

**Department of Political Science**

**Thesis in Political Science**

## **Israel and the Obama Administrations**

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# Introduction

## 1. A Special Relation

*“Where you stand in life is driven by where you sit. This is a philosophical observation that is as true in our personal lives as it is in diplomacy”<sup>1</sup>.*

This is how Aaron David Miller, a Middle-eastern analyst and Vice President for New Initiatives at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, explained why American and Israeli foreign policies largely differ sometimes, even if their objectives have often been the same in the course of history.

On one hand, the United States is considered to be the only hegemonic power in the world. Moreover, it is an enormous country surrounded by two non-predatory powers to the North and to the South, Canada and Mexico, and protected by two oceans to the East and to the West. According to Miller, these factors explain American idealism, and Americans’ conviction that “every problem has a solution”.

On the other hand, Israel is a small young country surrounded by enemy States and that has always had to fight for its own existence. This explains Israel’s realism and the country’s trend to be offensive in its foreign policy.

Since the birth of the State of Israel, in 1948, the two countries have been deeply interconnected for several reasons. From the American side, both the importance to have an ally in the Middle East and the presence, in the country, of a strong Jewish community are fundamental. Israel, on the other hand, has always needed a strong Western ally to receive economic finance and political and military support. Thus, these two countries can be said to be a good example of interdependence.

In the course of history the relationship between this two countries has continuously evolved, going through periods of approaching each other and periods of distance. It not only depen-

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron David Miller, *Gulliver’s troubles: America in the Middle East*, May 12, 2014

ded on the changing interests of the two countries, but also on the personal relationships between their leaders in the course of the years.

## **2. An historical background**

Israel was founded on April 23rd 1948, in between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. In that period one of the main interests of American foreign policy was to prevent USSR from extending its power to the Middle East and the Arab world, and from cultivating a strong anti-American sentiment too. Israel was considered to be the only “Western base” in an area in which The Russian Federation had all the interest to expand its influence. Despite this, the relations between Israel and the United States remained rather cold until the beginning of Kennedy’s administration.

However, in 1957, Israel was the first beneficiary of the so-called Eisenhower doctrine, which stated that a Middle Eastern country could request American economic and military aid if it was being threatened by a State controlled by “international communism”. But Eisenhower had a chance to prove how much his country was influential over Israeli politics when he declared, on February 20 1957, that the United States would have supported the U.N. sanctions if Israel had not pulled out of Gaza and other Egyptian territories seized during the 1956 Suez Crisis. In that occasion Israel could not do anything but agree.

When Lindon Johnson came to power in 1963 he worked to straighten Israeli-American relations for two main reasons: the first, as usual, was that Israel may serve as a pro-Western bulwark against Soviets future gains in the region; the second regarded the American fear, worsened during Kennedy’s administration, that a weak Israel would be willing to “go nuclear” with French help. One of the United States’ main objectives in foreign policy, in fact, has always been the prevention of “nuclear proliferation”. In the end, however, this strategy did not prevent Israel from acquiring atomic weapons.

At the same time, moreover, the United States didn’t only finance Israel, it also furnished military equipment to some of its worst enemies, such as Lebanon and Syria, driven by the idea of countering Soviet army sales in the region.

The main objective has always been to “contain” the Soviet Union abroad, and the United States applied in the Middle East the same policies that it applied in Asia. It was natural, for

Johnson, to compare Fatah to the Vietcong. For this reason, during his administration the relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv became ever deeper and stronger; it is particularly notable that when Israel occupied Jordan's West Bank and Syria's Golan Heights in 1967, the United States acquiesced. This behavior proves that, after 1967, Israel had begun to be considered a valid and precious ally, as it had defeated Moscow's two major clients in the Arab world, Egypt and Syria. From that moment, Johnson began to supply Israel with sophisticated fighter-bombers. Differently from Eisenhower, Johnson stood with Israel in front of the UN, sponsoring the UN Security Council Resolution 242, which did not require Israel to give back all the land it had occupied during the war, even for a peace treaty.

It was during the presidency of Richard Nixon that the security cooperation between the two countries deepened the most. Nixon's secretary of State, William Rogers was anything but loved in Israel since his nonstarter plan for peace would have minimized the territories conquered by the Jewish State in 1967. Anyway, three years later Israeli engaged in protecting the United States' client, Jordan, against the USSR's client, Syria, during the Palestinian uprising against king Hussein. This is the main reason why, during the Yom Kippur war in 1973, the United States sent its own armies to help Israel against the Soviet clients Egypt and Syria. Jimmy Carter's administration proved to be really significant as well. Even if his attempt to solve the conflict through a major international conference in Geneva did not succeed, the United States had a fundamental role in convening a three-way summit with the Egyptian President Sadat and the Israeli Prime Minister Begin in 1978, at Camp David, Maryland. In March 1979, an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed, and, as part of the agreement, the United States pledged to give 3 billion \$ to Israel and 2,2 to Egypt as an annual allocation and maintained its position at the Sinai passes.

