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The American Jewish Community: A Divergence of Political Perspectives

by Saba Soomekh

No other politician has stoked so much political division within the American Jewish community as Donald Trump. While some see him as a significant danger to American Jews, blaming him for heightening antisemitism on the far right and turning Israel into a partisan issue, others view him as the champion of American Jewry, punishing antisemitism on the far left, and advocating for Israel on the world stage. What makes writing about Trump and his relationship to the Jewish community so difficult is that all of the above statements are true. There are many shades of gray when it comes to Trump, antisemitism, his relationship with American Jewry, and Israel.

The United States does not have a monolithic Jewish community with uniform concerns. Polls have shown that 95% of American Jews support Israel, and 79% believe that a thriving state of Israel is vital for the long-term future of the Jewish people. The issue of Israel’s security in the world and America’s support for Israel is important to many American Jews. President Trump has expressed the belief that he has a great record on Israel, and many Israelis and American Jews agree with this view. Throughout his presidency, Trump repeatedly expressed his commitment to Israel and his intention to take a friendlier approach toward Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In 2017, Trump announced the official US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and then moved the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In March 2019, in a move hailed as “historic” by Israel’s prime minister, he recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, seized from
Syria in 1967. Throughout his presidency, Trump had been extremely critical of the Palestinian Authority’s “pay for slay” policy. In 2018, Trump signed into law the Taylor Force Act, which suspended US aid to the Palestinian Authority as long as it continued to implement the existing prisoner payment policy. The legislation was named in honor of Taylor Force, a West Point graduate who had served tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan and was stabbed to death by a Palestinian terrorist while with a Vanderbilt University tour group in Israel.

The Trump administration took the stance of protecting Israel at the United Nations and expressed frustration that the Palestinian Authority would not engage in peace talks with Israel. Historically, the US was the UN Relief and Works Agency’s (UNRWA) largest single donor. Trump cut aid to UNRWA from $360 million to $60 million in 2018, and reduced it to zero in 2019, saying the agency needed to make unspecified reforms and called on the Palestinians to renew peace talks. Cutting UNRWA funding has been widely interpreted in both Israel and Palestine as a blunt move by the US to unilaterally sweep aside one of the main sticking points in peace negotiations—the right of return of Palestinians. By slashing its budget, Palestinians believed Washington was attempting to delegitimize their refugee status and that of their descendants.

The US and Israel disagree with UNRWA on which Palestinians are refugees with a right to return to the homes they fled following the 1948 war. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has previously called for UNRWA’s funding to be cut gradually and its responsibilities transferred to the UN’s global refugee agency, the UNHCR, arguing that UNRWA “perpetuates the Palestinian problem.” Right-wing Israeli and US politicians have long argued the organization created in 1948 to service Palestinian refugees had become a stumbling block to the peace process because of its decision to confer refugee status on the descendants of the more than 750,000 Palestinians who fled their homes during Israel’s War of Independence. They believe UNRWA artificially inflates the numbers of refugees.

Israel, and many American Jews, believe that the United Nations is biased against Israel. The Anti-Defamation League website states:

The international body has a continuing history of a one-sided, hostile approach to Israel. After decades of bias and marginalization, recent years have brought some positive developments for Israel to the UN. Nonetheless, the UN’s record and culture continue to demonstrate a predisposition against Israel. Successive Secretary Generals have acknowledged this an issue for the institution. Indeed,
in a meeting in April 2007, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon acknowledged to ADL leaders that Israel has been treated poorly at the UN and that, while some progress has been made, this bias still remains an issue. Secretary Ban stated this view publicly during his visit to Israel in August 2013. “Unfortunately, because of the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict, Israel’s been weighed down by criticism and suffered from bias—and sometimes even discrimination,” Ban said in response to a question about discrimination against Israel at the UN. “It’s an unfortunate situation,” Ban said, adding that Israel should be treated equal to all the other 192-member states. In his first public address to a Jewish group, Secretary General Antonio Guterres told the World Jewish Congress in April 2017: “As secretary general of the United Nations I consider that the State of Israel needs to be treated as any other state.” And in August 2017, he stated that calls for Israel’s destruction are a form of modern-day anti-Semitism.

