

# American Jewish Public Affairs and Israel: Looking Back, Looking Ahead

BY MARTIN J. RAFFEL

## Looking Back: Israel Emerges As Central Communal Concern

Prior to 1967, the organized American Jewish community's public affairs involvement with Israel was relatively limited. The battle against anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination, as well as the struggle for civil rights topped the agenda. Nevertheless, there were systematic efforts being undertaken by the community to combat both Arab propaganda in the United States and the Arab economic boycott against Israel. Two important organizations that address Israel-related issues were established in the 1950s: the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (Presidents Conference).

The Six Day War in 1967, which was widely viewed as a struggle for Israel's survival, transformed American Jewish public affairs and galvanized American Jewry as no issue before or since. Building U.S. support for Israel—to counter Arab military, economic, and political aggression—became a major focus of attention. The perception of Israel's vulnerability was reinforced by the terrible losses suffered in the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

## The Survival Agenda

The 1967 conflict resulted in Israel capturing not only the Sinai and Golan Heights, but also the densely populated West Bank and Gaza Strip as well as East Jerusalem. Thus, Israel began to administer the affairs of a large Palestinian population (today numbering about two million) who had been living under Egyptian and

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Jordanian rule. This new reality created the political, strategic, and moral dilemmas which lie at the heart of today's peace process.

As it had done since the founding of the state, the Labor Party led Israel's governments from 1967 to 1977. These governments, which were committed to the principle of territorial compromise, were strongly supported by most American Jews. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), designated "official representative of the Palestinian people" by the Arab world, was engaged in horrific acts of terrorism against Jews in Israel and elsewhere in the world. Alternative Palestinian peace partners did not exist. As a result, the 1967–77 time frame was characterized by overwhelming consensus in the Jewish community in support of the Israeli government and its positions.

At the same time, the period following the Six Day War witnessed the first movement of Jewish settlers—including the religiously-motivated Gush Emunim—into the areas captured during that conflict. The West Bank, for these Israelis, was Judea and Samaria, an integral part of the Jewish people's ancient homeland. In the eyes of some Israelis, this phenomenon only served to burden an already complicated and difficult situation, and to make prospects for peace with the Arabs even more remote. The emergence of a fledgling settlers movement received relatively little attention in the U.S., but it did generate opposition from a small, but vocal segment of the Jewish left. Moreover, some Christian leaders, especially from the

liberal Protestant churches, began to espouse positions sharply critical of Israeli policy. The silence of these same leaders leading up to the Six Day War was deeply troubling to American Jews who had worked with them in the past in various social justice settings.

## Possibility of Peace

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's dramatic journey to Israel in 1977 persuaded most Israelis and American Jews that perhaps acceptance by the Arab world was possible after all. What heretofore was a public affairs agenda dedicated almost exclusively to Israel's struggle for survival changed abruptly. Interpreting and supporting a realistic peace process—if restricted at this stage to Egypt—became another crucial dimension of Jewish public affairs engagement. It was evident that the U.S. had to play a key role in assisting the parties to reach an agreement. Therefore, in addition to serving as Israel's principal supporter, the U.S. would need to be a credible mediator of the Arab-Israeli dispute. This meant periodic disagreements, mostly in private but sometimes in public, with Israeli policies and approaches. President Jimmy Carter, of course, had an enormous impact on the ultimate success of the Israeli-Egyptian negotiations at Camp David. Despite the positive outcome, many in the Jewish community had a sense of unease with what they perceived to be undue American pressure on Israel.

The breakthrough with Egypt was taking place as a Likud-led govern-

ment assumed the reigns of power in Israel for the first time. This government, headed by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, successfully concluded the negotiations with Egypt. But it also dramatically accelerated the establishment of new Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The government asserted the geopolitical need and right to retain all of these areas not only to insure Israel's security but for historical and religious reasons as well.

### **The Peace Process Stagnates**

The peace process then stagnated for an extended period of time and Egypt entered a period of strain with the rest of the Arab world because of its treaty with Israel. Middle East politics played out as one of the principal battlegrounds of the Cold War, with the Soviet Union serving as patron to the Arab states and the PLO. Differences in Israel and within the American Jewish community over the question of territorial compromise flared periodically. However, such differences seemed somewhat less pressing since there did not appear to Israel to be any credible Arab partner with whom to negotiate, and the organized Jewish community largely supported this position.

