APOI
American Public Opinion toward Israel

American Public Support for Israel: Assessing the Cracks in a Unique Bond[1]

Amnon Cavari[2]
Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy IDC, Herzliya
cavari@idc.ac.il

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Americans generally think of Israel in favorable terms—they sympathize more with Israel than with Arab countries or with the Palestinians, they see Israel as an ally of the United States and they are willing to follow up on their support for Israel with economic and military aid. However, this high public support is undergoing important transformations, which may result in a decline of public support in the near future and in turn affect US policy toward Israel. In recent years we are witnessing a development of important demographic gaps in support for Israel among age, education, and religious groups. These groups are aligned with existing political cleavages and are the root of the unprecedented polarization of American elite and mass about support for Israel, where the Republican Party demonstrates strong support for Israel and the Democratic Party demonstrates an increasingly weakening support. This, I argue, should be of concern to policymakers in Israel.

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[1] This is an updated version of a paper presented at the 14th Herzliya Conference, 2014. For the original paper please see http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/?CategoryID=513&ArticleID=2537

[2] The author thanks Guy Freedman of the APOI Project for collecting the data for this report.

American public opinion about Israel has long been a puzzling exception to Americans' knowledge, interest and opinion about foreign policy. Most Americans possess little knowledge about foreign countries and demonstrate unstable attitudes about them. Yet, Americans are highly informed about Israel and view Israel in favorable terms—they sympathize more with Israel than with Arab countries or with the Palestinians, they see Israel as an ally of the United States and they are willing to follow up on their support for Israel with large sums of economic and military aid. Moreover, the support for Israel has long remained strikingly homogenous across most major groups in American society, leading pundits, journalists and scholars to conclude that views toward Israel are relatively isolated from American partisan politics, putting Israel in a special category (Cavari 2012; Gilboa 1987).

The strong and broad support is often referred to as the source of the special relationship between the United States and Israel. While the special relationship rests on strategic interests and deep social, religious, and ideological ties, the relationship would have been untenable without the strong and broad support among the American public.

In this report, I argue that despite the strong—indeed strengthening—support for Israel among Americans, recent evidence suggests that this high public support is undergoing important transformations which may result in a decline of public support in the near future and in turn affect US policy toward Israel. Mainly, I demonstrate that during recent years we are witnessing a development of important demographic gaps in support for Israel among age, education, and religious groups. These groups are aligned with existing political cleavages and hence are the root of the unprecedented polarization of American elite and mass about support for Israel, where the Republican Party demonstrates strong support for Israel and the Democratic Party demonstrates an increasingly weakening support. This, I argue, should be of concern to policymakers in Israel.
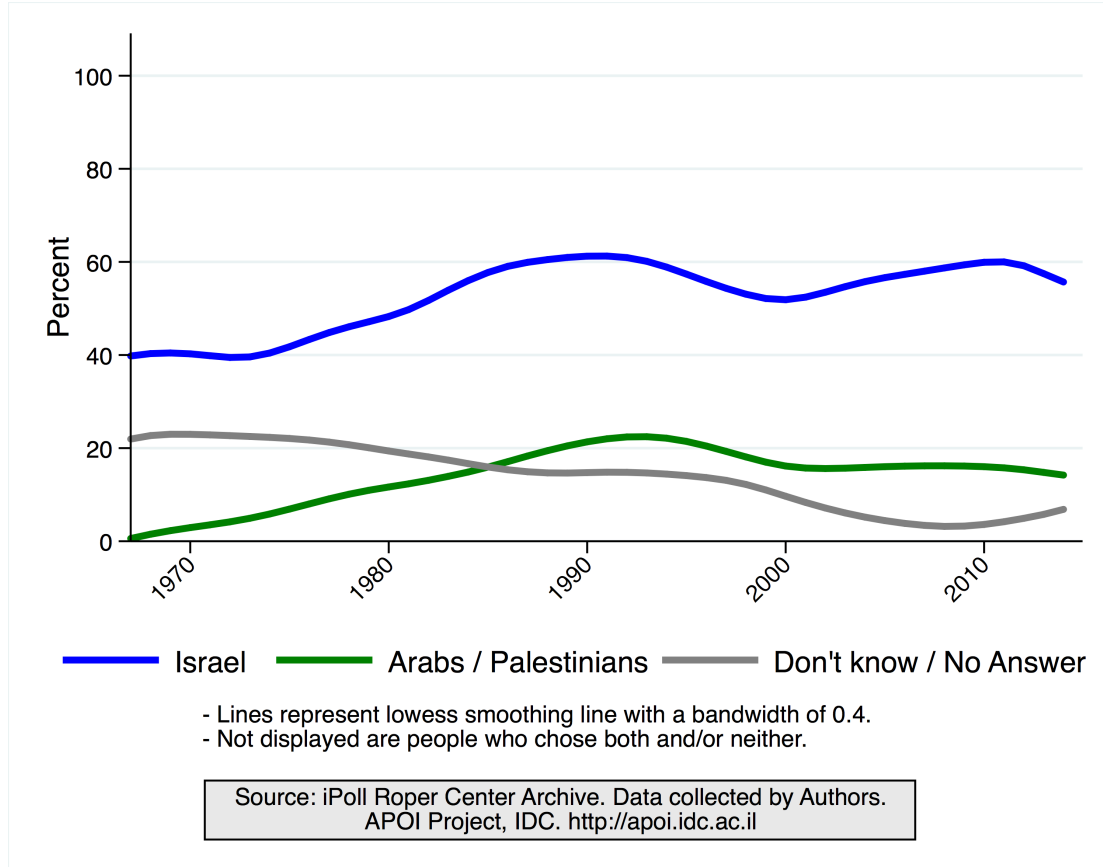
Overall Support for Israel