Throughout Trump’s presidency, the administration pushed for reform at the world body, opposing anti-Israel resolutions and actions by the United Nations and its affiliated agencies. During Nikki Haley’s two-year-tenure as envoy to the United Nations, the Trump administration withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council and the UN educational and scientific agency for adopting positions it deemed to be hostile to Israel. In her opening testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting, Kelly Knight Craft, who served after Haley as United States Ambassador to the United Nations from 2019 to 2021, said: “Without U.S. leadership, our partners and allies would be vulnerable to bad actors at the UN. This is particularly true in the case of Israel, which is the subject of unrelenting bias and hostility in UN venues. The United States will never accept such bias, and if confirmed I commit to seizing every opportunity to shine a light on this conduct, call it what it is, and demand that these outrageous practices finally come to an end.”

In 2018, Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, reiterating Republican arguments against the deal: that it does not address the threat of Iran’s ballistic missiles or its malign behavior in the region, and that the expiration dates for the sunset clauses open the door to an Iranian nuclear bomb down the road.

Netanyahu lauded the withdrawal as he had been one of the world’s most vocal critics of the Iran deal, saying it cleared the way for the Islamic Republic to acquire a nuclear bomb. He described Trump’s decision to pull out of the agreement as “historic.” He commented: “Israel thanks President Trump for
his courageous leadership, his commitment to confront the terrorist regime in Tehran, and his commitment to ensure that Iran never gets nuclear weapons, not today, not in a decade, not ever.” Israel was not the only country that supported America’s withdrawal from the JCPOA; Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain swiftly backed Trump’s decision to reimpose sanctions on Tehran, reflecting their concern about Iran’s ballistic missile program and support for militant groups.

Like Netanyahu, many Iranian American Jews in Los Angeles supported Trump because of his dealings with Iran and his “pro-Israel” stance. For instance, Philip Mehdipour writes that the “Iranian-American Jewish community, in which he is a part of, has elevated President Trump into a messianic figure.” While there is no polling data on the Iranian Jewish community, which comprises less than 100,000 people, Mehdipour writes that he has found that support for Trump is strong among both older-generation and younger generation Iranian Jews born in America. Mehdipour offers reasons as to why Trump is attractive to Iranian American Jews: Iranian Jews are fairly traditional in their religious beliefs and in their support for Israel; he is seen as a “pro-Israel” president; he exited the Iran deal, killed the commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, and recognized the Golan Heights.

Journalist Karmel Melamed refutes Mehdipour’s oped. He writes:

In his piece Mehdipour picks and chooses certain segments of Southern California’s Iranian Jews to make the false claim that all of the community is Republican, but he conveniently leaves out the very viable segment of the community that are Democrats. He also conveniently leaves out the Iranian Jewish community’s positive history with Democrats and the Carter administration. . . . All of the facts and the Iranian American Jewish community’s history show that the community has both passionate Republicans and Democrats members among its ranks. To pigeon-hole the Iranian American Jews by claiming they all follow one particular political party does a disservice to the community and insults the community members who do not follow one party over the other.

In 2019, California State University, Los Angeles produced the Los Angeles Voter Study. Sixty-eight first- and second-generation Iranian Jews were interviewed; 20% identified their political party as Democrat while 30% identified with being Republican; 44% said that they are independent. What this data shows is that like the larger American Jewish community, immigrant American Jews also are divided in their feelings for Trump.
Like many US administrations before, the Trump administration attempted to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through their peace plan, officially titled “Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People.” Many journalists and pundits were quick to point out that the peace plan was one sided towards Israel. The New York Times wrote that this plan “would give Israel most of what it has sought over decades of conflict while offering the Palestinians the possibility of a state with limited sovereignty. Mr. Trump’s plan would guarantee that Israel would control a unified Jerusalem as its capital and not require it to uproot any of the settlements in the West Bank that have provoked Palestinian outrage and alienated much of the world. Mr. Trump promised to provide $50 billion in international investment to build the new Palestinian entity and open an embassy in its new state.”

Journalist Bret Stephens does not refute that the Trump peace plan favored Israel, writing Trump “offered a peace plan for an eventual Palestinian state that clearly tilted toward Israel. The plan later provided the pretext for the Abraham Accords, after the UAE offered Israel a peace deal in exchange for Benjamin Netanyahu backing off from his pledge to annex parts of the West Bank.”

American Middle East analyst, author, and negotiator, Aaron David Miller, writes that Trump clung to the image he tried to cultivate as the most pro-Israel president in history. In a speech in 2019, Trump said: “The Jewish State has never had a better friend in the White House than your president.” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed, telling the president earlier that year that Trump had been “the greatest friend that Israel has ever had in the White House.” However, Miller argues that while Trump was certainly helpful to Netanyahu, he did little to promote Israel’s security and long-term interests. Instead, he writes, “Trump’s approach to Iran—withstanding the United States from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—and his faulty approach to the Israel-Palestinian peace process have degraded Israel’s security, not enhanced it. Iran is ramping up its nuclear program, while prospects for progress, let alone a resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict remain remote.”