The Israeli government's policy of encouraging Jews to move into the administered territories generated contentious debate. Opponents of the policy asserted that it undermined efforts to get the Arab parties to the negotiating table and would make a peace agreement more difficult to achieve once they came. While many

American Jews felt uncomfortable about settlements, particularly as they were consistently a point of contention with U.S. administrations, the community generally accepted the argument that they should not be characterized as a serious obstacle to peace. After all, many American Jews reasoned, settlements in the Sinai had not stood in the way of an agreement between Israel and Egypt. It is worth recalling, however, that all of those Jewish settlements, including the town of Yamit, had to be removed by Israel in order to achieve that agreement. The status of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is one of the issues to be resolved in permanent status negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, the elected body which governed the internal affairs of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There is a consensus in Israel, which is supported by the American Jewish community, that every effort should be made to include as many settlers as possible within Israel's final borders.

### **Serious Challenges for the Jewish Community**

In contrast to the 1967 and 1973 wars, which were recognized as necessary struggles for survival, the 1982 Lebanon War was not supported by segments of Israeli society and of the American Jewish community. The massive Israeli bombing in Beirut and the Sabra and Shatilla massacres committed by Christian forces allied with Israel were troubling to many. The Jewish communal consensus regarding

Israel was tested as never before. The Intifada, which erupted throughout the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in late 1987, with its disturbing scenes of the Israeli army suppressing a massive civilian insurrection, presented serious interpretive challenges to Jewish public affairs agencies. Israel was subjected to harsh criticism in the media, with reportage and editorial comment often devoid of context and historical perspective. The organized Jewish community found itself torn between the natural impulse to defend Israel and its own questioning about the morality of Israel's handling of the situation. In the end, what dominated the internal debate, and the messages conveyed to the general community, was the realization that only a negotiated political agreement could resolve the underlying issues that led to this explosion of violence. Again the perceived absence of an acceptable negotiating partner—especially after Jordan's King Hussein renounced any claim to the West Bank in the summer of 1988—tended to mitigate the impact of the Intifada on the Jewish community.

### **Dramatic Developments in the Peace Process**

That equation changed fundamentally with the end of the Cold War and the defeat of Iraq's Saddam Hussein in Operation Desert Storm. These developments created conditions ripe for a renewed peace effort. The 1991 Madrid peace conference, engineered by the Bush administration, was a watershed event. For the first time, Israel entered into direct, face-to-face

negotiations with Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians.

The September 1993 signing of the Declaration of Principles (known as the Oslo Accords) between Israel and the PLO, grounded in the mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinian people, was in some ways an even more historic breakthrough. The Israeli-Palestinian agreement paved the way for a formal peace treaty between Israel and Jordan in 1994. These events, occurring in rapid succession, led to a growing perception in the Jewish community that the Israeli "survival agenda," which had dominated the Jewish community's public affairs work since 1967, was becoming obsolete. Many expressed confidence that this process inevitably would lead to normalization of Israel's relations with its neighbors. Imbued with optimism about the future, the Jewish community began to think about the challenge of relating to Israel in an era of peace.

### **The Breakdown of Consensus**

This dynamic peace process, however, also caused many of the traditional political differences within the community to rise more forcefully to the surface. There were real peace partners now, and discussions about the future of the territories Israel captured in the Six Day War, including the status of Jerusalem, were no longer mere academic exercises. Not surprisingly, those American Jewish groups with a particular political point of view—either from the left or the right—intensified their efforts to influence public debate on these

issues. The ultimate targets of these activities were the White House and the Congress. Not surprisingly, members of Congress and other leaders in the general community often expressed confusion about the Jewish community's positions on the peace process.

Furthermore, those who were uncomfortable with the Oslo process—both Israeli leaders associated with the then opposition Likud Party and right-wing Jewish activists—openly sought to frustrate the Israeli government's peace agenda on Capitol Hill. They encouraged members of Congress to reject U.S. financial aid to the Palestinian Authority. In such an environment there was greater need for those organizations that reflect Jewish communal consensus—such as the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the organized Jewish community's national coordinating body for the multi-issue public affairs agenda, the Presidents Conference, and AIPAC—to be more active and visible. In December 1995, the three groups organized a "National Peace Process Advocacy Day" in Washington to dramatize the community's support of Oslo to members of Congress.