Ronald Reagan was the last American President of the Cold War period, and he kept on the American tradition of embracing Israel as a strategic partner against USSR. He gave his contribution to several Israeli goals, such as helping the exodus of thousands of Russian Jews toward Israel and neutralizing Moscow as the main backer of Arab countries against Tel Aviv. Reagan gave some kind of support to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as well. In particular the American interest was to destroy the PLO bases in the Southern Lebanon, as the organization was allied to the Soviet Union. Although Reagan and Begin disagreed on the new American plan to solve the conflict (especially on the problem of the settlements, that both Carter and

Reagan pressed to freeze and that Begin never wanted to give up), it was under his administration that the PLO leader Yasser Arafat accepted the UN Security Council Resolution 242, renouncing terrorism and recognizing Israel as a State.

At the end of the Cold War, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir had to face an enormous immigration of hundred of thousand of Soviet Jews. The new American President George Bush denied any loan guarantee until the Israeli government would have denied to freeze the settlements to host the new immigrants. The relations between the two countries only improved when Yitzhak Rabin became Prime Minister and accepted this resolution, so that the American loan guarantees were authorized. In that period, in particular during the Gulf War, the United States placed Patriot missiles in Israel to defend the country against the Iraqi Scud. Even if they proved to be inadequate, they demonstrated, once again, the American support to the Jewish State.

Bill Clinton's presidency, together with Rabin's government, was a watershed in the relations between Israel and the United States. Even if the Madrid conference for peace in the Middle East, initiated by Bush, proved to be a failure, in September 1993 Rabin signed the Oslo I agreement directly with the PLO, with Clinton only serving as a cheerleader once it had been signed on the White House lawn. The Israeli and Palestinian leaders signed also the Oslo II agreement in 1995, despite the series of terror attacks from Hamas and the Islamic Jihad seeking to sabotage the agreements. Shimon Peres, Rabin's successor, tried to implement the Oslo agreements as soon as possible. But a series of terror attacks from the Palestinian groups and also from Jewish religious fanatics contributed to obstacle the peace process. In 1996, Clinton ultimately tried to sustain it by holding an international antiterrorism conference in March 1996.

Two months later, Benjamin Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister for the first time. His cold relation with Arafat forced Clinton to take a direct control of the process. In this occasion, the United States proved to be truly a patron in this delicate situation. However, Netanyahu and Arafat were not willing to communicate at all. In that year new Israeli settlements were authorized, and the PLO proved to be unable or not interested in stopping the crescendo of Palestinian terror attacks. Netanyahu, in particular, was an exasperating ally to Clinton, who publicly snubbed him when Netanyahu visited the United States in 1997. Netanyahu, however, had always had close ties to the Republicans in the Congress, and these helped him

insulating from the American pressure.

Every ultimatum imposed by an ever weaker Clinton's administration failed because of Netanyahu's sustain from the Republicans, the pro-Israeli lobby and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Despite this, Clinton was able to involve the Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian leaders in a new conference in Wye Plantation. Moreover, he decided to travel to Gaza, which warmed the American-Palestinian relations and gave the PLO a major international legitimacy. When Netanyahu's government collapsed and Ehud Barak became the new Israeli Prime Minister, Clinton kept being the most important mediator in that stagnating, exasperating peace process. He also personally met Hafiz al-Assad, Syria's President, to try to achieve a peace agreement between his country and Israel. In 2000, Clinton and Barak organized the Camp David II Summit, that proved to be a well-known diplomatic failure, since Arafat finally refused the agreement. The election of Ariel Sharon as Israeli Prime Minister, George W. Bush as the new American President and the beginning of the Second Intifada led to the collapse of all the agreements.

When Bush took office at the beginning of 2001, he wanted to clearly distinguish his politics toward the Middle East from Clinton's, particularly because he had witnessed his predecessor's vane efforts to find an agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and he did not want to engage too much in a peace process that he considered useless.

