact that the administration's policies made it far more perilous by, among other things, failing to enforce Obama's red line in Syria, and signing the nuclear deal with Iran.

The shared concern about Iran has brought Israel and several Arab states closer together. Rather than take advantage of this opportunity and encourage more formal relations, Kerry regurgitated the Arabist lines about the Arab states all being so concerned about the Palestinians that they will not improve relations with Israel until Palestinian statehood is achieved. Even Jimmy Carter proved this was a lie when he wrote in his memoir that the Arab leaders he met did not care about Palestinian statehood.²¹ The Arab states care about their own survival, not the Palestinians, as evidenced by the lack of support they provide them beyond limited amounts of aid and rhetorical expressions of concern.

Thanks to Israel's improved ties with the Gulf States, Netanyahu advocated pursuing peace with those countries first hoping they would bring along the Palestinians. Kerry had eschewed this approach until proposing it in the secret talks he held with Netanyahu, the president of Egypt, and the king of Jordan; hence, it would not be surprising if one source of his anger was the Israeli prime minister's rejection of the regional approach to pursuing peace that Netanyahu himself had advocated.

In his own farewell retrospective on relations with Israel, Obama insisted he was a friend of Israel but that "Bibi didn't always recognize it." Like Kerry, Obama believed that as a friend he had to save Israel from itself, or more specifically, from Netanyahu. "Unfettered support for Israel, and support for the Netanyahu government's policies, no matter what they are, no matter how inimical they may be to the

²¹ Jimmy Carter, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979*, p. 1585.

prospect of peace, if that’s what qualifies as a good friend, I believe we will see a worsening situation over time,” he said.²²

Ultimately, the Obama administration’s poor relationship with Israel had less to do with the personal chemistry between the leaders than the president’s failure to convince the Israeli public of his commitment to their well-being. Dennis Ross saw first-hand Obama’s genuine concern with Israel’s security, but this was never evident to Israelis, which, he argues proved to be Obama’s undoing:

There are a lot of things that I think President Obama could have done on the Iran issue with Israel, on the peace issue with Israel had he not lost the Israeli public. But he lost the Israeli public...had he been able to lay out certain positions, the Israeli public would have automatically looked and said: “He gets our predicament. He understands the region. When he asks us to do something, it’s because actually it is in our best interests.”²³

One other mistake Obama made, according to Ross, which contributed to losing the confidence of Israelis both inside and outside of government, was his one-sided approach to the dispute with the Palestinians. “I think that Obama asks a lot of the right questions about Israeli policy,” he said. “My concern about Obama is that he never asks anything about the Palestinians. He gives them a complete pass.” He added, “When you focus all the onus on the Israelis, you give the other side an excuse to do nothing.”²⁴

The UN vote, Kerry’s harsh speech, and Obama’s parting comments were a suitable denouement to what many people viewed as 8 years of hostility and counter-productive policies related to Israel pursued by the Obama administration.

4.6 The Election

Most (70%) American Jews are Democrats²⁵ and there was little doubt as to who they would support in the 2016 election. The presumptive Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton was extremely popular with the Jewish community, partly because of the warm feelings Jews have toward her husband, who is viewed as one of the most pro-Israel presidents in history and, partly, because of her own record of supporting Israel in the Senate. Clinton’s views toward Israel, however, were secondary to most liberal Jews who saw her domestic policies as more consistent with their beliefs than the more conservative approach to social issues of her Republican opponents.

²²“Obama defends UN abstention, Iran deal and peace push in Israeli TV interview,” *JTA*, (January 10, 2017).

²³Jason M. Breslow, “Dennis Ross: Obama, Netanyahu Have a ‘Backdrop of Distrust,’” *Frontline*, (January 6, 2016).

²⁴Jeffrey Goldberg, “Explaining the Toxic Obama-Netanyahu Marriage,” *The Atlantic*, (October 9, 2015).

²⁵Pew Research Center, “A Portrait of Jewish Americans, 2013” shows that 55% of Jews are Democrats and 15% lean Democrat, p. 16.

Since the top ten states with the largest Jewish populations account for 244 of the 270 electoral votes needed to win the presidency, it is possible for the Jewish vote to swing a close election, especially in key swing states such as Florida, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, if a Republican can do better than average. Republicans are at a disadvantage since, on average, Republicans receive only 25% of the Jewish vote (the high-point occurred 60 years earlier when Dwight Eisenhower won 40%) and have averaged only 22% of the Jewish vote since 1992.²⁶

None of the Republican candidates was particularly popular with Jewish voters, with supporters split among the many contestants. Throughout most of the campaign, Jewish voters were uneasy with Donald Trump because of his lack of foreign policy experience, shoot from the hip style, and provocative remarks. Many Jews were happy to see that, unlike Obama, he did not hesitate to call radical Islam a global threat, but his ideas for combating the danger, particularly barring Muslims from entering the US, were controversial.