To assess the overall support for Israel, I examine a dataset collected at the research project on American Public Opinion toward Israel (APOI) at the IDC, Herzliya.[3] The dataset includes all available surveys that ask Americans for their sympathies in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The exact wording varies slightly yet the general pattern is the following: In the Israeli-[Palestinian/Arab] Conflict, which side do you sympathize with more: Israel, [Palestinians/Arabs/Arab Countries], both, or neither.

While these surveys are available since Israel's independence, the questions were asked more consistently since 1964. Together, these surveys offer a unique opportunity to assess attitude-change over time. In fact, the frequency and consistency of wording of these surveys make the analysis of Americans attitudes toward Israel a unique case study for studying change in American public opinion on a foreign policy issue (Cavari 2013). Trends displayed in the following figures were created using Stimson's dyad ratio algorithm (1999).

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[3] http://apoi.idc.ac.il

Figure 1: American Sympathies in the Israel-Arab Conflict

- Lines represent lowess smoothing line with a bandwidth of 0.4.
- Not displayed are people who chose both and/or neither.

Source: iPoll Roper Center Archive. Data collected by Authors.
APOI Project, IDC. http://apoi.idc.ac.il

Concurring with the conventional wisdom, Americans have a clear preference about which side in the Israel-Arab conflict they sympathize with more. Throughout the entire period examined, the support for Israel was twofold and threefold the sympathies for Arabs, Arab countries or Palestinians. Trends indicate that over time, fewer Americans refused to respond or said they do not know, and more Americans sympathized with Israel. Most importantly, during the last decade, this support had passed the 50% threshold and recently reached the unprecedented level of 60% support. Indeed, taken together, Israel enjoys the overwhelming backing of the American public.

Cracks in Public Support

To illustrate the change in the structure of American public support for Israel, the table below summarizes the percent of people in major demographic groups who sympathize more with Israel than with Arab Nations or Palestinians in 1967 and in 2009. Overall support has remained the same, yet the structure of mass support has significantly changed. In 1967 there were no differences between the two dominant religious camps in America—Protestants and Catholics (nearly 90% of Americans at the time). There were also no differences between gender or partisan groups. Breaking the data by education levels, reveals that support for Israel was strongest among the more educated (college education or more) and weakest among the least educated (without a high school diploma). Age differences were minimal except for overwhelming support of the youngest cohort (age 18-29). Racial differences were small.

By 2009, the structure of mass opinion has changed considerably. While support among Roman Catholics remained unchanged, Protestant groups have increased their support for Israel generating a religious gap of 10 points. This change has been mobilized by the growing share of Evangelical Christians in America, whose support reaches 78%. Differences between education levels decreased but the associations reversed: now people with fewer years of formal education (no high school diploma) became Israel's staunchest supporters, whereas those with the highest education levels (college degree or more) significantly reduced their support. This reverse of associations characterizes also age groups. In 2009, the most supportive age groups are the older cohorts—the cohort that was the youngest in the 1967 survey. The increase in the gender and racial gaps is within the margin of error.

Table 1: Support for Israel of Major Demographic Groups – 1967 and 2009

	June 1967*	January 2009
ALL**	60%	61%
Protestants	59%	69%
Mainline Protestants	***	55%
Evangelical Protestants	***	78%
Catholics	58%	58%
Jewish	100%	75%
No high school education	52%	67%
High school diploma	60%	65%
Some higher education	63%	60%
College education or more	75%	57%
Republican	60%	80%
Independents	57%	60%
Democrat	62%	51%
White	60%	64%
Black	53%	54%
Male	60%	63%
Female	60%	60%
Age 18-29	72%	53%
Age 30-49	56%	60%
Age 50-64	59%	67%
Age 65+	57%	66%
N (responding to the sympathies question	2253	1218

* June 2-June 7. The 1967 War broke on June 5th, during the last two days of the survey.

