

# Americans' Shifting Views on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

by Eytan Gilboa

As the worldwide mass demonstrations during the latest war between Israel and Hamas vividly illustrate, every conflict is fought twice: first on the battlefield, then in public opinion. Having failed to destroy the State of Israel upon its birth and in ensuing decades of terrorism, the Palestinians waged a sustained propaganda battle to win over Western hearts and minds, especially in the United States, the foremost world power and Israel's staunchest and most longstanding ally.

Turning Israel's struggle for survival upside down—with aggressors turned into hapless victims and vice versa—the fake Palestinian narrative of unblemished victimhood has made inroads into American public opinion. This has been especially true since the onset of the Oslo “peace process,” which transformed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) overnight from the world's leading terror organization into a (supposed) peaceable political actor.

Yet, examination of American attitudes toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict over the past two decades, as reflected in national public opinion surveys during this period, reveals stable and highly favorable feelings toward Israel, albeit not without some widening fissures, and unfavorable, if somewhat improving, attitudes toward the Palestinians. Indeed, even the foremost indicator of the improving Palestinian image—the growing support for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the framework of the two-state solution—is not only a corollary of pro-Palestinian



*The positive favorability rating of Israel among Americans is likely related to views on the Israeli and Palestinian political systems. While Israel is a thriving liberal democracy, the PA is a corrupt, ineffective, and failed dictatorship.*

sentiments but also of the widespread belief that, as the only (perceived) road to peace, such a move is in Israel's best interests.

## Trends and Issues

*Favorability.* General feelings toward peoples and nations influence opinions on specific issues and policies, and surveys use the term "favorability" to gauge such feelings. Over the past two decades most surveyed Americans held positive opinions of Israel, with its favorability rate rising from 62 percent in 2000 to 74 percent in 2020 (an average 64 percent rate in 2000-10, and 71 percent in 2011-20). By contrast, favorable opinions of the PLO-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA), established in 1994 by the Oslo accords as the official governing body of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip's Palestinians, remained conspicuously low (and virtually unchanged) over the past two decades: 21 percent favorability rate in 2000 and 23 percent in 2020.

Apart from the numerous, mutually beneficial aspects of the longstanding U.S.-Israeli relationship (e.g., military, intelligence, and technological collaboration), this substantial favorability gap is probably related to the diametrically opposed nature of the Israeli and Palestinian political systems. While Israel is a thriving liberal democracy, the PA is a corrupt, ineffective, and failed dictatorship. During its 27-year existence, it has been headed by only two leaders: Yasser Arafat until his death in November 2004, and Mahmoud Abbas ever since (despite the expiry of his presidential term in early 2009). Similarly, the PA held parliamentary elections only twice—in January 1996 and January 2006—after which it effectively ceased to function as Abbas would not allow Hamas, which won the 2006 elections by a landslide, to run the PA. This drove the Islamist terror organization to eject the PLO violently from

Gaza in 2007 and to establish its own repressive rule there.

Nor has the PA ever established an independent media and judiciary or respected basic human rights including freedoms of life, liberty, opinion, expression, assembly, and women rights.<sup>1</sup> And while the PA regularly blames its ineptness and failures on the "Israeli occupation," the truth is that this "occupation" ended in January 1996 when Israel withdrew its forces from the West Bank's populated areas, with the exception of Hebron where redeployment was completed in early 1997, while withdrawal from the Gaza Strip's populated areas had been completed by May 1994. Since then, 95 percent of the West Bank and the Gaza Palestinian population have lived under the rule of the PA (and since 2007, under Hamas's rule in Gaza), which have turned these territories into repressive dictatorships.<sup>2</sup>

Another cause of the negative view of the PA (and Hamas) has been its persistent use of terrorism—from Arafat's tacit encouragement of Hamas's and the Islamic Jihad's 1990s suicide bombings; to its four-year-long terrorist war (September 2000- February 2005), euphemized as the "al-Aqsa Intifada"; to the firing of thousands of rockets from the Gaza Strip on Israeli population centers; to the "pay and slay" policy of remunerating convicted terrorists imprisoned in Israel. Indeed, whenever Palestinian terrorism seemed to be abating, there was a spike in the PA's favorability image among Americans, notably in 2005 when the "al-Aqsa Intifada"