### **Likud Returns to Power**

In 1996, Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu, who had been among the strongest critics of the Oslo process, became the first directly elected Prime Minister in Israel's history. A number of crises have taken place during the first eighteen months of his administration, including armed confrontations between Israeli

soldiers and Palestinian police. Those events occurred following Israel's opening of an ancient tunnel in Jerusalem's Old City.

At the same time, there have been advances as well, particularly an agreement with the Palestinians on Israel's redeployment in the city of Hebron. The Netanyahu government has agreed in principle to a further redeployment, subject to full Palestinian Authority compliance with its obligations under Oslo, and also has urged acceleration of the permanent status negotiations.

Israel's insistence on reciprocity is understood and widely supported by the organized Jewish community. Critics of the Prime Minister have expressed concern about the depth of his commitment to fulfilling an agreement he had so vigorously condemned before. The protracted stagnation of the peace process—to the extent Netanyahu is seen as contributing to that stagnation—could result in strained U.S.-Israel relations and to erosion in American Jewish support for the Israeli government. Only time will tell whether Netanyahu will lead Israel to a successful completion of the historic process commenced in Madrid.

### **Importance of Consensus**

The rationale for seeking and nurturing consensus warrants clarification. As a rule, U.S. policy toward Israel and the Middle East is not determined on the basis of the Jewish community's positions and attitudes. The President, Secretary of State, and other foreign policy officials, as well as

the Congress, can be presumed to act on the basis of their perception of American national interests. However, there is no question that the community's views are weighed seriously by decision-makers in Washington. Of course, the positions with the greatest impact are those representing the broadest communal consensus.

An illustration of this point was Israel's request in the early 1990s for U.S. loan guarantees to assist in absorbing the wave of immigrants arriving from the former Soviet Union. While there was considerable opposition in the Congress toward Israel's settlements policy, which was shared by a significant portion of the American Jewish community, there also was strong communal resistance to the administration's attempted use of the loan guarantees as leverage to change Israel's policy. This agreement on the issue of linkage enabled the community to persuade an overwhelming number of members of Congress to support the guarantees despite the administration's posture.

The Jewish community has long opposed the conditioning of U.S. diplomatic, military, or economic assistance to Israel, including foreign aid, on Israel's willingness to follow U.S. policy requests. Regardless of differences that currently exist, or which may emerge in the future as negotiations proceed, that principle is likely to remain firm.

## **Rise of American Jewish Influence**

The Israeli survival agenda has served as a powerful tool for bringing

Jews into the American political process and for building their identification with the organized Jewish community. Support for Israel, according to Dr. Jonathan Woocher, director of the Jewish Educational Service of North America (JESNA), is an important component of American Jewry's "civil religion." Unquestionably, Israel-related public affairs involvement helped establish the Jewish community as a serious political force. AIPAC was recently rated by *Fortune* magazine as the second most influential lobby in Washington, D.C. The emergence of many well-funded Israel-oriented political action committees (PACs) founded in the 1970s and '80s also contributed to the reality and perception of Jewish power.

This formidable political clout—which is often exaggerated by foreign leaders who line up for meetings with Jewish organizational officials during visits to the U.S.—has proven to be useful in other areas as well. It is highly unlikely, for example, that Switzerland and other countries that profited from the assets of Holocaust victims would be as forthcoming were it not for the intervention of the American Jewish community.

At the same time, this influence—and the perception of influence—built around the issue of Israel, does not come without a price. It has tended to distort Washington's and the public's view of the nature of Jewish public affairs commitments. The perception is widespread that only Israel really matters to the Jewish community. The fact is that the community still devotes considerable

attention to an array of domestic and other international concerns. In addition, some observers argue that Israel-related political activism has retarded the development of American Jewish religious and cultural identity. However, some Jews who initially entered the organized Jewish community through the public affairs door may have gone on to acquire religious and other types of communal associations as well.

It also is important to be realistic about the limits of Jewish power. The loan guarantee episode, referred to previously, instructs that it is unwise to believe that American presidents can be easily pressured by the Congress, especially in regard to foreign policy issues. Despite the overwhelming congressional support of Israel's request for humanitarian assistance, it took the election of a Labor-led Israeli government in 1992, which instituted a change in settlements policy, finally to win President Bush's support for the guarantees. Similarly, in 1981, President Ronald Reagan managed to overcome strenuous congressional and Jewish community opposition to the U.S. sale of AWACs surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia. While the campaign against the AWACs sale was unsuccessful, this massive effort bolstered the image of the Jewish community as a major player in Washington and gave great institutional impetus to AIPAC.