** The total includes all respondents, some of which are missing information on several demographic questions. Therefore, a weighted sum of each breakdown does not reach the same average as the total.

*** Data not available.

Data: Gallup, June 2-7, 1967. Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, January 7-11, 2009.

The most significant change, however, is that of partisan groups. In contrast to 1967, Democratic identifiers became the least supportive group among all other major demographic divisions (51%), whereas Republicans became the most supportive group (80%), exceeding even the Jewish population and Evangelical Christians, the two most pro-Israeli groups in contemporary America (Mayer, 2004). Given this 30 points gap, it is difficult to argue that American attitudes toward Israel today are beyond party politics.

Assessing the Growing Gaps

Moving beyond the comparison of these two surveys, I use extensive public opinion data that include 176,647 individual responses to the sympathies question asked in 121 surveys from 1964 to 2013. Using this unique dataset of individual responses, I examine trends in public support of major demographic groups: age, education, religion, and party. These trends illustrate the change in public opinion and offer an important perspective to assess the future of American public opinion toward Israel.

Religion

That religion has a role in public opinion toward Israel, the holy land in the eyes of most faiths in America, is self-evident. Americans are overwhelmingly Christian and are demonstrating strong—perhaps the strongest among developed countries—religious behavior, which also affects the public sphere in the United States (Putnam & Campbell 2010). Protestants and Catholics make the majority of the American population reaching an average of about three-quarters of the population. The majority of the remaining quarter is uncategorized, a group that consists of a variety of groups, most of which prefer to not affiliate with any religion (see discussion of this group in Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The Jewish population is small, approximately two percent, yet for obvious reasons it is of interest in this case, at least as a reference category.
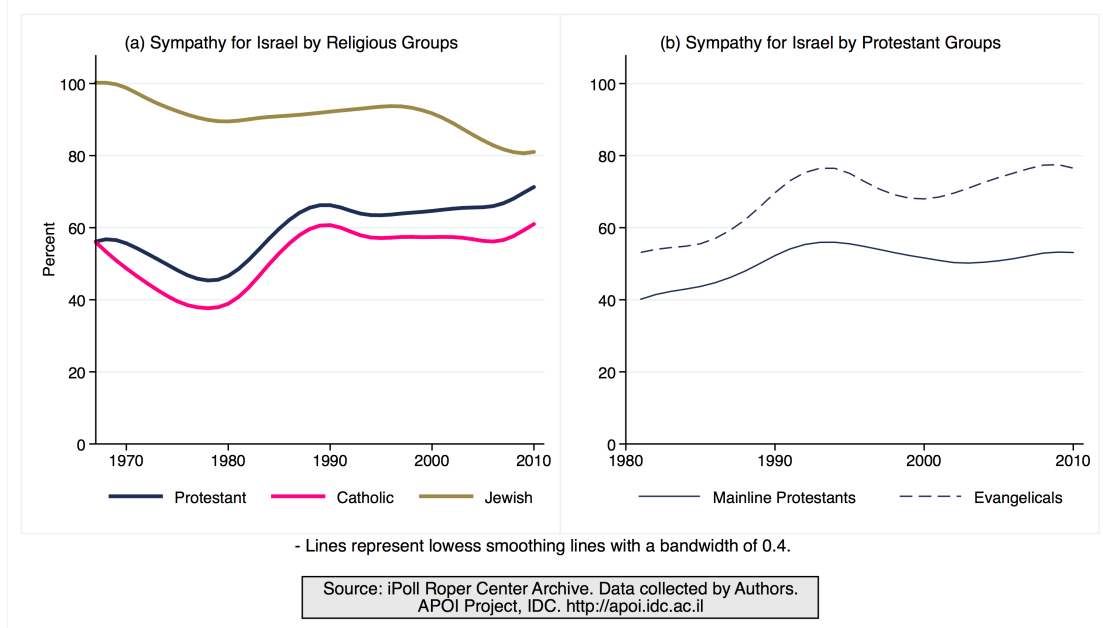
While the share of Protestants in the United States has remained stable over time, major transformations in the Protestant Church since the 1980s, have affected their attitudes toward Israel—mainly, the rise of evangelical groups at the expense of mainline Protestants. The support for Israel among evangelical groups is tightly connected to the evangelical belief of dispensationalism, predicting an Armageddon that would end with the second coming of Christ. According to the modern interpreters of dispensationalism, God gave the land of Israel to the Jews and the modern reappearance of the nation of Israel is a confirmation of the accuracy of biblical prophecies and the nearness of Christ's own reign. The 1967 War, in which Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, tripled its territory and took control over the old city of Jerusalem and holy places in the West Bank, was viewed as another dispensation, or stage, in God's unfolding plan (Lienesch, 1993).