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<sup>1</sup> Bassem Eid, "[Confronting Human Rights Abuses in the Palestinian Authority](#): An Essential Step for Progress in the Region," The Henry Jackson Society, London, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Efraim Karsh, "[The Oslo Disaster](#)," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Mideast Security and Policy Studies, no. 123, 2016, pp. 21-2.

withered away following Arafat's death and Israel's successful counterterrorism measures.

*Sympathies.* As with the favorability factor addressing attitudes toward Israel and the PA as political entities, the "sympathy" factor, exploring sentiments toward Israelis and Palestinians as national communities, has evinced a historic trend of greater American sympathizing with Israelis than with the Palestinians (or other Arabs for that matter). Examples include: the overwhelming U.S. public support for the establishment of a Jewish state before the passing of the November 1947 U.N. partition resolution when 65 percent of Americans surveyed in a Gallup poll supported the idea<sup>3</sup>; the wall-to-wall sympathy for Israelis and censure of Arab aggression during the 1967 Six-Day War (56 percent vs. 4 percent),<sup>4</sup> and a figure of 64 percent in sympathy with Israelis during the 1991 Gulf War, compared to 7 percent with the Palestinians.<sup>5</sup>

There has, of course, been the occasional fluctuation from this pattern in accordance with regional vicissitudes. After the September 1982 killing of hundreds of Palestinians in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila by a local Christian militia, for example, the gap between sympathy for Israelis and Palestinians narrowed to its slimmest point (32 percent vs. 28 percent). Conversely, Palestinian support

**There is a historic trend of greater American sympathy with Israelis than with the Palestinians.**

for Saddam Hussein's brutal occupation of Kuwait and his unprovoked missile attacks on Israel led to a record sympathy gap of 57 percent in favor of Israelis. But on

the whole, the "sympathy index" during the latter part of the twentieth century reveals a substantial and stable gap in favor of Israelis.

This pattern stayed virtually unchanged in 2000-20, with American public opinion remaining vastly more sympathetic to Israelis than to Palestinians. Thus, the sympathy gap between the two groups grew from 35 percent in 2001 to 48 percent in 2010 (51 percent vs. 16 percent and 63 percent vs. 15 percent respectively) before narrowing to 37 percent in 2020 (60 percent vs. 23 percent). This shows that the increase in sympathy for the Palestinians did not come at the expense of sympathy for Israelis, with the average gap in their favor over the past two decades standing at 41 percent, being slightly wider in 2020 than in 2001: 37 percent vs. 35 percent.<sup>6</sup>

As in previous decades, there were some fluctuations from this general pattern of stability, mainly in the extent of sympathy for the Palestinians: the greater their political intransigence and physical violence, the less public American sympathy there was for their cause and the reverse. Thus, for example, the outbreak of the "al-Aqsa intifada" widened the sympathy gap in favor of Israelis from 30 percent in 2000 to 45 percent in 2003 with this gap narrowing to 38 percent in 2007 with the abating of this war of terror.