Bush had a limited political capital, and he wanted to save it for internal questions. He did not even replaced Dennis Ross, the special US mediator for Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when he resigned in January 2001. This does not mean that the United States distanced themselves from Israel: Bush and Sharon had in fact a good relationship, and the new American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, was a sincere and sometimes non-critical sustainer of Israel. In Bush's view, the United States should only facilitate, not taking on the peace process. This policy naturally changed after 9/11 attacks. By that moment, the United States had to search for a Muslim alliance against Osama Bin Laden, and it urged the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Suddenly, Bush began pressuring Sharon to agree a cease-fire with Arafat, and this incoherent policy signed a low point in the relationship between the two countries. Another failure of Bush's policy was his vain attempt to create an Arab support for his plan to attack Iraq in 2003. In the meantime, both Bush and Sharon ruled out Arafat as a partner in the peace process as he failed to contain the Palestinian terrorism. Bush had the ambition to build up

a kind of “diplomatic quartet” with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations to solve the conflict and finally gain a kind of support from the Arab world for his “crusade” in Iraq. The presentation of a Road Map to re-start the peace process led to a meeting between Bush, Sharon and the new Palestinian leader, Abu Mazen in Washington in 2003, but even this effort turned to be unsuccessful. In the meanwhile, Bush sustained both the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the construction of a fence between Israeli and the Palestinian Authority’s territories wanted by Sharon. Bush’s main objectives in the Middle East, apart from the attempt to find allies against Iraq, were on one hand to contain the terror attacks - especially after 9/11 - and, on the other, to democratize the Arab world as a means for peace. He also had to maintain a solid relationship with Sharon, as during the electoral campaign of 2004 his adversarial John Kerry was intercepting many votes from the Jewish Community. Bush won the elections with 3.5 million votes and, in the same year, Arafat died, opening a new chapter in the continuous American attempt to revive the peace process. The new Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, tried to facilitate the communication between Sharon and Abu Mazen during the disengagement, intervening coherently with Bush’s objectives. As Bush administration had the ambition to “democratize” the Middle East, both the President and the Secretary of State pressed Sharon to let Hamas candidate for the Palestinian elections in 2006. The United States obviously hoped Abu Mazen would win, as he was considered to be a good interlocutor. Unfortunately Hamas won the elections instead and, as a consequence, both the “diplomatic quartet” and the “Road Map” were abandoned. The United States blocked every kind of economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority except the humanitarian aid. In the meanwhile, Iran’s new President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that his country was moving ahead with nuclear enrichment and that he wanted to eliminate Israel. This new threat added to the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah and a war against Hamas. As both the organizations were financed by Syria and Iran, the United States assumed once again a pro-Israeli policy. But when the Democrats won the Congressional elections in November, it became clear that a serious peace process would begun only as a new government would have taken power in 2009.

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From 2009 up to nowadays, the United States has been administrated by Barack Obama, from the Democratic party. He has been re-elected in 2012, although the 2014 Congressional



elections saw the victory of the Republicans. From 2010, Israel has been governed by Benjamin Netanyahu, from the Likud party. He has been re-elected as well in 2013 and in 2015, although both his second and third mandate have proved to be notably unstable and both his governments have gone through severe political crisis. The two leaders have always showed not only to sharply differ in their priorities, but also to have two opposite views of the world and of politics. On one hand, Obama is a liberal and wanted to distinguish his policies from Bush's. On the other hand, Netanyahu is a conservative, seasoned leader that had to face an unprecedented process of radicalization of the region where his country is situated.

During the course of his mandates, Obama has always been concerned by the situation in the Middle East, with a special regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. His main objective in foreign policy was to replace the unilateralism of his predecessor with a policy of outreach to the former "enemy" countries, in particular the Arab world. In doing so, he has always tried to establish a dialogue with Iran concerning its nuclear ambitions - a process that led to the Geneva Agreement in 2015 -, he finally sustained the uprisings in North Africa during the Arab Spring and, above all, he distanced the United States from Israel to make its country appear more even-handed with regard to the conflict.

Benjamin Netanyahu has always been intransigent as far as Iran was concerned. The nuclear threat from Iran has always been his number one priority, and he has always opposed a deal with Teheran - notably in his famous speech at the American Congress in March 2015 -. He has always feared the instability brought by the Arab Spring in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and in Syria. In the course of the years, he has continuously changed his mind with regard to the construction of the new settlements in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank territories, while Obama has always condemned them as an obstacle to the peace process.

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The first chapter of the thesis, named "Israel under Obama's administration", discusses the current American interest in the Middle East and how they have changed from 2009. In particular, it refers to Obama's politics and resolution toward the area and Israel above all.