Evangelical leaders found contemporary political meaning in God's gift, exhorting Israel's leadership never to give up any territory to the Palestinians or Arab Nations, and ensuring that the United States would continue its support to Israel (Boyer 2005). The fact that this interpretation is rooted in a strict reading of the bible (Ariel 2002), and the relative tendency of evangelicals to accept the policies suggested by their religious leaders (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), both contributed to a wave of mass pro-Israeli views among a majority of evangelicals.

The figures below demonstrate the deterioration of Jewish support over time, the growing gap between Catholics and Protestants, and the divergence of the protestant main groups. While support among American Jews remains high, the decrease in support reveals the recent changes in the connection of Jewish Communities in the United States with Israel. These changes harbor the internal critique within the traditional Israel lobby in the United States, mainly the challenge presented by J-Street groups and the more traditional AIPAC.

Support among American Catholics has remained relatively stable. The increase in support among Protestants has been fueled by the rise of the fundamentalist groups within the Church. As Figure 2 illustrates, evangelical Christians have increased their support considerably while the support among mainline Protestants has waned.

Figure 2: Sympathy for Israel by Religious groups

- Lines represent lowess smoothing lines with a bandwidth of 0.4.

Source: iPoll Roper Center Archive. Data collected by Authors.
APOI Project, IDC. http://apoi.idc.ac.il

Age

Age can have a varying effect on the attitudes of an individual. People in different ages have a different perspective on self and society, and hence differ in their attitudes about policy. Yet in contrast to most other demographic characteristics, age changes. The question, therefore, is whether attitudes of an individual are affected by his age, or by his life experiences. This brings to the fore the idea of generations, or cohorts.[4] A birth cohort is an aggregate of the individuals within a given social framework born in a certain years-span (For example: Ryder 1965; Evan 1959). According to the theory
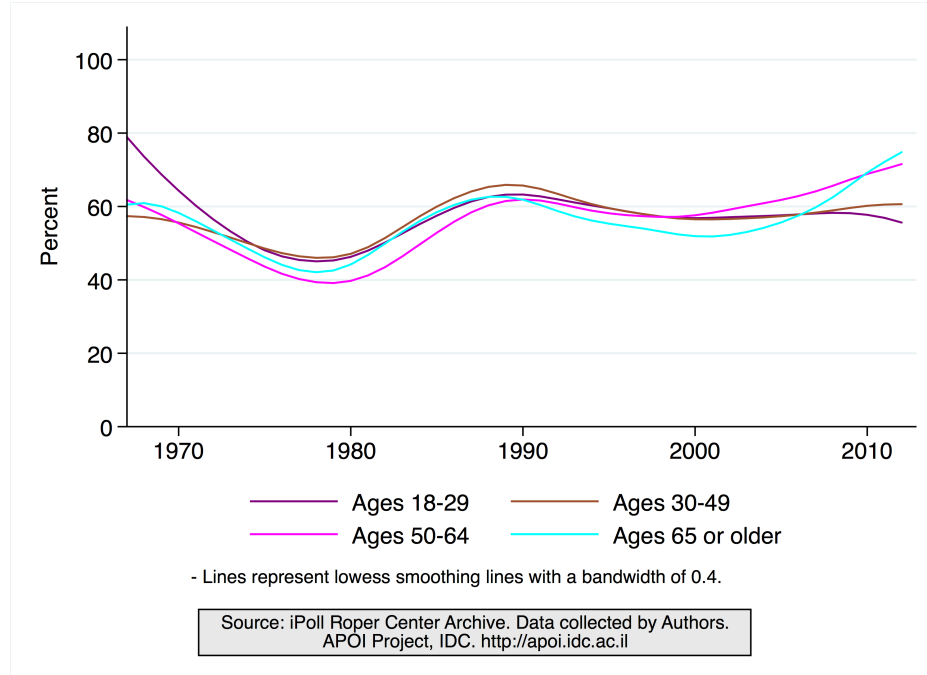
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[4] The term "generation" is also used to describe kinship: parents, children and grandchildren consist different generations in a family. Therefore, "Generation" was criticized as an ambiguous and problematic category to analyze. It was therefore substituted by "birth cohort" as a preferred unit of analysis.

of cohorts, the attitudes of people are shaped by the contemporary political and environmental conditions they were exposed to during the formative years of their political maturation, widely viewed to be between the ages of 17 and 25 (Bilingsley and Tucker 1987; Campbell 1971). Hence, generational differences reflect the unique conditions that prevailed when each generational group was in this age. Several examples in the literature include the unique world view of the generation of Europeans, who experienced in their early adulthood the First World War (Fussel 1975), or the unique attitudinal characteristics for Algerians, who came of age during Boumedienne's regime between 1965 and 1978 (Tessler, Konold & Reiff 2004).