Trump also set off alarms in February 2016 when he told an interviewer he would be “a neutral guy” when it comes to negotiating the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Though he walked this statement back later, his first thought was not to stand behind Israel, or to call out the Palestinians for their recalcitrance. He acknowledged the difficulty of solving the problem – “a lot of people have gone down in flames trying to make that deal.... That’s probably the toughest deal in the world right now to make” – but also said, “I will give it one hell of a shot. I would say if you can do that deal, you can do any deal.”²⁷

His position is not difficult to understand considering Trump has made a living as a negotiator. His view of the conflict was expressed by Jason Greenblatt, the person he later appointed as his Middle East peace negotiator, “If you take out the emotional part of it and the historical part of it, it is a business transaction.”²⁸ This attitude is reminiscent of former Secretary of State James Baker, who did not appreciate the political, psychological, historical and, especially, religious dimension of the conflict that differentiates it from mediating a deal between General Motors and the United Auto Workers.

When Trump appeared before AIPAC’s annual policy conference in March 2016,²⁹ he came prepared with all the guaranteed applause lines. This was reputed to be the first speech that was prepared for him and that he read from a teleprompter (reportedly his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner advised him), no doubt because his Jewish supporters wanted to make sure he did not make any mistakes speaking in his typical off-the-cuff manner.

²⁶ Ira Sheskin, “Geography, Demography, and the Jewish Vote,” In *American Politics and the Jewish Community, The Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life Annual Review, Volume 11* edited by Bruce Zuckerman, Dan Schnur, & Lisa Ansell (2013) (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press) pp. 39–76.

²⁷ Mark Hensch, “Trump: I’ll be ‘neutral’ on Israel and Palestine,” *The Hill*, (February 17, 2016).

²⁸ Uriel Heilman, “No experience necessary: Meet the Orthodox lawyer advising Trump on Israel,” *JTA*, (April 18, 2016).

²⁹ [Address to AIPAC Policy Conference](#) by Donald Trump, Washington, DC, (March 21, 2016).

Some people protested AIPAC inviting Trump to speak and others were disturbed by the positive reception he received. AIPAC could not ignore the leading candidate for the Republican nomination, however, so his invitation was *de rigueur*. As to the applause, many Jews have a Pavlovian response to magic words, such as, “We will move the American embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem – and we will send a clear signal that there is no daylight between America and our most reliable ally, the state of Israel. The Palestinians must come to the table knowing that the bond between the US and Israel is unbreakable.” When he declared, “My number one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran,” he received a huge ovation since AIPAC had vigorously opposed the agreement. “When I become president, the days of treating Israel like a second-class citizen will end on day one,” Trump declared. He no doubt thought he would also get a huge response when he ad-libbed, “With President Obama in his final year—yea! He may be the worst thing to ever happen to Israel, believe me, believe me. And you know it and you know it better than anybody.”

The comments got both cheers and jeers from the crowd, and AIPAC was so concerned that Trump’s remarks offended its Democratic members and angered the White House that the lobby’s president, Lillian Pinkus, issued an unprecedented apology the next day: “While we may have policy differences, we deeply respect the office of president of the United States and our president, Barack Obama,” Pinkus said. “There were people in our AIPAC family who were deeply hurt last night, and for that we are deeply sorry. We are disappointed that so many people applauded the sentiment that we neither agree with or condone.”³⁰

Trump’s pro-Israel statements and views about radical Islam and Iran failed to win over many prominent Jewish Republicans, especially neoconservatives, such as William Kristol, who was so hostile toward Trump he tried to recruit an alternative candidate.³¹ Many major Republican donors also shied away, with many refusing to support him even after he became the nominee, choosing instead to invest their time and money in Senate and House races. Ultimately, the wealthiest Jew in America, Sheldon Adelson, did throw his support to Trump as did some other prominent financiers who were part of the “anyone but Hillary” camp.³²

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton had a great deal of support from Jews, many of whom had been active in her husband’s campaigns. Although it initially appeared her nomination was a foregone conclusion, Bernie Sanders mounted a surprisingly strong challenge and siphoned off some of the support Clinton might otherwise have expected from Jewish progressives. Sanders, who is Jewish, was critical of Israel

³⁰David Weigel, “AIPAC’s apology for Trump speech is unprecedented,” *Washington Post*, (March 22, 2016).