The second chapter, named “The United States under Netanyahu’s administration”, discusses the current Israeli interests concerning its foreign policy and Netanyahu’s policies toward the country’s neighbors and toward this new, distant, United States.

In the conclusions, the theme of the American and Israeli public opinions will be central, with reference to the American Jewish community as well. Finally, future perspectives will be taken into consideration as far as the relationship between the United States and Israel is concerned.

## **Chapter I - Barack Obama and Israel**

When he was elected on the 20th January 2009, Barack Obama immediately showed a particular interest toward the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by appointing George Mitchell as special envoy to the Arab-Israeli peace process. This former senator had already assumed this task during Clinton's administration and had previously served as mediator of the Northern-Ireland agreement for peace. This decision demonstrated the new President's willingness to distance his foreign policy from the one of his predecessor, who only had showed an opportunist interest toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, time was not on his side. Obama was elected only two days after the end of the Operation Cast Land, a three-week armed conflict during which the Israeli troops invaded the Gaza Strip. In the following years there have been two other wars between Israel and Hamas: the Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012 and the Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014. Both sides of the conflict were going through a process of radicalization. On one hand, the Palestinian Authority was and is guided by Mahaboud Abbas and the Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, that were considered too weak as talk partners, while Gaza was and is still governed by Hamas, which will not open to dialogue at all. On the other, the 2009 Israeli elections reflected a clear move to the right by both the Parliament and the people. This was due above all to the failure of the policy of unilateral withdrawal both in Gaza and in Lebanon. Israel was skeptical toward its neighbors and not cooperative to the peace process. Consequently Obama's earlier attempts to reinvigorate the peace process immediately resulted unpopular in the Jewish State. This chapter discusses the theoretical basis of the so called Obama Doctrine toward foreign policy and its application in the Middle East and particularly toward Netanyahu's Israel.

### **1. Obama's Doctrine**

Running for president in 2008, Obama offered a "sweeping liberal foreign policy critique," repudiating President Bush's doctrine of pre-emption. His foreign policy has deep roots in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and opposes both Reagan and Bush's "arrogance". As a senator, Obama opposed the Iraq invasion in 2002, differently from other Democrats

such as Hillary Clinton. In 2007 he voted against President Bush's surge in Iraq, calling instead for an immediate withdrawal from the country. He has always appealed to the notion of "smart power" to justify his decision in foreign policy, referring to the fact that "America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America".

Robert G. Kaufman, Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University, has examined Obama's doctrine main tenets.

*Tenet I: "Protect the world and the United States from the arrogance of the American power".* Obama rejects the so called "American exceptionalism" and any act of neo-imperialism conducted by his predecessors against the interests of the other countries involved. In several occasions, he has even apologized for the attitude the United States has had toward the rest of the world, especially the Middle East.

*Tenet II: Embrace multilateralism, rather than unilateralism or narrow coalitions of the willing, as the default presumption for American grand strategy.* As written above, Obama has always opposed multilateralism to Bush's unilateralism, including the ambition to "democratize" the entire world. Obama tends at least in theory to emphasize legalism and the binding effect of the international treaties and norms. He is said to trust the efficacy of multilateral institutions and to prefer using force only to achieve the humanitarian goals that the international community considers legitimate.

*Tenet III: Minimize the importance of ideology and regime type.* Obama doctrine contains some elements of neorealism as well. In fact he undertakes the regime type or ideology as far as international diplomacy is concerned. Obama's administration, as is underlined below, has narrowed the relations between the United States and any kind of totalitarian regime, more than any previous American administration. An example is given by the current approach between Obama and Raul Castro. Bush, on the contrary, has always identified regime type as the main cause of aggression, as in the case of Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

*Tenet IV: Use of force as a rule sparingly, proportionally, multilaterally, for limited goals, with limited means and only as a last resort. Establish a high burden of proof to justify exceptions to this rule.* Obama has proved to dislike American "military interventionism", especially when it lacks the U.N. approval. This does not mean that Obama's administration did not intervene militarily across the world. It has instead expanded the employment of drones

against al Qaeda in Pakistan and against Al Shabaab in Somalia. The United States has intervened in Libya with a Nato coalition in 2011 and is currently involved in air attacks in Syria since 2013 and against ISIS since 2014. Nevertheless, the American intervention in Libya exemplifies Obama's administration preferred mode of using force, that is "leading from behind". The conviction at the basis of this *modus operandi* is that the main interest of any State should be being secure, not hegemonic. This kind of "defensive neorealist" attitude is the same that convinces Obama to oppose the creation of new Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

*Tenet V: Focus more on soft power and unconventional threats rather than hard power and great power rivalry.* As it is discussed in the course of this chapter, Obama usually prefers using soft power instruments of coercion to make the others take a useful direction. He tried to do so through his famous speeches in Cairo and Istanbul in 2009 and signing an agreement on nuclear proliferation with Iran. He is generally more focused on "unconventional threats" such as the environmental change, than on the classic threats to security that were the key components of the Bush doctrine.