One of Trump’s significant diplomatic accomplishments before leaving office was the Abraham Accords, which marked the first public normalization of relations between Israel and Muslim countries since agreements with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994. Traditionally, Arab states did not publicize their dealings with Israel in part because of the Arab Peace Initiative, drawn up by Saudi Arabia in 2002. In that accord, Arab nations endorsed the idea of normalizing ties with Israel, but only if the Israelis ended their occupation and
gave the Palestinians a state of their own.\textsuperscript{24} Although that has not happened, in August 2020, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain agreed to normalization. Following the UAE and Bahrain, Sudan formally agreed to normalize ties with Israel and join the broader diplomatic realignment in the Middle East two months later. And in December 2020, Israel and Morocco agreed to normalize their relations in the Israel-Morocco normalization accords. In the space of five months, the Trump administration secured normalization agreements between Israel and several Muslim states, while no agreement had been made between Israelis and Palestinians.

Although many American Jews and Jewish organizations hailed the Abraham Accords, others criticized it for failing to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself. Specifically, progressive journalist Jeffrey Goldberg writes that, if normalization causes “Israel to avoid coming to terms with the reality that its continued control over the lives of millions of Palestinians threatens its democratic nature, then both the Palestinian aspiration of nationhood and the Israeli dream of a free and strong democratic haven in the Jewish ancestral homeland could be victims of this agreement.”\textsuperscript{25}

However, not everyone is happy when it comes to Trump and Israel. A 2018 survey by the non-partisan American Jewish Committee found that 57\% of US Jews “disapproved” of Trump’s handling of the US-Israel relationship.\textsuperscript{26} They feared that Trump had made support for Israel a wedge issue in American politics. Aaron David Miller writes that “Trump has damaged the bipartisan-ship on which the durability of the US-Israel relationship depends. To secure his base, which includes evangelical Christians and right-leaning Republicans, and driving a political wedge within the American Jewish community, Trump has tried to make the GOP the go-to party for Israel while demonizing Democrats, cynically remarking in 2019 that ‘if you vote for a Democrat, you are very, very disloyal to Israel and to the Jewish people.’”\textsuperscript{27}

DOMESTIC POLITICS AND THE PRESIDENT
While many American Jews support the state of Israel, this does not mean that they prioritize Israel over American politics. Moreover, many American Jews are more concerned about Trump’s domestic policies than his Middle Eastern ones. Polling shows that the Israel of today, for better or worse, carries less political weight for younger American Jews than domestic US concerns.\textsuperscript{28}
Many within the Jewish community disagreed with the Trump administration regarding deportation, detention of children, the border wall, tariffs, detention of refugees, and treatment of Dreamers; many were also concerned about the rise of antisemitism under Trump.

Another area of tremendous concern is that the US Jewish community has experienced near-historic levels of antisemitism since 2016. According to the 2019 American Jewish Committee (AJC) Survey of American Jewish Opinion, 65% of American Jews at that time thought they were less secure than a year prior. When asked in a 2020 AJC poll if antisemitism was a problem in America today, 88% of Jews surveyed said that it was; 82% of those surveyed said that antisemitism had increased in the past five years. Clearly the American Jewish community feels that antisemitism is getting worse in America, and with good reason as racism and antisemitism was evident at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville in 2017:

The demonstration was suffused with anti-black racism, but also with antisemitism. Marchers displayed swastikas on banners and shouted slogans like “blood and soil,” a phrase drawn from Nazi ideology. As Jews prayed at a local synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel, men dressed in fatigues carrying semi-automatic rifles stood across the street, according to the Temple’s president. Nazi websites posted a call to burn their building. As a precautionary measure, congregants had removed their Torah scrolls and exited through the back of the building when they were done praying.

Beyond the shocking images of white men shouting Nazi slogans, a further shock came two days after Charlottesville, when Trump condemned “hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides.” This suggested equivalence between the white supremacist demonstrators and their counter-protesters shocked politicians and public figures in both parties, who quickly criticized Trump’s unwillingness to condemn neo-Nazis and the KKK. “It’s very clear that the people marching in Charlottesville felt very supported by the shape of the public statements made by President Trump,” according to University of Chicago historian David Nirenberg.