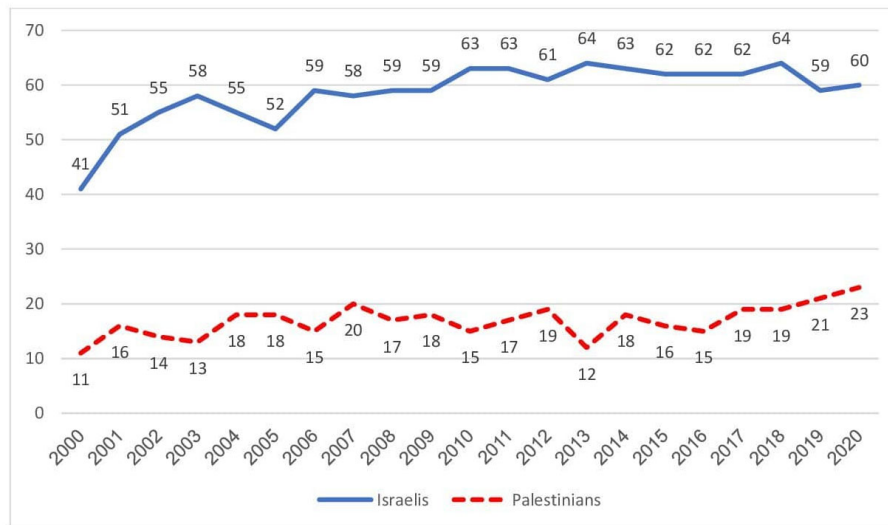
<sup>3</sup> Efraim Karsh, *The Tail Wags the Dog: International Politics and the Middle East* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Eytan Gilboa, *American Public Opinion toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1987), pp. 47-8.

<sup>5</sup> "[American Sympathy toward Israel and the Arabs/Palestinians, 1967-2020.](#)" Jewish Virtual Library, Chevy Chase.

<sup>6</sup> "Republicans and Democrats Grow Even Further Apart in Views of Israel, Palestinians," The Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., [Jan. 23, 2018.](#)

### U.S. Public Sympathy with Israelis vs. the Palestinians, 2000-20



Question: “In the Middle East situation, are your sympathies more with the Israelis or more with the Palestinians?” —Gallup Poll.  
 Source: Saad, “Majority in U.S.”

Paradoxically, the sympathy gap in Israelis’ favor widened noticeably during Barack Obama’s two terms in office (from 41 percent in 2009 to 47 percent in 2016) and narrowed by the same ratio during Donald Trump’s presidency (from 43 percent to 37 percent). Obama took an unabashed, anti-Israel stance. He told Abbas, “You will never have an administration as committed [to the Palestinian cause] ... as this one.”<sup>7</sup> The Palestinians likely took this as a carte blanche for shedding all pretenses of seeking a settlement and left the negotiating table with Israel. Similarly, Hamas exploited Obama’s anti-Israel stance by transforming the Gaza Strip into an ineradicable terrorist bastion that rained thousands of rockets and missiles on Israel’s population centers, triggering four ferocious wars (in 2008-9, 2012, 2014, and

2021). By contrast, Trump’s staunch support for Israel generated a timid Palestinian policy for fear of retribution by the unpredictable U.S. president as vividly illustrated by the relative calm along the Gaza-Israel border, the low-key response to recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, or to the move of the U.S. embassy to the city. All this occurred in stark contradiction of widespread apocalyptic predictions that these moves would trigger a regional conflagration.

### The Two-state Solution

Since Jordan’s renunciation of its claim to the West Bank in July 1988, and the PLO’s feigned acceptance four months later of Security Council Resolution 242 that created the land-for-peace formula, the resolution has been reinterpreted (or rather misinterpreted as it makes no mention of the Palestinians) to imply a two-state solution. It has been considered the cornerstone of a future Israeli-Palestinian peace, based on an Israeli state and a newly-established Palestinian state in

<sup>7</sup> Ben Birnbaum and Amir Tibon, “The Explosive, Inside Story of How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan—and Watched It Crumble,” *The New Republic*, July 20, 2014.

the West Bank and the Gaza Strip living peacefully side by side.<sup>8</sup>

This misinterpretation gained further momentum with the 1993 launch of the Oslo process, which was widely seen as geared toward that goal though none of the agreements signed within this framework spelled it out. And while the PLO remained highly evasive, supporting the two-state solution while addressing foreign audiences and prophesying Israel's demise to its own Palestinian constituents, all Israeli prime ministers during the Oslo years (with the exception of Yitzhak Rabin who envisaged "an entity short of a state")<sup>9</sup> publicly endorsed the two-state solution.