*Tenet VI: Accept gracefully the decline of the American power. As part of his multilateral view.* Obama accepts the relative decline of the United States as the only pole of the diplomatic relations, in favor of new centers such as the European Union and the emerging Asiatic countries, namely China and India.

*Tenet VII: Conciliate and accommodate actual and potential rivals.* If any liberal leader tends to narrow the ties with other nations, Obama went beyond, stressing the need to conciliate the existing and potential adversaries of the United States. As it will be discussed below, he is referring particularly to the Muslim countries and to the necessity of "outreaching" them. The scholar David Remnick<sup>2</sup> outlines that the President likes considering himself as a bridge, reconciling not only Americans of all races with each other, but also the United States with the rest of the world.

## **2. Obama and the Middle East**

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<sup>2</sup> David Remnick, *The bridge: the rise and rise of Barack Obama*, 2011

Barack Obama inherited from Bush a war in Afghanistan and one in Iraq, plus an Iran guided by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and determined to develop its own nuclear capability and to destroy Israel and the Gaza strip ruled by the terror organization Hamas. In all these situations, as written above, he wanted to replace the unilateralism of Bush's administration with a policy of outreach of the countries that had come into conflict with the United States during the previous presidency. In particular, he wanted to outreach the Muslim countries and institute a good relationship with the moderate Islamic regimes. As a consequence, he cooled his relation with Israel, to avoid the risk of appearing biased in the peace process. Finally, his estrangement from Bush's unilateralism brought him to try to start a dialogue with Ahmadinejad, in the attempt to change his policies without the use of force. During the first year of his mandate, Obama often appealed to the Iranian regime to improve their relationship, but every effort was inconclusive until 2013. The new American President also wanted to depart from Bush's democratization policy in the Middle East, asserting that "no system of government can or should be imposed on one nation by another"<sup>3</sup>.

Anyway, as it is written above, Obama considered the reviving of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as a major priority in the Middle East, at least in theory. In his view a resolution of the conflict would have weakened Iran's proxies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, would have pulled Syria away from Iran and would have reconciled at least the Sunni Arab world with the West, isolating Ahmadinejad as the head of a Shi'ite country. These objectives are coherent with the historical interests of the United States to contain terrorism.

During his first mandate, Obama tried to reach his ambitious goals by completing the withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq. He also applied his beloved instruments of soft power presenting two important speeches in 2009, one in Cairo ("A new beginning") and one in Istanbul.

In both speeches the President showed a sound grasp of Islamic sensibilities, and he referred to a "two-states solution" between Israel and the Palestinians and to Iran's right to develop a peaceful nuclear program as any other country, that he sustains. He also made clear, though, the U.S' determination to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

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<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, *Cairo's Speech: A new beginning*, 2009

Not only these speeches were criticized for their failure to appeal to Egypt and Turkey's respective Heads of State, Hosni Mubarak and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for undertaking a process of democratization in their countries, but they also proved to be disastrous as instruments of soft power. In fact in the course of the next three years Mubarak's regime was overthrown and Erdoğan proved to be a repressive and violent, though largely appreciated, tyrant, and to have no intention to approach the West and the European Union. On the contrary, his regime soon undertook a kind of neo-ottoman policy and aligned with organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas.

Another fallacy was to visit these two Arab countries in the same year and failing to visit Israel until 2013, which contributed to the President's unpopularity in the Jewish State.

Obama's attitude toward the Arab world had to change completely after 2011-2012, when the Northern-African countries saw, one after another, the beginning of a series of revolts that led to the fall of most of the authoritarian regimes of the area. The Arab Spring was tearing apart all the equilibria in the Middle East, leading to different results in every country. In particular, the Syrian and Libyan civil wars broke out. At this point, the American President had to take a position on this field. On one hand, the United States and the Western countries in general are supposed to encourage every attempt to overthrow an authoritarian regime and any process of democratization; on the other, the United States had solid relationships with most of those regimes, such as with Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia or Hosni Mubarak himself in Egypt. In particular Mubarak had the geopolitical merit to have helped the States try to facilitate a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians in the past. It was one of the numerous situations in which the United States had to choose between its values and its interests, and Obama was required to do so just before the 2012 Presidential elections. He discussed this dilemma in the speech on the Arab uprisings on May 19, 2011. As far as the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was concerned, by contrast, there was no doubt that the United States should encourage the popular protests in the Arab world. In mid-January 2011, just when the first riots began in Tunisia, she made a speech in Qatar fiercely criticizing the Arab governments for stalling political change. Given these circumstances, the United States' reaction to the uprisings were perhaps too slow to come. Obama expressed openly his support to a "genuine transition to democracy" of the Arab world only after his former ally Mubarak was forced to dismiss one month later. This maneuver was considered to be in many ways a return