Jonathan Greenblatt, National Director of the ADL, argued that the backlash against Trump’s comments has not been about politics, but about recognizing a pattern of antisemitism. He provided examples of this pattern, such as the Holocaust Remembrance Day statement that did not mention Jews; Trump retweeting the conspiratorial meme of Hillary Clinton and the Star of David during his campaign; and the infamous Nazi salute and shouts of “Hail
Trump!” at an alt-right conference following the election. After Charlottesville, a number of advocacy groups urged Trump to fire his then chief strategist, Steve Bannon, in part based on Bannon’s role in heading Breitbart, which he called a “platform for the alt-right.” Greenblatt described all these as signs that, at best, the White House did not take antisemitism seriously enough. At worst, he believed, the Trump administration was indulging bigotry so as not to alienate some supporters.

Trump’s pattern of dog-whistling to the far-right was again demonstrated in the Presidential election debate in September 2020, when he was asked by the moderator, Chris Wallace, and by his opponent Joe Biden, to condemn white supremacists for inciting violence at anti-police brutality demonstrations across the country. Trump instead placed the blame on the “left wing” and Antifa. When pressed again by Wallace and Biden to denounce hate groups such as the Proud Boys, Trump’s response was “Proud Boys—stand back and stand by.” Trump’s refusal to denounce White supremacists and his specific mention of this group drew immediate celebration from members of the Proud Boys. Images of an updated Proud Boys logo featuring the President’s “stand by” remark in the group’s signature yellow and black swiftly circulated online.

In addition to the “stand by” comment which because a rallying cry for the alt-right, Trump also refused to denounce the antisemitic far-right movement QAnon, a conspiracy theory centered on the baseless belief that Trump was waging a secret campaign against enemies in the “deep state” and combating a child sex trafficking ring that, per the QAnon lore, was funded by Soros and “the Rothschilds,” and run by satanic pedophiles and cannibals. In August, 2020 Trump tweeted support for then congressional candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene, a believer of the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory who has been criticized for racist and antisemitic comments, following her Republican primary victory in Georgia. Trump tweeted “Congratulations to future Republican Star Marjorie Taylor Greene on a big Congressional primary win in Georgia against a very tough and smart opponent,” Trump said on Twitter. “Marjorie is strong on everything and never gives up—a real WINNER!” Once again, by supporting antisemitic candidates and failing to confront his supporters for peddling antisemitism, he sanctioned their ideology permeated with antisemitic canards.

Trump, knowingly or unknowingly, also appropriates antisemitic accusations when he speaks publicly off the cuff. His relationship with Jews is both philosemitic and antisemitic. He has internalized antisemitic stereotypes about Jews and appears to appreciate them for these bigoted reasons. In August 2019, he said that Jewish people who vote for Democrats were either ignorant or
disloyal as he railed against congresswomen Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, who have been critical of the US-Israel alliance. “I think Jewish people that vote for a Democrat—I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty,” Trump told reporters during an Oval Office meeting with the president of Romania. Charges of disloyalty have been used for centuries to attack and murder Jews. Trump claimed that Democratic Jews are “disloyal” to Israel. What is interesting is that this is an inversion of the traditional dual loyalty trope, which charges that Jews are more loyal to their fellow Jews or Israel than to their home countries. Trump, by contrast, was arguing that Democratic Jews were insufficiently devoted to other Jews or to Israel—that they were not strong enough dual loyalists. In other words, he criticized American Jews for not conforming to the antisemitic stereotype. AJC CEO David Harris said the president’s comments are “shockingly divisive and unbecoming of the occupant of the highest elected office. American Jews—like all Americans—have a range of political views and policy priorities. His assessment of their knowledge or ‘loyalty,’ based on their party preference, is inappropriate, unwelcome, and downright dangerous.” AJC called on President Trump to stop such divisive rhetoric and to retract his disparaging remarks.

Some might argue that Trump did attempt to tackle the issue of antisemitism, by signing the executive order in December 2019 that made Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act apply to antisemitic acts. This executive order takes indirect aim at the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement that has generated intense controversy on college campuses. Title VI bans discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs and activities, such as colleges and universities, that receive federal funding. The executive order will extend the ban to discrimination based on antisemitism. The draft order suggests that those charged with enforcing Title VI consider the definition of antisemitism adopted by International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which states: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” Many in the Jewish community praised Trump for signing the executive order and addressing antisemitism on college campuses, with the Republican Jewish Coalition calling Trump “the most Pro-Israel President in American history” and saying that he has “shown himself to be the most pro-Jewish president as well. Today’s order will have a real, positive impact in protecting Jewish college students from anti-Semitism.”
Others have instead argued that Trump should apply the same intolerance for antisemitism when it stems from the far right and his own party. Trump has been accused of contributing to the environment of antisemitism and only fighting the danger when it comes from the left. What many in the Jewish community wanted him to do is de-weaponize and depoliticize antisemitism and call it out whether it comes from the left but also from the right.