Cohort analysis is therefore a useful research tool for separating between age effects and cohort effects. An *age effect* reflects changes of individuals as they get older. A *cohort effect* reflects lifelong stability of individuals who were born within a given period and hence were shaped by certain formative experiences. I find both processes to have an important effect on attitudes toward Israel.

Age. Figure 3 demonstrates that during the first half of the 50 years examined, changes of sympathies toward Israel have remained parallel among different age groups. In general, the two younger age-groups, 18-29 and 30-49, have demonstrated higher levels of support, compared to older age-groups, 50-64, and 65 and up. This trend, however, changes dramatically in early 1990s and even stronger in 2000. Starting in the 1990s, the middle age-group (50-64) is beginning a gradual increase in support for Israel and by 2000 becoming the most supportive group. Starting in 2000, the oldest age-group (65 and up) are beginning a rapid increase in support for Israel, reaching in recent years the same level of support that is demonstrated by the middle age-group. At the same time, we see a gradual decrease in the support of the two younger groups. By 2013, the gap between the two young age-groups and the two old age-groups is more than 15 percentage points.
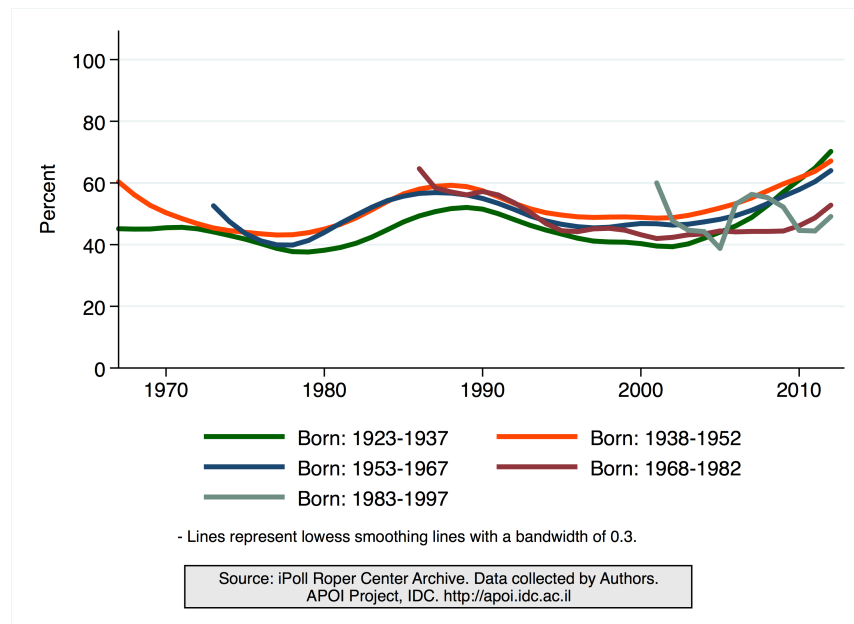
Figure 3: Sympathy for Israel by Age Groups

- Lines represent lowess smoothing lines with a bandwidth of 0.4.

Source: iPoll Roper Center Archive. Data collected by Authors.
APOI Project, IDC. http://apoi.idc.ac.il

Cohorts.[5] The fact that age groups are dynamic—i.e., people move from one age group to another as they get older—suggest that the cause of these dramatic shifts of public opinion are rooted in life experiences of different cohorts. To illustrate differences between cohorts, I divide the data into cohort groups, each consisting of a group of people born within a 15 year period. The attitudes of each cohort group over time are illustrated in Figure 4.   As the figure illustrates, each cohort has a unique trend line. Yet, change in not isolated—i.e., when support goes up, it goes up among most cohorts in similar rates.

The most supportive cohort has been the one born during and immediately after World War II (1938-1952). This cohort reached political maturation during the 1960s and early 1970s, a period in which Israel strengthened its relationship with the United States, enjoyed a reputation of a small democracy able to defend itself against stronger undemocratic and Soviet-leaning Arab countries. The support of this cohort is interesting when compared to its elder and younger cohorts. The older cohort consists of those born before the War and reaching political maturation during the immediate post-War

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[5] The work on cohorts is based on an ongoing study with Dr. Shlomo Egoz.

period when Israel gained independence yet was viewed with great suspicion for its relationship with the Soviet Union. This cohort demonstrates much weaker levels of support throughout most of the period examined, reaching similar levels only recently. The younger cohort consists of those born during the 1950s and 1960s and reached political maturation during the final decades of the Cold War when Israel has established its regional strength and has been involved in military events that were criticized globally. This cohort entered the data showing weak support for Israel. Yet, their support quickly picked up reaching similar levels to those of the two older cohorts.