to Bush's democratization policy. The truth is that as far as countries as Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Qatar were concerned, Obama was - or at least felt - compelled to sustain the winner, whoever he was, in order not to risk to completely lose control over such an unstable and explosive region. Obama's objective was to try as far as possible to watch over the changes that North Africa was going through in order to turn them to his favor. The victory in the Egyptian elections of 2012 of the Muslim Brotherhood, a party considered strictly linked to Hamas, with the candidate Mohamed Morsi, were the first proof that this strategy was not working. Obama's tendency to *laissez-faire* with regard to Egypt and the other countries involved in the Arab Spring contributed to the deterioration of American-Israeli relations, as Israel felt threatened by an Egypt under Muslim Brotherhood's control.

In 2012-2013, Obama and Netanyahu were both re-elected and, not far from Israel, Hassan Rouhani became the new Iranian President after a period of great protests across the country that were later labeled as the Green Revolution. Being freed from Ahmadinejad was a relief for the entire Western world, but the new leader had been the head negotiator for the Iranian nuclear program and was obviously favorable to continue it, even if he was more moderate than his predecessor in foreign policy. Obama himself decided to keep distance from the movement and declared in an interview with CNBC: "The difference between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani in terms of their actual policies may not be as great as has been advertised".

Iran has been sanctioned for a long time for its nuclear ambitions from the UN Security Council and has suffered from economic embargo from the United States and the European Union. On April 2nd, 2015 Iran and the P5 + 1 (The United States, Germany, France, Russia, China and the United Kingdom) signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) after two years of negotiations. It is supposed to be finalized by the 30th of June and be implemented in the next six months. According to the agreement, Iran is willing to roll back part of its nuclear program in exchange of relief from some sanctions. In particular, it has agreed to enrich uranium in only one nuclear facility based in Nantanz for the next ten years, to enrich uranium to 3,67% to its facility for the next fifteen years and to allow intrusive IAEA inspections. On the other hand, the P5 +1 have accepted Iran's right to uranium enrichment under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). A treaty that Israel has never signed. Nonetheless, Netanyahu and the majority of the Israeli public opinion has always opposed this deal, as



they do not trust Iran's intentions after decades of mistrust. Once again, the different views of the United States and Israel can be explained considering "the place where they sit". Obviously, a nuclear Iran may represent a huge risk from Israel's point of view. However, the agreement formally recognizes that Iran is not a threat to Israel's existence and that uranium enrichment in the Middle East can be legitimate to some extent.

The Geneva agreement is one of the main obstacles for a good relationship between Obama and Netanyahu.

In this mixture of hard and soft power - or "smart power" as the Obama administration prefers to call it -, another element is to be taken into consideration when referring to the United States politics toward the Middle East in the last years. This is the use of drones (officially known as unmanned aerial vehicles or UAV) that Obama is copiously using in continuing the war on terror in Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Yemen. They are used for targeted attacks and, as the American pilot that guides them usually flies miles away from his targets, it is safe for the soldiers' integrity. It may be considered a smart way to fight terrorism, and the American public opinion tends to approve their use (according to a poll published in 2012 by the Pew Research Center, 62% of Americans agree with their use<sup>4</sup>), with consequential electoral advantages for the current Presidents. However, apart from the ethical doubts that their use may rise, they are considered to be a weak instrument to fight terrorism too, as they do not represent a way to eradicate the phenomenon while, on the contrary, they risk to widespread it and create more terrorists than those eliminated.

In conclusion, the United States' interests in the Middle East changed progressively in the course of the last six years, as the circumstances and the balance of the region varied sharply during this period. At the beginning, Obama's priorities regarded the stabilization of the region, the approach to the Muslim countries, the withdrawal of the American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and sustaining the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as a vehicle to reach these wider objectives. After the Arab Spring, the beginning of the Syrian civil war and the advance of the terror group ISIS, Obama and the rest of the Western world had to change their priorities and goals toward the area, as it was getting more and more unstable. At this point, Obama's policies have become more intrusive and active.