³¹Ginger Gibson and Jonathan Allen, “Chagrined anti-Trump Republicans seek to recruit third-party candidate,” *Reuters*, (May 9, 2016).

³²Michal Addady, “Donald Trump Gains the Support of a Former ‘Never Trump’ Billionaire,” *Fortune*, (September 20, 2016); Nicholas Confessore and Maggie Haberman, “Sheldon Adelson Focuses on Congressional Races, Despite Donald Trump’s Pleas,” *New York Times*, (September 20, 2016).

throughout the campaign and tried to insert contentious positions regarding Israel and the Palestinians into the Democratic Platform at the party's national convention. Those efforts were fought off by Clinton's supporters, but it still left some Jews feeling uncomfortable with the direction Sanders seemed to be pulling the party.³³

Clinton's image was also complicated by the question: Was she a foreign policy maker or primarily a bystander? If the former, she had to take responsibility for Obama's policies. If the latter, her experience as secretary of state did not give her the standing to portray herself as someone prepared to be commander-in-chief.

For some voters, Clinton carried the baggage of the Obama administration; after all, she had been secretary of state when many of Obama's unpopular policies, such as the demand for a settlement freeze, were implemented. Reportedly, she opposed the idea, but that was an example of her lack of influence. As former secretary of state James Baker put it, "Hillary Clinton was never given anything to do. She was just there [at the State Department] to run for president."³⁴

Baker is a partisan, but he was not the first person to make this observation. David Hazony wrote that unlike the Bush administration, where titanic battles for influence were fought between Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, "The Obama administration was oddly lacking in such battles for the simple reason that nobody seems to have had any influence at all."³⁵ Obama's Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta confirmed this notion, admitting that both he and Clinton were ignored.³⁶ Similarly, Aaron David Miller, a longtime US peace negotiator, observed, "She's coming away with a stellar reputation that seems to have put her almost above criticism," but, he added, "you can't say that she's really led on any of the big issues for this administration or made a major mark on high strategy."³⁷

Clinton could not distance herself too far from Obama's Middle East policies without angering the president whose full-throated support she needed. For example, she continued to endorse the Iranian nuclear deal despite the continued criticism of the deal by Israel and many American Jews.

Though it was more of an issue for conservative Jews, some people still raised an old incident during her husband's presidency when she stood next to Yasser Arafat's wife, Suha, and said nothing after Arafat made the outrageous claim that Israel was using poison gas to pollute the West Bank's water and land. A photo of Clinton kissing Arafat afterward created a PR disaster at the time.³⁸ Though nowhere as

³³Tal Kopan and Elise Labott, "Hillary Clinton's views on Israel win out in DNC platform, for now," *CNN*, (June 26, 2016).

³⁴Lionel Barber, "Lunch with the FT: James Baker," *Financial Times*, (June 2, 2016).

³⁵David Hazony, "The Mind of the President," *The Tower*, (June 2016).

³⁶Josh Rogin, "Obama's Ex-CIA Chief Slams White House for 'Hesitation and Half Steps,'" *The Daily Beast*, (October 2, 2014).

³⁷John Cassidy, "Hillary Was a Great Ambassador, Not a Great Secretary of State," *The New Yorker*, (January 29, 2013).

³⁸"As First Lady, Hillary Was A Prized Jewish Keynote – Until She Kissed Suha Arafat," *JTA*, (April 20, 2015).

dysfunctional as the relationship with Obama, Bill Clinton and Netanyahu (then serving his first term as prime minister) also had serious disagreements. Hillary had her own disputes with the Israeli leader, notably when ordered by the White House to read the riot act to Netanyahu over the phone – what turned into a 45-min scolding – after Israel angered the administration by announcing plans to build 1600 new homes for Jews in a part of Jerusalem claimed by the Palestinians while Vice President Joe Biden was visiting the capital.

After the mutual interference of Americans and Israelis seeking to defeat Obama and Netanyahu in their reelection campaigns,³⁹ Israeli officials were careful not to express any favoritism in 2016 once the nominees were finalized. Many were concerned, however, with Trump’s unpredictability and Clinton’s unreliability.⁴⁰

Ultimately, Israel was not a significant issue in the election. Both candidates had the dubious distinction of being disliked by an extraordinary percentage of the electorate with many ABH (anyone but Hillary) voters and anti-Trumpers. Hillary ran an ineffective campaign, failing to focus enough resources and attention on battleground states she took for granted but ultimately lost. She was confident of an easy victory, bolstered by polls that suggested she would win (and she did win the popular vote), but, like most commentators, she underestimated the anger of much of the country and their desire for a radical change after 8 years of a Democrat in the White House.⁴¹ She received 71% of the Jewish vote, slightly better than Obama in 2012, but considerably worse than her husband’s 78 and 80% shares. Meanwhile, Trump rode the wave of anger toward Washington to the White House and, despite the trepidation of many Jews, including Republicans, got 24% of the Jewish vote, average for a Republican.