Figure 4: Sympathy for Israel by Cohort Group

- Lines represent lowess smoothing lines with a bandwidth of 0.3.

Source: iPoll Roper Center Archive. Data collected by Authors.
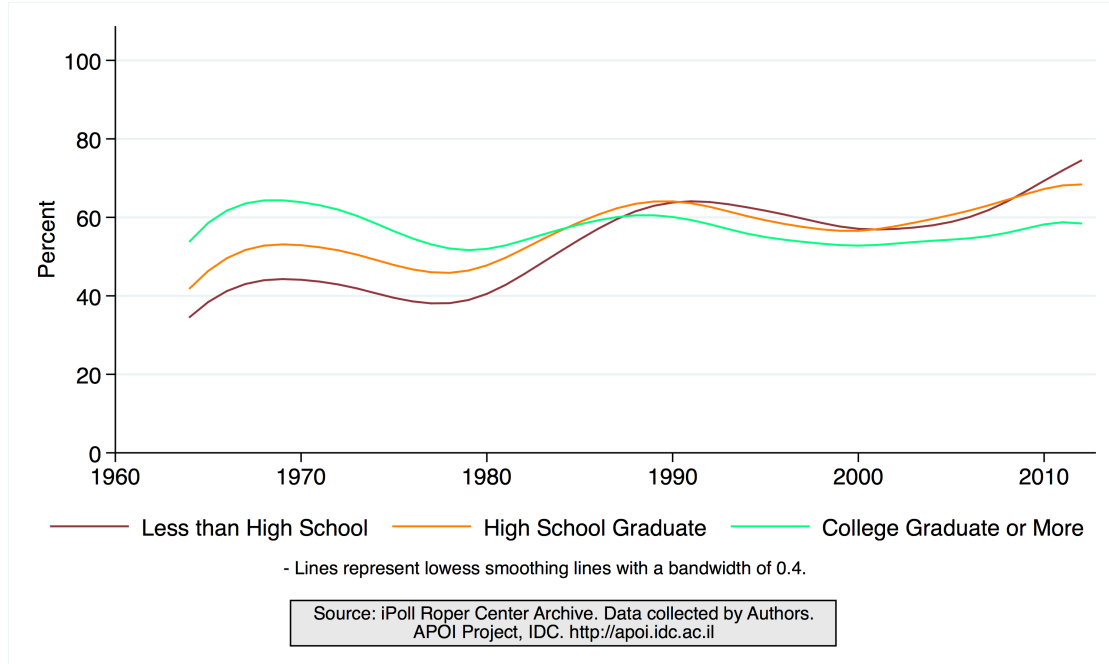APOI Project, IDC. http://apoi.idc.ac.il

In contrast, the two youngest cohorts demonstrate a clear deterioration in support for Israel. These two young cohorts were born since the 1970s and reached political maturation during the Intifada, the peace process of the 1990s and the militant conflicts with the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. While support of these groups is high—a feature of the question used (sympathies) and the overall tendency of Americans to support Israel—these cohorts have entered the data with strong support for Israel, yet over time have reduced their support to the lowest among the five cohorts presented. The gap between these cohorts and the older cohorts is approximately ten percentage points.

Education

Education plays an important role in the formation of public attitudes (Zaller 1992). This is especially true with regards to foreign affairs (Holsti 2004). In contrast to domestic issues, for which each individual is constantly exposed to policies in his everyday life, people are dependent on the availability of information and on the ability to generate meaningful attitudes based on that information. Education hence can increase exposure to information about foreign affairs and provide the means to formulate opinion.