Against this backdrop, very few American public opinion polls during the 1990s directly addressed the two-state solution, likely because it was generally assumed to be the only possible option. The issue resurfaced following the seeming collapse of the Oslo process after the launch of Arafat's war of terror in September 2000. In subsequent years, the American public's support or opposition to the idea fluctuated in line with the vicissitudes in the ferocity of Palestinian terrorism and the extent of their political intransigence.

Thus, for example, support for the two-state solution dropped from 53 percent in 1999 to 40 percent in 2000—its lowest point in the subsequent twenty years—before leaping to 58 percent in 2003—the highest level ever since.<sup>10</sup>

**During Obama's two terms in office, support for the Palestinians and the two-state solution dropped.**

This was due to Israel's highly successful counterterrorism campaign that broke the backbone of the Palestinian war of terror and enabled President Bush to make his June 2002 historic speech es-

pousing the creation of a Palestinian state headed by "new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror" and predicated on "entirely new political and economic institutions based on democracy, market economics and action against terrorism."<sup>11</sup> And while this change of Palestinian leadership failed to materialize, support for the two-state solution remained steady for the rest of the Bush presidency, sliding gradually over the years to 52 percent in 2008 (with opposition rising from 22 percent in 2003 to 29 in 2008) as peace hopes faded after Hamas's January 2006 landslide victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections and its violent takeover of the Gaza Strip the following year.<sup>12</sup>

Just as American public sympathy for the Palestinians dropped noticeably during Obama's two terms in office, so did support for the two-state solution, and for the very same reason: Public opinion polls showed the strength of support for the creation of a Palestinian state to be dependent on the PA's recognition of Israel's right to exist and its determination to fight terrorism and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure in the territories under its control.<sup>13</sup> But with the most

<sup>8</sup> "[Resolution 242 \(1967\) of 22 November 1967](#)," S/RES/242 (1967), U.N. Security Council, New York.

<sup>9</sup> The 376th session of the 13<sup>th</sup> Knesset, Oct. 5, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Lydia Saad, "Americans Closely Split Over Palestinian Statehood," Gallup, Washington, D.C., [Feb. 24, 2015](#).

<sup>11</sup> "[President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership](#)," White House archives, Washington, D.C., June 24, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Lydia Saad, "Americans Still Doubt Mideast Peace Is in the Cards," Gallup, Washington, D.C., [Feb. 27, 2014](#).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, "Israel and the Palestinians," *PollingReport*, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 5, 2020](#).

pro-Palestinian president in the White House since Jimmy Carter, the PA hardened its intransigence in the hope that Obama would deliver Israel on a silver platter, and American public support for the two-state solution dropped.

Thus, when in June 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to the establishment of a Palestinian state and five months later announced a 10-month construction freeze in the West Bank aimed at reviving “meaningful negotiations to reach a historic peace agreement that would finally end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians,” the PA’s chief peace negotiator Saeb Erekat warned that the prime minister “will have to wait 1,000 years before he finds one Palestinian who will go along with him.” In addition, Fatah, the PLO’s largest constituent organization, reaffirmed its commitment to the “armed struggle” (the standard euphemism for terrorism) as “a strategy, not tactic . . . in the battle for liberation and for the elimination of the Zionist presence.”<sup>14</sup> With this rejectionist mindset persisting through the Obama years, accompanied as it was by rocket and missile barrages from Gaza on Israeli towns and villages, American public support for Palestinian statehood declined from 52 percent in 2008 to 44 percent in 2016 while opposition to the idea grew from 28 percent to 37 percent.<sup>15</sup>

This trend seemed to persist during Donald Trump’s first year when the gap between support and opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state reached its narrowest point

**When the PA responded with a more restrained policy, American public support for a Palestinian state grew steadily.**

(46 vs. 42 percent)<sup>16</sup> due to the president’s amenability to both the two-state and the one-state solution. “I can live with either one,” he told Netanyahu in a White House meeting. “I’m very happy with the

one that both parties like.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, this approach was quickly reversed as the PA responded to Trump’s staunch pro-Israel approach—manifested, among other things, in his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the move of the U.S. embassy to the city—and adopted a more restrained policy in an attempt to weather the storm until the arrival of a friendlier administration. As a result of this lull, American public support for the establishment of a Palestinian state grew steadily, surging after the January 2020 release of Trump’s long-awaited “Deal of the Century” peace plan to its highest level since Bush’s 2002 speech, with opposition to the idea dropping to its lowest level (55 percent vs. 34%).<sup>18</sup>