4.7 President Trump

Like most candidates, Trump said what Jewish voters wanted to hear during the campaign. Unlike Obama, he had no reluctance to utter the words “radical Islam,” which reassured many Jews who believed Obama did not appreciate the threat to Israel from Islamist terror organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. He promised to reverse Obama’s policies in the Middle East and to strengthen the alliance with Israel. He promised to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a promise made by candidates going back to Bill Clinton, all of whom changed their minds after taking office. He spoke of Bibi Netanyahu as a friend, a stark contrast from the attitude of Obama.

³⁹ See, for example, Burgess Everett, “Senate report: State Dept. grant also aided campaign to unseat Netanyahu,” *Politico*, (July 12, 2016).

⁴⁰ Jonathan Ferziger, “Netanyahu, Facing Trump or Clinton, Urged to take Obama Aid,” *Bloomberg*, (June 13, 2016).

⁴¹ Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes, *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton’s Doomed Campaign*, (NY: Crown, 2017).

Many Jews uncomfortable with Trump's lack of political and, especially, foreign policy experience, looked to his son-in-law Jared Kushner for reassurance. Trump's daughter Ivanka had converted to Orthodox Judaism to marry Kushner and he was viewed as one of the new president's closest advisers. Kushner has a personal relationship with Netanyahu going back many years. He reportedly wrote the very pro-Israel speech Trump delivered at the AIPAC Policy Conference and was expected to be a positive influence on the president's policy toward Israel.

Trump also chose two close friends, neither of whom had any foreign policy experience, to work directly with Israel. The first, David Friedman, a 57-year-old bankruptcy attorney was appointed ambassador to Israel. Friedman aroused controversy because of his role as the president of the Friends of Bet El, a settlement in the West Bank. Friedman also was an outspoken critic of the two-state solution and had angered some Jewish leaders when he referred to J Street as being worse than kapos (Jews who policed their fellow Jews in concentration camps) and made derogatory remarks about the Anti-Defamation League. The idea of having a pro-settlement ambassador opposed to the peace process pursued since Oslo provoked trepidation among many Israeli and American Jews. Despite the opposition of J Street and some other liberal Jews, Friedman was confirmed after testifying before Congress that he would support the pursuit of a two-state solution and apologizing for the comments he had made about J Street.

Trump's other surprising appointment was Joel Greenblatt, the executive vice president and chief legal officer to The Trump Organization, as Special Representative for International Negotiations. Greenblatt traveled to Israel and the West Bank in March 2017 and impressed many of his interlocutors with his open-mindedness. He spoke to Jews and Arabs with a variety of opinions, including Israeli settlers and Palestinian refugees, and presented the image of someone who would be a skilled negotiator. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said after meeting the envoy that he believed Trump was serious about reaching an agreement. Arab leaders who met with him on the sidelines of the Arab League summit in Jordan a few weeks later came away with the same opinion. "What I'm struck by now is how Trump genuinely wants to see something happen," observed longtime peace negotiator Dennis Ross. "The Greenblatt visit was a very serious one, based on what I heard from both sides. Both sides saw a demeanor of someone who was learning as much as he could."⁴²

While the president repeatedly expressed his commitment to Israel and his intention to take a friendlier approach toward Israel and its prime minister – statements that alarmed the Palestinians – some Jews were concerned when Trump chose Exxon executive Rex Tillerson as secretary of state. Yet another appointee with no foreign policy experience, Tillerson has extensive ties in the Middle East due to his position in the oil industry, but, given that industry's traditional closeness to the anti-Israel oil-producers of the region, his views on Israel were uncertain. Early on, however, he sought to reassure Israel and its friends, stating during his confirmation hearings, for example, "Israel is, has always been and remains our most important

⁴²Dov Lieber, "Abbas to US envoy: Peace deal possible under Trump," *Times of Israel*, (March 14, 2017); Annie Karni, "Trump's surprisingly conventional Israel policy," *Politico*, (April 5, 2017).