Figure 5 illustrates the differences in attitudes toward Israel of different age groups. During the 1960s and 1970s a meaningful gap between the low level of support of Americans with no high school diploma and Americans with a college degree (or more) has been approximately 20 percentage points. Support for Israel was among the more educated groups. This has changed during the 1980s when the support among the less educated went up. Starting at the turn of the century, support has gone up among the least educated groups, but has waned among the more educated. Support for Israel is slowly becoming more prevalent among the less educated.
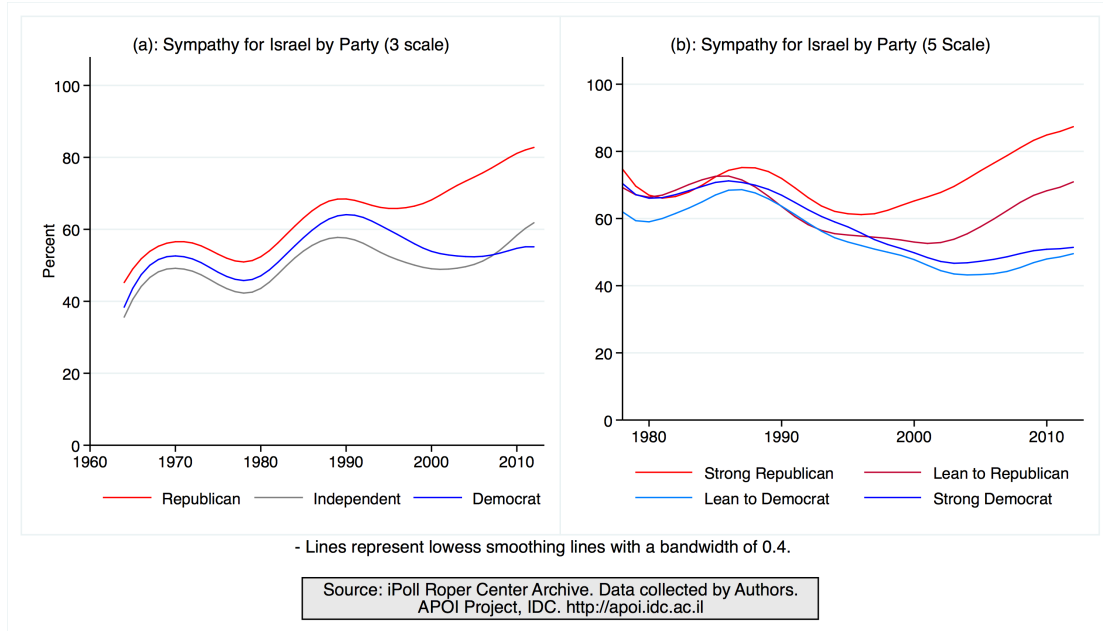
Figure 5: Sympathy for Israel by Levels of Education

- Lines represent lowess smoothing lines with a bandwidth of 0.4.

Source: iPoll Roper Center Archive. Data collected by Authors.
APOI Project, IDC. http://apoi.idc.ac.il

Party Affiliation

Perhaps the most significant change in American public support for Israel is the polarization of the support along partisan divisions—with Republicans increasing their support and Democrats reducing their support.   The outstanding change is illustrated in Figures 6a and 6b. Figure 6a summarizes the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats including party leaners. Figure 6b summarizes the differences between strong partisan identifiers and partisan leaners.

Figure 6: Sympathy for Israel by Party

(a): Sympathy for Israel by Party (3 scale)

(b): Sympathy for Israel by Party (5 Scale)

Republican — Independent — Democrat

Strong Republican — Lean to Republican
Lean to Democrat — Strong Democrat

- Lines represent lowess smoothing lines with a bandwidth of 0.4.

Source: iPoll Roper Center Archive. Data collected by Authors.
APOI Project, IDC. http://apoi.idc.ac.il

Throughout the entire period, Republicans demonstrated higher levels of support for Israel. Yet, for nearly three decades the differences were small. Starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the gap between Republicans and Democrats has taken a sharp increase reaching a difference of more than 30 points. Support for Israel has increased among both Republican groups, with strong Republicans reaching nearly 90 percent support. In comparison, the decline of support among Democrats was slower and less dramatic. Interestingly, differences between the two Democratic groups are relatively small.

To some extent, the differences between the parties can be attributed to the growing gaps among the demographic groups illustrated above, and the alignment of several groups with the political parties. This includes the alignment of fundamentalist Christian faiths with the Republicans Party, the recent tendency of younger individuals to identify with the Democratic Party and the longtime association of educated individuals with the Democratic Party. Yet, none of these are sufficient to explain the magnitude of the polarization that we see between the two partisan groups. *I argue that the*

demographic shifts allowed partisan strategists to transform the Israel issue into a political issue that

magnified the difference between the parties and generated the polarization we are now witnessing.

In support of this argument I use a multivariate regression model to assess the independent effect of partisan affiliation on support for Israel (sympathies).[6] To simplify the presentation of the results, I summarize the findings regarding the partisan differences using Figure 7 that illustrates the probability distribution of each partisan group as generated by the regression model.

The top left graph summarizes the probability that a Democrat and a Republican will sympathize with Israel in the entire data. While Republicans are more likely to support Israel, the differences are not very big. The other three graphs focus on three periods: 1964-1990, 1991-2000, and 2001-2013 respectively. A comparison between these three graphs reveals the strength of the polarization of support for Israel along partisan lines. Very little difference is found during the first period. Relatively noisy intraparty differences are found during the 1990s. And, most importantly, clear, wide differences between the parties are found since 2001. In fact, the differences are so large that very few Democrats and Republicans share similar tendencies in their support for Israel.