## Political Attitudes

*Republicans vs. Democrats.* For decades, Israel enjoyed strong bipartisan political support in Washington. Spread almost evenly among Republicans and Democrats, this bipartisanship helped Israel promote favorable legislation in Congress and secure high levels of military aid. By the early 2000s, however, this pattern had fundamentally changed with Republicans sympathizing more strongly with

<sup>14</sup> Karsh, *The Tail Wags the Dog*, pp. 170-1.

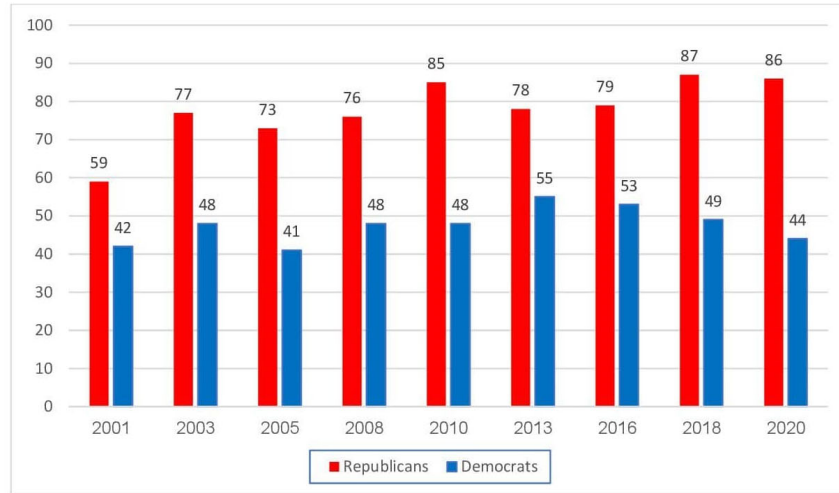
<sup>15</sup> Saad, “Americans Closely Split Over Palestinian Statehood,” [Feb. 24, 2015](#); Saad, “Americans Still Doubt Mideast Peace Is in the Cards,” [Feb. 27, 2014](#).

<sup>16</sup> Lydia Saad, “Majority in U.S. Again, Support Palestinian Statehood,” Gallup, Washington, D.C., [Apr. 22, 2020](#).

<sup>17</sup> *Politico* (Arlington, Va.), [Feb. 15, 2017](#).

<sup>18</sup> Saad, “Majority in U.S. Again, Support Palestinian Statehood,” [Apr. 22, 2020](#).

### Sympathy with Israelis vs. the Palestinians by U.S. Party



Sources: “Social Series: World Affairs,” Gallup Poll, Feb. 3-16, 2020; Saad, “Majority in U.S.”

Israel than Democrats. This partisan divide widened substantially over the next decades as growing numbers of Republicans sympathized more with Israelis than with the Palestinians (86 percent in 2020 compared to 59 percent in 2001) while the level of sympathy for the Jewish state among Democrats remained virtually unchanged (42 percent in 2001 compared to 44 percent in 2020). Thus, while in 2020, nearly 9 of 10 Republicans sympathized more strongly with Israelis than with Palestinians and only 5 percent had greater sympathy for the Palestinians, Democrats sympathized almost evenly with both sides: 44 percent vs. 38 percent.