ally in the region.” He criticized Security Council Resolution 2334 and his predecessor’s “troubling” speech condemning Israeli policy. “The president-elect has already made it clear that we’re going to meet our obligations to Israel as the most important ally in the region,” Tillerson said, vowing to make a “clear statement” to that effect through policy actions should he be confirmed by the Senate. He also expressed skepticism about negotiations with the Palestinians so long as they refuse to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and cease terrorism. Tillerson also vowed support for congressional action to combat the BDS movement and a full review of the Iran nuclear deal, which he opposed.⁴³

Israel’s friends also worry about the traditional influence of Arabists in the State Department who have historically sought to weaken the US-Israel alliance. To counter that influence, the hope was that Tillerson would appoint a deputy with a pro-Israel reputation. He did that when he offered Elliot Abrams the job, but the White House vetoed the selection because of Abrams’ criticism of Trump during the campaign. As of this writing, this position and many other important positions remain unfilled (as are thousands of others throughout the administration). In the meantime, some holdovers from the Obama administration are filling key posts at State and other departments to the consternation of those who had hoped Trump would clean house and appoint officials more sympathetic to Israel.

4.8 What Is Trump’s Policy?

Despite his positive statements, Trump has alarmed Israelis with his inconsistency. After repeatedly promising he would move the US embassy to Jerusalem, he backed away from that commitment after hearing from Arab officials and others who warned that Muslims would be angered and a wave of violence might spread from Jerusalem across the region directed at Israelis and Americans. Some people speculated he might announce the embassy move during his visit to Israel in May.⁴⁴

Though Trump indicates that he takes pride in keeping his promises, few people will be surprised if he does not move the embassy. His predecessors had also made campaign promises to move the embassy and chose not to do so once in office. Though Israelis would certainly appreciate the recognition of their capital, it has not been a priority; in part because of concerns about an outbreak of violence should the US act.

A second cause of unease was Trump’s remarks about a prospective solution to the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians. On February 15, 2017, during a joint

⁴³Michael Wilner, “Tillerson Criticizes Kerry’s Approach To Israel, Vowing A Different Path,” *Jerusalem Post*, (January 11, 2017).

⁴⁴Note at press time: President Trump did not. Though he did not rule out moving the embassy at some point, Trump did renew the waiver in June 2017 that allows the president to delay moving the embassy for 6 months if deemed in the national interest. The reason was that he did not want to risk angering the Palestinians at the outset of his efforts to initiate peace talks. See Barak Ravid, “Israel Believes Trump Will Not Seek to Move US Embassy to Jerusalem for Now, Officials Say,” *Haaretz*, (April 28, 2017).

news conference with Netanyahu, Trump appeared to retreat from Obama's commitment to the creation of a Palestinian state. He also drew attention for appearing to abandon support for a two-state solution to the dispute with the Palestinians. "I'm looking at two states and one state, and I like the one both parties like." He said he could "live with either one." Two days later; however, he said he did support a two-state solution.⁴⁵

Trump also surprised Netanyahu by publicly urging the prime minister to "hold back on settlements for a little bit." Prior to their meeting, the White House had told Israel to stop announcing new settlements. Press secretary Sean Spicer said, "While we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal."⁴⁶

Israel's right wing had gotten the impression during the campaign that because Trump understood settlements were not the obstacle to peace, he would not object to their expansion. Netanyahu explained to his cabinet that he did not want to anger Trump at the outset of his term and would honor his request to restrain settlement construction. Netanyahu subsequently announced that new construction in the West Bank would be limited to within boundaries that have already been built, or sites directly adjacent to them, and that the construction of illegal outposts would not be allowed.⁴⁷

Trump did give tacit approval to one exception, the establishment of a new settlement – the first in 20 years – to relocate Jewish families that had been forced by a Supreme Court decree to evacuate the settlement of Amona. Netanyahu had committed to finding them new homes and it would likely have caused a coalition crisis if he did not follow through on that promise. The Trump administration seems to have understood this and that is why it did not object to the new settlement.

"This is part of a new era of good feeling," according to Elliot Abrams. "They certainly want to have very smooth relations with the president. And the position the administration is taking—that we understand there will be construction and settlements; we just would like it to be restrained—helps Netanyahu a lot."⁴⁸

4.9 New Aid to Israel and Opposition to Boycotts

The \$38 billion military aid deal signed by Netanyahu and Obama does not go into effect until 2018. Unbound by its terms, the new Congress introduced a series of measures to provide Israel with more assistance for missile defense, tunnel detection, and naval guns to protect its offshore gas reserves.

⁴⁵ Steve Holland, "Exclusive: Trump likes two-state solution, but says he will leave up to Israelis, Palestinians," *Reuters*, (February 23, 2017).