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, 2012

### 3. Obama and Israel

As previously stated in this chapter, the relations with Israel and the resolution of its conflict with the Palestinian Authority have always been priorities in the Obama administration's agenda. Both the President and the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, have always underlined the "special relationship" between Israel and the United States and the importance of the resolution of the conflict as a national commitment. In particular Clinton declared in 2010: "A strong Israel is an asset to the national security of the United States and brings stability to the Middle East" (Clinton, 2010).

However, in his attempt to reproach the Arab world, Obama stated in his Cairo speech of 2009: "America will not turn its back on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own"<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, Clinton called for a settlement freeze both in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank. This has always been one of the main obstacles in the Obama-Netanyahu relationship, as the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories are a touchstone for the current government. To be honest, under American pressure the Israeli Prime Minister partially modified his position in the course of 2009. In a speech at Bar-Ilan University he agreed to a two-states solution (specifying that Jerusalem would have remained under Israeli control) and to a ten-month settlements freeze (not including Jerusalem). Obama had accepted this partial agreement with the Israeli administration; however, on February 1st, 2010 he declared in a *Time* magazine interview that he had "overestimated" the US ability to get the Israeli and the Palestinians to engage in a "meaningful conversation"<sup>6</sup>. A crisis between Israel and the United States erupted one month later, when the vice-president Joe Biden visited Israel. This trip aimed at imprinting a new start of the talks between Netanyahu and Abbas, particularly after the United States had convinced the Palestinian leaders to resume them. During Biden's visit, however, the Israeli government had suddenly accelerated the Jewish housing in an Arab neighborhood in Jerusalem, destroying several Arab housings in East Jerusalem, as they were said to be built without the municipal permit (that is almost impossible to obtain for an Arab under the Israeli catch-22 policy). The Israeli administration

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<sup>5</sup> Barack Obama, *Cairo's Speech: a new beginning*, 2009

<sup>6</sup> Barak Obama, *Time*, February 1st, 2010

announced in particular the construction of 1,600 new Jewish homes in East Jerusalem. This gesture was considered offensive and provocative by the Obama administration itself. Biden condemned this maneuver, and at the same time Abbas refused to enter into talks as he was committed to do. Ten days later, Netanyahu failed to visit Washington. This two episodes represented a great crash between the two administrations. Anyway, the indirect talks were resumed in May as the United States made a major gesture to Israel by granting it with an additional \$ 205 million in military aid to help the expansion of Israeli Iron Dome antimissile system<sup>7</sup>. At this point, Netanyahu froze the settlements again. The peace negotiations officially started in September, but were quickly stalled because of a new resumption of the settlement construction, that Obama defined “unhelpful”. He offered Netanyahu to extend the freeze for ninety days, a time considered - naively - sufficient to agree the new borders with Abbas, so that the new settlements would have been constructed in a territory agreed by the two parts. The purpose included the provision to Israel of twenty new American F-35 stealth fighter planes and the promise to put a veto on any Palestinian’s Authority effort to get the United Nation Security Council to recognize it as a State.

Netanyahu refused this generous offer, as pursuing peace with the Palestinians was hardly a priority in the government’s view. In fact, containing the Iranian nuclear ambitions was considered far more urgent. The United States, on the other hand, continued resisting the Israeli calls to attack Iran, as Obama, as stated above, was much more willing to pursue a policy of dialogue with his adversaries. In his effort to eliminate the nuclear weapons in the Middle East through the use of soft power, the American President also invited Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, differently from what his predecessor would have ever done. The nuclear issue was and still is considered another major obstacle between Obama and Netanyahu. In particular, the final realization of an agreement was welcomed as a defeat by the Netanyahu government. As it will be discussed in the next chapter, the Israeli Prime Minister did everything in his power to obstacle the talks between the United States and Iran, including delivering a speech in front of the American Republican Congress in March 2015, in the middle of his last electoral campaign. Iran is considered a paradigm of the incompatibility of the two leaders’ views. Although sharing the same objective - the containment of Iran’s nu-

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<sup>7</sup> Robert O. Freeman, *“Israel and the United States: six decades of US-Israeli relations”*, 2012

clear ambitions -, Obama and Netanyahu presented two completely different ways to deal with the problem.