The decline in sympathy for Israelis was the sharpest among liberal and/or progressive Democrats: in 2014-16, the share of liberals/progressives sympathizing with the Palestinians over the Israelis shot from 21 percent to 40 percent. This downward shift in sympathy for Israel was most pronounced during the Trump presidency as the progressive

wing of the party became increasingly powerful and vociferous.<sup>19</sup>

Republicans and Democrats also differed on the establishment of a Palestinian state with support for the idea consistently stronger among Democrats. The gap between the parties was at its narrowest during the Bush presidency, so much so that in 2003, under Bush, Republican support for Palestinian statehood even surpassed that of the Democrats (60 percent vs. 55 percent). This was despite the fact that Democratic support for the idea grew at a far higher rate during the Bush presidency than during the Obama years (14 percent compared

<sup>19</sup> Samantha Smith and Carrol Doherty, “Five facts on how Americans view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., [May 23, 2016](#); “Republicans and Democrats Grow Even Further Apart,” [Jan. 23, 2018](#); Lydia Saad, “Americans, but Not Liberal Democrats, Mostly Pro-Israeli,” Gallup, Washington, D.C., [Mar. 6, 2019](#).

to 2 percent). The fact that Democrats' support for Palestinian statehood remained virtually unchanged under a staunchly pro-Palestinian Democratic president while significantly growing under a Republican president inimical to the PLO and PA (especially after being lied to by Arafat about his personal involvement in terror activities)<sup>20</sup> was due to Israel's suppression of Arafat's war of terror (2000-5), on the one hand, and the sustained rocket attacks on Israel's population centers attending Hamas' Gaza takeover in 2007.

Indeed, even during the Trump presidency, support among Democrats for the creation of a Palestinian state grew at a higher rate than under Obama's watch: from 61 percent in 2017 to 70 percent in 2020 (while Republican support for the idea grew by a whopping 19 percent: from 25 percent in 2017 to 44 percent in 2020). Thus, paradoxically, Trump's "Deal of the Century" produced strong bipartisan support for Palestinian statehood for diametrically opposed reasons: among Democrats, as a means to subvert the deal, which they considered an obstacle to Palestinian statehood, and among Republicans, as a means to promote the two-state solution.

## Religious Attitudes

*American Jews.* For obvious reasons, American Jews have always felt attached to Israel, and this trend continued in 2000-20 with more than two thirds of surveyed members of this community feeling affinity and closeness to Israel, sympathizing much more with Israelis than with Palestinians (93 percent in 2001-14, dropping to 86 percent in

2015-19).<sup>21</sup> According to a 2019 survey, 80 percent of American Jews considered themselves pro-Israel (despite being critical of government policies) while 67 percent felt an emotional attachment to the Jewish state.<sup>22</sup>

As for the establishment of a Palestinian state, American Jewish support remained rather static during the Bush and Obama's presidencies (growing from 49 percent in 2002 to 52 percent in 2016), before gaining considerable momentum during the Trump years: from 52 percent in 2016 to 64 percent in 2020. This corresponds to the pattern of Democratic support for Palestinian statehood during the Trump years (hardly surprising given the historic Jewish identification with the party), with the notable exception that the rise in Jewish support for the idea during this period was more dramatic than that of Democrats and the general public (a 12 percent rise compared to 8 percent and 6 percent respectively). This is most likely due to the addition of the qualification "demilitarized" to the description of the Palestinian state in the American Jewish Committee Poll, on the one hand, and to the bipartisan nature of the Jewish community, on the other. As such, support for Palestinian statehood was both an anti-Trump statement by Democratic Party supporters (still the vast majority of American Jewry) and a vote of confidence in Trump and his policies by the growing number of American Jewish Republicans.

*Christian Denominations.* Religion has been a significant predictor of attitudes toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with devout

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<sup>20</sup> Douglas J. Feith and Lewis Libby, "How the Trump Plan Makes Peace Possible," *Middle East Quarterly*, [Fall 2020](#).

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Newport, "American Jews, Politics and Israel," Gallup, Washington, D.C., [Aug 17, 2019](#).

<sup>22</sup> "American Jewry Position Survey," White Papers and Research, Ruderman Family Foundation, New York, [Dec. 2019](#).