⁴⁶ *Statement by the Press Secretary*, (February 2, 2017).

⁴⁷ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Announces Policy of Restrained Settlement Construction in 'Show of Good Will' to Trump," *Haaretz*, (March 31, 2017).

⁴⁸ Annie Kami, "Trump's surprisingly conventional Israel policy," *Politico*, (April 5, 2017).

Congress also took up the challenge of finding a constitutional way to inhibit the BDS movement's campaign to isolate Israel. More than a dozen states (with several more planning similar measures) already have adopted legislation aimed at prohibiting funds and contracts from going to entities engaged in or supporting a boycott of Israel. In the late 1970s, Congress passed anti-boycott legislation targeting the Arab League-sponsored boycott, but that only applied to the actions of states. Members of Congress have introduced two bills aimed at fighting the boycott. The first, the Combating BDS Act of 2017, would grant state and local governments the right to disassociate pensions and contracts from entities that boycott, divest from, or sanction Israel, and provide federal authorization for state and local officials to act against efforts to delegitimize the Jewish state. The second, the Israel Anti-Boycott Act would expand existing anti-boycott laws to international organizations such as the UN and the EU. The measure also directs the US Export-Import Bank to consider BDS activity when appraising a foreign company's credit application.

4.10 United Nations

The Trump administration wasted no time sending a message to the UN that it would no longer tolerate its ally being singled out for condemnation. One of the president's first appointments, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, blasted the UN's bias and declared that there "is a new sheriff in town."⁴⁹

A particular target of Israel and the administration's wrath is the Human Rights Council (HRC), where some of the world's worst human rights violators pillory Israel and ignore the horrors taking place in Syria, as well as abuses in countries such as Saudi Arabia, China, and Russia. "In its history," Anne Bayefsky, director of the Touro Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, noted, "the Council has condemned Israel more often than any other of the 192 UN states. Comparative totals after this session tell the story: Israel – 78 resolutions and decisions, Syria – 29, North Korea – 9, and Iran – 6. As for Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China, there's nothing at all." The Obama administration often protested the absurdity of the council's positions; nevertheless, it remained a member and opposed efforts to cut funding to the UN. Haley called the Council "corrupt," and Tillerson warned the US would withdraw from the Council if it does not undertake "considerable reform."⁵⁰

Congress, meanwhile, has grown increasingly impatient with the UN. In addition to the HRC, the General Assembly annually passes a package of anti-Israel resolutions and has taken several measures to upgrade the status of the Palestinian delegation and to pressure Israel to capitulate to Palestinian demands. The UN Peacekeeping

⁴⁹US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley [address](#) to AIPAC Policy Conference, (March 27, 2017).

⁵⁰Somini Sengupta, "Nikki Haley Calls United Nations Human Rights Council 'So Corrupt,'" *New York Times*, (March 29, 2017); John Hudson Lynch, "Tillerson To U.N. Rights Council: Reform or We're Leaving," *Foreign Policy*, (March 14, 2017).

Force in Lebanon tasked with preventing an outbreak of violence between Israel and Hezbollah has failed in its mission to prevent Hezbollah from smuggling weapons from Syria or establishing positions in civilian areas and near the Israeli border. American taxpayers subsidize a number of Palestinian propaganda operations at the UN, such as the Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, as well as UNRWA, the refugee agency that has exaggerated the number of Palestinian refugees, enabled Arab states to keep them in camps, and employed staff with connections to Hamas and teachers who indoctrinate refugees with hostile views toward Israel. The Republican-controlled Congress, with the support of many equally fed up Democrats, has introduced legislation to use America's disproportionate contribution to the UN budget to push for changes as well as threaten cuts if reforms are not made.⁵¹

The Israeli government has taken its own measures to signal its displeasure with the UN. In March 2017, officials announced Israel was cutting payments to the UN by \$2 million. The foreign ministry said the decision was designed to "rectify the discriminatory treatment of Israel obsessively pursued by the UN and its agencies."⁵² Earlier, Israel reduced its UN contribution by \$6 million from nearly \$12 million after the UN Security Council adoption of resolution 2334 condemning settlements.

4.11 Iran

The election outcome signaled a change in American policy toward Iran after Trump had repeatedly called the nuclear deal a "disaster." Members of Congress, especially Democrats, who had been pressured by Obama not to take any steps toward Iran that might cause the nuclear agreement to unravel, were emboldened to take a harder line toward the Iranians.