### **Ongoing Efforts on Behalf of Israel**

The vigorous policy debates that

take place from time to time within the Jewish community, which are necessary exercises in the shaping of consensus, receive much attention from the Anglo-Jewish press and the general media. As a consequence, the important ongoing work being done by American Jewish public affairs agencies tends to be overlooked. These efforts include supporting U.S. economic and military assistance to Israel, developing educational programs to enable Jewish activists to be more effective pro-Israel advocates, sponsoring missions to Israel and providing other learning opportunities for leaders in the general community, countering inaccurate and imbalanced material in the media, fighting the Arab economic boycott against Israel, and developing constitutionally-sound federal and state laws that contribute to the battle against terrorism.

Public affairs activity also has centered on the United Nations, which played a critical role in Israel's early years. The 1947 Partition Plan calling for a Jewish state and an Arab state in British Mandatory Palestine laid the foundation, and Israel's acceptance as a member state following its declaration of independence in May 1948 provided international legitimacy. Since then, the world body was transformed, largely through Arab and Soviet influence, into a stridently anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic forum. The nadir was reached in 1975 when the General Assembly adopted a resolution equating Zionism with racism. In recent years, with the Jewish community playing an active advocacy role, the UN repealed the repugnant

Zionism resolution and has begun to take a somewhat more balanced approach to Middle East issues. Despite this positive trend, Israel, because it does not belong to any of the UN's regional groupings, remains the only member state excluded from full participation in the Security Council and other important UN bodies. The organized Jewish community has been supporting Israel's efforts, reinforced by U.S. diplomacy, to gain admission to the Western European and Others Group (WEOG).

### **Looking Ahead: The Survival Agenda Continues**

The future of the Jewish community's Israel-related public affairs activity depends on the course of events in the region and the world, as was the case during Israel's first fifty years of existence. Unfortunately, interesting discussions about the Jewish community's relationship with an Israel at peace may be premature. There are many possible scenarios.

Among the more optimistic visions is that, building on the treaties already signed with Egypt and Jordan, Israel concludes agreements in the next 3-5 years with the Palestinians, Syria, and Lebanon. With the exception of a number of rogue states, like Iraq and Libya, the rest of the Arab world is likely to follow suit. These formal treaties gradually lead to a reconciliation between Israel and most of the Arab world. This process will be lengthy, judging by the enduring resistance to Israel's legitimacy on the part of intellectual and professional elites

in Egypt and Jordan. The forces of extremism are contained, and the region generally moves in the direction of greater democracy, stability, and sustained economic growth.

Alternatively, the peace process could stall indefinitely. Exploiting conditions of poverty and the corruption of traditional Arab regimes, Islamic radicals expand their influence. The new "moderate" leadership in Iran does not significantly alter that country's policies. Hamas emerges as the dominant force in the Palestinian community and many of the Arab states, including Egypt and Jordan, increasingly are affected by Islamic fundamentalist movements. These trends, coupled with the progressive proliferation of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons in the region, threaten Israel's security. The development of such a scenario is not out of the realm of possibility.

How developments play out in the Middle East is significantly influenced by U.S. leadership. The U.S., with the support of the organized Jewish community, will be called upon to continue pressing Israel and the Arab parties—without seeking to impose solutions—to make progress in their negotiations. Beyond the peace process, the international community must be mobilized to encourage democracy and political moderation in the Arab world, and to find mechanisms for discouraging radical Islamic fundamentalism and the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. This challenge, even if the more positive scenario begins to unfold, will occupy American Jewish

public affairs agencies for many years to come. AIPAC traditionally has stressed securing U.S. foreign aid to Israel and fighting U.S. weapons sales to Arab states. In recent years, the organization has begun to shift its focus toward measures intended to contain the threat posed by Iran. It was instrumental in drafting legislation which imposes American economic sanctions against countries and companies assisting Iran in missile technology and economic development.

### **Growing Interest in Israeli Domestic Issues**

As the external threats facing Israel diminish (assuming they do), the Jewish community is likely to take more interest in domestic Israeli issues, particularly those that have an impact on the nexus between religion and state. The current controversy surrounding proposed conversion legislation in Israel suggests that American Jews may be ready to play a more active and sustained role in this area.