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[6] Additional variables include age, education, and religion.

Figure 7: Probability Distributions of Party Identifiers
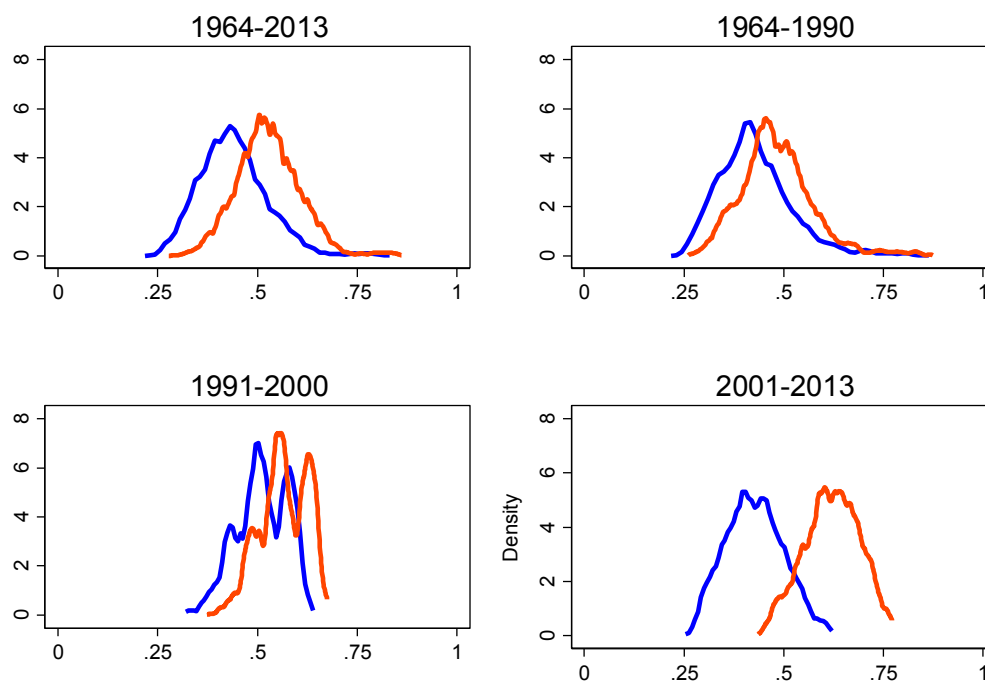
Source: Probabilities generated from a multivariate logistic model

Discussion

The findings demonstrate the extent of American public support for Israel but also of its fragile base. When asked about their sympathies in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Americans have consistently voiced their support for Israel. During the last 50 years, the share of Americans unable to voice an opinion about the Arab-Israeli conflict has decreased and support for Israel has increased. The current level of sympathies toward Israel is threefold that for the Palestinians, a rate unmatched by any other country in the world. Similar trends are available also for public support for providing military and economic aid to Israel.

And yet, the support has undergone an important transformation over the last 10 to 20 years. In contrast to the earlier decades, during recent years we find significant gaps in support for Israel. Noted

differences are the increase in support among Evangelical Christians and the decline among Mainline Protestants, the increase of support among older age-groups and decrease among younger age-groups, the increase in support among people who have no high school education and a decrease among the most educated groups, and, above all, the significant polarization of American attitudes toward along partisan lines with Republicans dramatically increasing their support and Democrats gradually decreasing theirs.

The ramifications of these changes should not be taken lightly. The special relations between the US and Israel has relied, to a great extent, on the strong and broad support among the American public (Gilboa 1987). Yet, as the support becomes identified with one party, and is shared by a few—albeit influential—demographic groups, political strategists turn the issue into a political dimension in the American highly competitive electoral system. Some indication for this change has been evident in the recent presidential election (2012), and in several primary and general congressional races, in congressional actions (Cavari & Nyer 2014) and in the disputes between Republican representatives in Congress and the Obama Administration.

While actions of Israeli officials may have influenced these developments, it seems safe to say that these trends may be inevitable. The Arab-Israeli conflict is currently a dominant issue on the global agenda and is closely tied to American interests. As such, Israel may indeed become a dominant issue— at least with regards to foreign policy—in American partisan politics. But, the consequences of such developments should be closely considered. Until today, Israel has—to a great extent—enjoyed the backing of American administration regardless of the party identification of the president. Policy makers in Israel should be ready for a not-too-distant time in which such automatic backing will not be guaranteed.

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