The nuclear agreement resulted in the lifting of international and some US sanctions against Iran. Even before Obama left office, however, Congress began to seek ways to impose new restrictions on Iran and tighten existing measures that related to Iranian actions outside the nuclear deal. In December 2016, Congress reauthorized the Iran Sanctions Act, renewing a variety of sanctions against Iran first adopted in 1996 for another 10 years. Obama let the bill become law without his signature to send a message to Tehran that the US was not reneging on its commitments. He and Kerry also emphasized that they had issued waivers to exempt Iran from sanctions lifted by the nuclear deal; consequently, the Iranians backed off on a threat to respond if the sanctions were renewed.⁵³

⁵¹ See, for example, Doug Stanglin, "Graham threatens to pull funding for U.N. over Israeli settlement vote," [USA Today](#), (December 24, 2016).

⁵² "Israel reduces payments to UN due to obsessive discrimination," [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), (March 29, 2017).

⁵³ "Iran Sanctions Renewal Becomes Law in US, Without Obama's Support," [Associated Press](#), (December 15, 2016).

Pressure on Iran was intensified, however, with the arrival of President Trump. In early February 2017, for example, the new administration sanctioned an additional 13 individuals and 12 entities for their support of Iran’s detrimental activities. A bipartisan group of senators also began preparing legislation for other sanctions targeting Iran’s ballistic missile development, support for terrorism, the transfer of weapons, and human rights violations.⁵⁴

Trump also announced a review of the Iran deal, which he continued to describe as “one of the worst deals I’ve ever witnessed.” Under the deal, the State Department must update Congress on Iran’s compliance every 90 days and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson fulfilled that obligation in a letter to House Speaker Paul Ryan saying that Iran is complying with the terms of the agreement. Tillerson also said, however, that Iran “remains a leading state sponsor of terror, through many platforms and methods” and that Trump had ordered an interagency review to determine whether the deal is “vital to the national security interests of the US.” White House officials also indicated they were considering expanding sanctions and adopting “more rigorous application of the tools at its disposal” to ensure Iran strictly complies with the terms of the deal.⁵⁵

Trump also sent a message to Tehran when he ordered an air strike on an air base in Syria which President Bashar Assad had used to launch a chemical weapons attack. By demonstrating that, unlike Obama, he was willing to use military force when red lines were crossed, Trump put the Iranians on notice that they could not count on using the nuclear agreement as a shield against an American response to their provocations.

The new impetus for Iran sanctions, championed by AIPAC, also demonstrated the organization remains a powerful lobby. In fact, despite Obama’s hope to neuter the pro-Israel lobby with the long-term military aid agreement, AIPAC is continuing to exert influence on foreign aid issues, America’s support for Israel at the UN, maintaining Israel’s qualitative military edge, and the fight against the delegitimization of Israel.

4.12 The Fight Against BDS

Two years ago, students at 27 universities considered resolutions calling on their universities to divest from companies doing business with Israel. Although 70% of those votes were defeated, the perception in the Jewish community was that the campuses were on fire with anti-Israel activity and the boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) movement was gaining steam. Two years later, many organizations continue to perpetuate the narrative that BDS is a significant threat to Israel; however, the evidence suggests otherwise.

⁵⁴“AIPAC Statement on Iran Sanctions,” Press Release, AIPAC, (February 3, 2017); Jordain Carney, “Senators introduce new Iran sanctions,” *The Hill*, (March 23, 2017).

⁵⁵Margaret Hartmann, “Trump Orders Review of Iran Nuclear Deal, Though Iran Has Been Complying,” *New York*, (April 19, 2017).

In the 2016–2017 school year, 18 divestment votes were held (affecting less than 1% of all campuses), the same number as the year before, and the majority failed. Two student governments that did vote for divestment, Pitzer and Tufts, scheduled their votes to coincide with the Passover break to ensure most Jewish students would be away. Both were subsequently invalidated by the school administrations.

In the past 12 years, divestment has been voted on a total of 106 times at 65 of the nation's 2500 four-year colleges. That means 97% of the campuses have never had a divestment vote. BDS proposals have been defeated 62% of the time. Of the 40 votes in favor of divestment – at only 31 schools – *not one* has resulted in any change of a university's investment policy. In fact, university officials have repeatedly declared they have no intention of boycotting Israel in any way.

The pro-Israel movement on campus is also growing stronger as philanthropists invest more funds, the Jewish Agency deploys more emissaries, Hillel increases its Israel-related activities, Birthright takes more students to Israel, and groups such as AIPAC, StandWithUs, Hasbarah Fellowships, AEPi, and others train activists. These significant advances are ignored by those perpetuating the “campuses are on fire” narrative.