The relationship between Israeli Jews and Israel's approximately one million Arab citizens has been the subject of growing interest among American Jewish public affairs agencies and specialized organizations such as The Abraham Fund. It can be expected that this issue will receive greater attention in Israel and among American Jews, who can identify with challenges facing a minority group living within a majority religious/cultural environment.

In response to concern being

expressed in Israel about absorption problems facing Ethiopian immigrants, particularly in the area of education, the organized Jewish community, under the leadership of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, has established a coalition to respond to this issue. A number of public affairs agencies, including the Anti-Defamation League and the Religious Action Center of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, as well as the JCPA and the Presidents Conference, have advocated to the Israeli government in support of additional programs and resources for the Ethiopian community. A separate "professionals" coalition in Israel was established to monitor the Israeli government's response and to develop concrete initiatives that will effectively address the educational challenges confronting Ethiopian children. This effort provides a model that could be utilized by the Jewish community in responding to other domestic Israeli issues as well, such as Jewish-Arab coexistence, civil liberties, women's concerns, the environment, etc.

### **Israeli Resources Respond to American Concerns**

In addition, American Jewish public affairs activists may look increasingly to Israel as a source of ideas for dealing with domestic challenges confronting this country. The Partnership 2000 program, sponsored by National UJA and implemented by local Jewish federations across the country, is promoting people-to-people exchanges in

a broad range of areas including those relevant to the Jewish community's public affairs agenda. Dr. Mitchell G. Bard, executive director of the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, has produced a series of books describing how U.S.-Israel cooperation can benefit America in various fields, including education, biotechnology, and care of the elderly. These "shared values initiatives," as Bard calls them, are tailor made for national and local community relations agencies. These agencies' ongoing relationships with various religious and ethnic groups, local school boards, as well as state and local elected officials would enable them to develop programs that could have a significant impact on issues at the grass roots.

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) has been a pioneer in this regard by importing to the U.S. and other countries the successful Israeli Home Instruction Program for Pre-School Youngsters (HIPPY), which trains mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds on how to enrich their children's pre-school experience. Bill Clinton, while governor of Arkansas, was one of the first U.S. officials to adopt the NCJW-sponsored program.

In the international arena, the Israeli-American partnership has had an impressive track record of achievement in aiding Jewish communities in distress—including support in the 1970s and '80s for Jewish Refuseniks struggling to leave the Soviet Union for freedom in Israel and the West, and the rescue of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Operations Moses and

Solomon. But international initiatives need not be limited to narrow Jewish interests. For example, in the spirit of *tikkun olam*, American Jewish activists could come together with Israeli counterparts to pursue development projects in third world countries.

## Challenge for the 21st Century

As the 20th century draws to a close, Israel is involved in a difficult and complex peace process which, under the best of circumstances, will take years to complete. But Israel's long cherished dream of peace with the Arab world appears to be within reach, and American Jews will continue to be involved in efforts to advance this objective. However, peacemaking, it seems, has failed to stimulate the same level of grass roots response in the Jewish community as the survival agenda. Moreover, it has proven to be a sharply polarizing factor which at times has degenerated into strident intracommunal rhetoric and even violence. In Israel, some assert, this polarization contributed to an environment that led to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

The next generation of American Jewish activists are likely to seek out new avenues for involvement. For them, a working partnership with like-minded Israelis to shape a modern, technologically advanced, democratic, and pluralistic Jewish state may well emerge as the dominant Israel-related public affairs enterprise of the 21st century.

These public affairs ties also must be seen against the backdrop of trends

generally affecting American Jewish-Israel relations. With the exception of the Orthodox community, this includes, among American Jews, a continuing process of assimilation and intermarriage as well as a diminishing attachment to Israel. On the other side, there are young Israeli Jews who generally feel less linked to their Jewish roots and to the Diaspora. The vastly different reactions to the conversion controversy—with most Israe-

lis failing to understand the passionate response this issue has aroused among American Jews—is symptomatic of the growing gulf between these communities. Utilizing our shared Jewish heritage as the foundation, Israeli and American Jews will be challenged to find creative new ways to build a strong, mutually satisfying relationship during the next fifty years and beyond.