Americans significantly more likely to sympathize with Israel than their less devout counterparts and vice versa. Aggregate Gallup data for 2000-19 shows that 66-71 percent of Americans who attended church weekly or almost weekly sympathized with Israel compared to 46-49 percent of those who never attended religious services (and who were twice more sympathetic to the Palestinians: 26 percent vs. 13 percent respectively).<sup>23</sup> The sympathy gap was at its lowest among those with no religious affiliation, with 38 percent sympathizing with Israel and 29 with the Palestinians.<sup>24</sup>

As such, religiously unaffiliated Americans were most critical of Trump's Palestinian-Israeli policy with 47 percent thinking he favored Israel too much and 38 percent saying he struck the right balance between Israelis and Palestinians. By contrast, only 26 percent of American Christians thought Trump was overindulging Israel while 59 percent (72 percent of Evangelical Protestants) believed he struck the right balance. Interestingly, criticism of Trump's supposed indulgence of Israel was significantly higher among American Jews



*Devout American Christians are more likely to sympathize with Israel than their less devout counterparts are. Among Christians, Evangelical Protestants' support for Israel has intensified most over the past two decades.*

than among their Christian compatriots (43 percent vs. 26 percent), echoing the moderate or conservative voice of the Democratic party, as opposed to its liberal-progressive wing, which overwhelmingly believed Trump favored Israel too much (66 percent).<sup>25</sup>

Broadly speaking, sympathy or favoritism of both Israelis and Palestinians among American Christians grew substantially and rather symmetrically over the past two decades: from 41 percent sympathetic to Israelis vs. 13 percent sympathetic to Palestinians in 2003 to 69 percent vs. 41 percent in 2019: thus, a sustained 28 percent sympathy gap in favor of

<sup>23</sup> Frank Newport, "Religion Plays Large Role in Americans' Support for Israelis," Gallup, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 1, 2014](#); Newport, "Americans' Views of Israel Remain Tied to Religious Beliefs," Gallup, [Mar. 19, 2019](#).

<sup>24</sup> Smith and Doherty, "Five facts," [May 23, 2016](#).

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Smith, "U.S. Jews Are More Likely than Christians to Say Trump Favors the Israelis Too Much," Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., [May 6, 2019](#); "Half say Trump is 'striking about the right balance' in dealing with Israelis and Palestinians," Pew Research Center, [Apr. 24, 2019](#).

Israel during this period.<sup>26</sup> In terms of denominational affiliation, Mormons sympathized most strongly with the Israelis (79 percent vs. 11 percent with the Palestinians), followed by Protestants (66 percent vs. 13 percent) and Catholics (50 percent vs. 18 percent).<sup>27</sup>

Yet it was evangelical Protestants, sometimes called “Christian Zionists,” whose staunch and consistent support for Israel has intensified most impressively over the past two decades. In 2003, 55 percent of white Evangelicals sympathized with Israel and only 6 percent with the Palestinians (compared to 41 percent vs. 13 percent of all surveyed Christian religious groups)<sup>28</sup>; by 2016, this ratio had grown to 79 percent (5 percent sympathized with the Palestinians). Support among evangelical Republicans was even higher—85 percent, compared to 69 percent of all Republicans.<sup>29</sup>

Even as American public attitudes toward the conflict became increasingly polarized during the Trump years, with Democrats more favorable for the first time toward Palestinians and the PA (58 percent vs. 57 percent) than toward Israelis and the Israeli government (27



Photo: Ted Eytan

*Supporters of Israel and the Palestinians meet. The intensity of Palestinian violence and intransigence has determined the extent of American support for the establishment of a Palestinian state.*

percent vs. 26 percent),<sup>30</sup> evangelical support remained undaunted. Some 79 percent of Evangelicals had a favorable view of Israelis (compared to 35 percent of Palestinians), and 61 percent viewed the Israeli government positively—while only 13 percent had a positive view of the Palestinian Authority, and 79 percent viewed the authority negatively.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

While surveys of American public opinion show steady and consistently stronger sympathies for Israel and Israelis than for Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority in 2000-20, these attitudes have grown increasingly

<sup>26</sup> “American Evangelicals and Israel,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., [Apr. 15, 2005](#); “Evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and Catholics express more favorable views of Israelis than Palestinians,” Pew Research Center, [May 6, 2019](#).