The fact that the BDS proponents have largely given up on convincing Americans to boycott Israel, and are increasingly resorting to desperate tactics such as trying to prevent pro-Israel lecturers from speaking, is just one of many signs the BDS movement may be ebbing in the US as its failures mount and the backlash grows.

After a brief period when three academic associations voted to boycott Israel, and others were considering BDS votes, the tide has turned. The BDS movement is now increasingly recognized as anti-Semitic, and boycotts are being rejected by professional associations that want no part of the Nazi-like efforts to banish Jews from academia. One exception is the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), which is formally apolitical, but historically has been hostile to Israel.⁵⁶ At its 2017 annual meeting, BDS activists successfully mobilized to change MESA's bylaws to allow a future vote to boycott Israel. Even if MESA eventually approves a boycott, it will have no practical impact as it has no authority to tell scholars what to do.

Cooperation among scholars, meanwhile, remains robust, with hundreds of American and Israeli researchers engaged in joint research either on their own or with grants from one of the binational foundations, such as the Binational Science Foundation (BSF) and the Binational Agricultural Research & Development Fund (BARD).

The promoters of a cultural boycott of Israel continue to pressure American entertainers not to perform in Israel. In past years, they have had some success in convincing mostly B or C-list acts not to visit Israel. Top acts, such as Lady Gaga, Madonna, and Bon Jovi are refusing to be coerced, however, and several have spoken out against boycott advocates. More than 50 prominent figures, for example, signed a petition calling on Radiohead to cancel their July 2017 show in Israel. The band's lead singer and songwriter, Thom Yorke responded in a *Rolling Stone* interview:

⁵⁶Mitchell Bard, *The Arab Lobby: The Invisible Alliance That Undermines America's Interests in the Middle East*, NY: HarperCollins: 2010, pp. 295–298; Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*. DC: Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 2001.

There are people I admire [who have been critical of the concert] like [English film director] Ken Loach, who I would never dream of telling where to work or what to do or think. The kind of dialogue that they want to engage in is one that's black or white. I have a problem with that. It's deeply distressing that they choose to, rather than engage with us personally, throw shit at us in public. It's deeply disrespectful to assume that we're either being misinformed or that we're so retarded we can't make these decisions ourselves. I thought it was patronizing in the extreme. It's offensive and I just can't understand why going to play a rock show or going to lecture at a university [is a problem to them].⁵⁷

The backlash against BDS is also reflected in a growing movement to enact laws against boycotting Israel. As of June 2017, 20 states have adopted anti-boycott legislation. South Carolina, the second state to address the issue, is considering legislation that would adopt the State Department definition of anti-Semitism to make it possible to take action against anti-Semitic BDS campaigns on college campuses. In addition, Congress is considering legislation that would expand on anti-boycott laws adopted in the 1970s in response to the Arab League boycott of Israel.

4.13 Israel Still a Bipartisan Issue

The anger over the outcome of the election reverberated across the country, with bitter Democrats unable to process how a seasoned politician such as Hillary Clinton could be defeated by someone they found unfit to be president. To add insult to injury, Clinton won the popular vote amid evidence of Russian efforts to influence the election. Just as Republicans had adopted a largely intransigent position opposing virtually the entire Obama agenda, the Democrats indicated from the outset of Trump's term that they were likely to be equally obstinate, as exemplified by the decision to filibuster the president's Supreme Court nominee. One issue, however, remained bipartisan – support for Israel.

Referring to the consensus on Israel represented by the participants at AIPAC's annual Policy Conference, Democratic strategist Ann Lewis observed:

In the midst of this polarization, we like knowing there are some things we can agree on. It reassures us that we have some things to be for. That politics doesn't have to be only negative. It doesn't only have to be name calling and division. It's almost an island of calamity in what is a raging sea. And boy, if you are in that raging sea, you are happy to know there is an island. You may not want to spend all your time there, but you want to know it's there. And that's what this conference demonstrates. And also, this is a chance to be something larger than yourself. It's a chance to feel that you're part of a movement that focuses on the future. When I come to AIPAC, I am not defined by what I am against. Much of American politics these days is what you are against. At AIPAC, I am defined by what I am for.⁵⁸

In Washington's toxic partisan environment, Republicans and Democrats found at least four issues on which they could agree, all related to Israel; first, strengthening the US-Israel relationship; second, taking a stand against UN bias against Israel; third, opposing boycotts of Israel; and, fourth, imposing new sanctions on Iran.

⁵⁷“Thom Yorke Breaks Silence on Israel Controversy,” *Rolling Stone*, (June 2, 2017).

⁵⁸*Jewish Insider*, (March 27, 2017).