One could argue that not only has Trump refused to call out antisemitism by his followers, but he has also actively encouraged it, as displayed in the tragic incident leaving another indelible stain on Trump’s presidency—the attempted coup at the US Capitol by domestic terrorists on January 6, 2020. In what some have referred to as the darkest in American history, thousands of Donald Trump’s supporters waved Confederate flags, hung nooses, and paraded white supremacist, antisemitic symbols as they violently breached the US Capitol. Trump’s opponents believe they were encouraged and instructed by Trump to incite violence against US federal lawmakers in his quest to overturn the 2020 Presidential election results. After weeks of refusing to concede and making false claims that the election was stolen from him, Trump urged his supporters to head to the Capitol to protest. In a rally ahead of the vote, he urged them to have a “strong” response and stated that the protests would be “wild.”

Trump now holds the notorious and embarrassing distinction of being the first American president to be impeached twice, as ten members of his party joined with Democrats in the House to charge him with “incitement of insurrection” for his role in egging on a violent mob that stormed the Capitol. More members of his party voted to charge the former president than in any other impeachment. Even Senate Republican Mitch McConnell, who shied away from public rebuke of Trump in the past, explicitly blamed him for the deadly riot at the Capitol, saying the mob was “fed lies” and that the Trump and others “provoked” those intent on overturning Democrat Joe Biden’s election victory.

Trump’s passive rhetoric on January 6th echoed his comments in connection with Charlottesville. As bipartisan pressure mounted on Trump to condemn the violence and urge the Capitol protesters to disperse, he called on his supporters to be “peaceful” and “go home” but did so while repeating his false claim that the election was stolen from him. Trump said to his followers: “I know your pain. I know your hurt, but you have to go home now,” in the video which was eventually taken down by Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. “We can’t play into the hands of these people. We have to have peace. So go home. We love you. You’re very special.”
The attempt by a US president to overthrow the American government was unprecedented in American history; also unprecedented was the response of nonpartisan Jewish human rights groups such as the ADL and AJC in demanding that a sitting president be removed from office. These Jewish non-profits remain very committed to being non-partisan and observing their 501c3 status. However, the events of January 6 and Trump’s role in it, along with the violent antisemitic and racist images from that day, were too powerful to ignore. This prompted the ADL to release a statement on January 8, 2020, stating “In our over 100 years of history, ADL has never called for the President of the United States to be removed from office, but what occurred on Wednesday was inexcusable. It will forever be remembered as one of the darkest days of American democracy and it makes unambiguously clear: President Trump is unfit for office and needs to be removed. Racism, antisemitism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and so many other forms of hate were on full display as extremists perpetrated violence and sedition. We must root out this evil if we are ever to heal as a nation.” On January 13, AJC released a statement supporting the impeachment of Donald Trump, asserting that his actions “disqualify[ed] him from continuing to occupy the highest office in the land.”

While Jews who were critical of Trump were not surprised by the insurrection and his support for it, the real question should be how do Jewish Trump supporters view the events that unfolded on January 6th? If many Trump supporters vote for Trump because they think he is good for Israel, isn’t a strong, democratic America “good for Israel?” While Trump has exited the world stage—for now—the far-right groups who supported him, with their antisemitic and racist ideology, are sadly now a part of the American landscape.
Notes

1. This statistic originates from an article by Gallup Senior Scientist Frank Newport, written in August 2019.
4. “Pay for Slay” is a controversial policy in which the Palestinian Authority compensates those who serve time in Israeli prisons, including for violent attack. The policy has long been denounced by Israel and its supporters as giving an incentive to terrorism because it assures would-be attackers that their dependents will be well cared for. And because payments are based largely on the length of the prison sentence, critics say the most heinous crimes are the most rewarded (Adam Rasgon and David M. Halbfinger, “Seeking Restart with Biden, Palestinians Eye End to Prisoner Payments,” The New York Times, November 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/world/middleeast/biden-palestinian-prisoner-payments.html).
8. Ibid.
13. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


27. Miller, “Trump Was Great for Netanyahu.”


32. Green, “Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed with Jews.”
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
42. This executive order takes indirect aim at the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement that has generated intense controversy on college campuses. Title VI bans discrimination based on race, color or national origin in programs and activities, such as colleges and universities, that receive federal funding.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.


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