<sup>27</sup> Smith and Doherty, “Five facts,” [May 23, 2016](#); Newport, “Religion Plays Large Role in Americans’ Support for Israelis,” [Aug. 1, 2014](#).

<sup>28</sup> “American Evangelicals and Israel,” [Apr. 15, 2005](#).

<sup>29</sup> Smith and Doherty, “Five facts,” [May 23, 2016](#).

<sup>30</sup> “U.S. Public Has Favorable View of Israel’s People, but Is Less Positive Toward Its Government,” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., [Apr. 24, 2019](#).

<sup>31</sup> Smith, “U.S. Jews Are More Likely Than Christians to Say Trump Favors the Israelis Too Much,” [May 6, 2019](#).

partisan over the past decade, culminating during the Trump presidency in Democrats sympathizing more with the Palestinians and the PA than with Israelis and the Israeli government. This shift was primarily a corollary of the relatively low level of Palestinian political and military militancy during the Trump years. Indeed, more than any other single factor, it is the intensity of Palestinian violence and intransigence that has determined the way Palestinians and the PA were seen by Americans and the extent of support for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

As a result, public sympathy with the Palestinians was less, even among Democrats, during the Obama presidency than during the Bush and Trump years as the PA and Hamas interpreted Obama's anti-Israel bias as free rein to walk away from the negotiating table and to subject Israeli civilians to years of sustained rocket and missile attacks. This Palestinian pattern seems to be repeating itself with the Biden administration's eagerness to reenter the Iran nuclear deal; its cold shouldering of America's longstanding regional allies; and its restoration of the Palestinian problem to the top of its agenda. These policies have already enticed Hamas into a war with Israel and triggered mass violence in the West Bank and by Israel's Arab citizens.

Though Palestinian violence and intransigence are almost certain to intensify in tandem with the Biden administration's increased pressure on Israel, this may not necessarily dampen public sympathy for the Palestinians as in past decades since several key developments seem to be working in their favor. For one thing, the fervent polarization of American politics, alongside the mainstreaming

**Israel and its allies in the United States must endeavor to restore the traditional, bipartisan support of Republicans and Democrats.**

of anti-Semitism and the continued movement to the left of Democratic constituencies, may have made segments of American society less sensitive to anti-Jewish and anti-Israel violence. For another thing, with twice as many sympathizers among non-white Americans (33 percent in a 2020 survey vs. 18 percent of whites) as opposed to Israel's predominantly white sympathy base (68 percent in the same survey vs. 43 percent non-whites),<sup>32</sup> the Palestinians have successfully cast their fight to destroy Israel as a liberation struggle by a colonized indigenous people against a "privileged white oppressor."

Small wonder that as Hamas was deliberately perpetuating the wanton war crime of raining thousands of missiles on Israel's population centers, the Black Lives Matters movement tweeted its "solidarity with the Palestinians," adding a thinly veiled wish for Israel's demise: "We are a movement committed to ending settler colonialism in all forms and will continue to advocate for Palestinian liberation. (Always have. And always will be)."<sup>33</sup>

In light of the above polls, if Israel and its allies in the United States wish to maintain its still significant support vis-a-vis the Palestinians in American public opinion (60 percent vs. 23 percent in 2020),<sup>34</sup> they must address any liberal-progressive criticism, strengthen the bond with the American Jewish community—especially its younger segments—and

32 "Gallup News Service Gallup Poll Social Series: World Affairs—Final topline," [Feb. 3-16, 2020](#).

33 Twitter, Black Lives Matter, [May 17, 2021](#).

34 Saad, "Majority in U.S. Again, Support Palestinian Statehood," [Apr. 22, 2020](#).

endeavor to restore the traditional, bipartisan support of Republicans and Democrats.

**Eytan Gilboa** is Professor Emeritus of Political Science and International Communication at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies. His publications include books and numerous articles on American-Israeli relations including *The American Public* and *Israel in the Twenty-First Century* (BESA, 2020).