Together with the radicalization of the Palestinians ( Hamas' continuous attacks and Abbas' weakness), this is the main reason why the two governments were incapable of restarting the peace talks. In 2011, while he was already dealing with the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Libyan civil war, Obama was pressured by America's Nato allies to intervene again in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In the meantime, George Mitchell resigned as US Middle East peace mediator. In her speech to the US-Islamic World Forum, Clinton defined the Israeli-Palestinian status quo "unsustainable" and expressed the United States' frustration for the impossibility to communicate with Netanyahu. By 2011, no peace process was even begun. Even Obama's visit in 2013 was not decisive in this sense, although it seemed to be a step ahead in the approach of the two governments.

As it will be deepened in the next chapter, the real reason why Obama was never able to coerce his Israeli colleague in any way was related to a problem of domestic policy. In particular, the Republican Congress of the United States has always interfered with the President's attempt to act against Netanyahu. Not only the Congress historically favors Israel, but the current one is especially close to the Likud Prime Minister and tends to support him against Obama's efforts to find a compromise on the Palestinian issue.

This domestic incongruence has made Obama's policy toward Israel generally weak and often incoherent. In fact the President has continuously condemned Netanyahu's settlements and his non-proportional responses against Palestinian civilians in war time. At the same time, however, he has never stopped to finance Israel's military expenses. Actually he has even significantly increased it in the course of his mandates.

Israel is the country with the largest share of U.S foreign assistance in the world since the Second World War. So far, the United States has provided his best ally with 121 billion dollars in total. In the last years, almost all the bilateral assistance to Israel has been in the form of military assistance, as the country is considered to be economically self-sufficient now. Israel has also privileges not given to other countries, such as the possibility to use U.S. military assistance both for research and development in the United States and for military purchases from Israeli manufacturers.

In 2007, the Bush Administration and the Israeli government agreed to a 10-year, \$ 30 billion military aid package for the period from 2009 to 2018, confirmed by Obama during his visit in 2013. Obama went further though. In 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act he granted Israel with \$ 235 million for the production of the Iron Dome anti-rocket system, \$ 149,7 million for the joint U.S.-Israel missile defense systems David's Sling and \$ 44,3 million and 74,7 million respectively for the Arrow II and III improvement program. In 2015, Obama offered also \$ 10 million in Migration and Refugee Assistance. Obama's verbal critics to the Netanyahu administration and his efforts to coerce his actions were never accompanied by a concrete measure, so that the President's "prudence" is proving to be a sort of weakness.

**Table B-I. Recent U.S. Bilateral Aid to Israel**  
(millions of dollars)

Year	Total	Military Grant	Economic Grant	Immig. Grant	ASHA	All other
1949-1996	68,030.9	29,014.9	23,122.4	868.9	121.4	14,903.3
1997	3,132.1	1,800.0	1,200.0	80.0	2.1	50.0
1998	3,080.0	1,800.0	1,200.0	80.0	—	—
1999	3,010.0	1,860.0	1,080.0	70.0	—	—
2000	4,131.85	3,120.0	949.1	60.0	2.75	—
2001	2,876.05	1,975.6	838.2	60.0	2.25	—
2002	2,850.65	2,040.0	720.0	60.0	2.65	28.0
2003	3,745.15	3,086.4	596.1	59.6	3.05	—
2004	2,687.25	2,147.3	477.2	49.7	3.15	9.9
2005	2,612.15	2,202.2	357.0	50.0	2.95	—
2006	2,534.5	2,257.0	237.0	40.0	—	0.5
2007	2,503.15	2,340.0	120.0	40.0	2.95	0.2
2008	2,423.9	2,380.0	0	40.0	3.90	0
2009	2,583.9	2,550.0	0	30.0	3.90	0
2010	2,803.8	2,775.0	0	25.0	3.80	0
2011	3,029.22	3,000.0	0	25.0	4.225	0
2012	3,098.0	3,075.0	0	20.0	3.00	0
2013	2,943.234 (After Sequestration)	3,100.0	0	15.0	—	0
2014 Estimate	3,115.0	3,100.0	0	15.0	—	0
FY2015 Request	3,110.0	3,100.0	0	10.0	—	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>121,190.804</b>	<b>70,523.4</b>	<b>30,897.0</b>	<b>1,673.2</b>	<b>162.075</b>	<b>14,991.9</b>

*Figure 1: Economic assistance from the United States to Israel from 1997 on, data from the Congressional Research Service 2015.*

## **4. Conclusion**

Obama has always demonstrated a particular interest in maintaining the American-Israeli “special relation” and in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact he considered its resolution as the first step toward a more stable Middle East and the weakening of terror organizations related to Iran such as Hamas and Hezbollah. His doctrine, based on the end of “American exceptionalism” and on more multilateral international relations, the rapprochement of the moderate Islamic countries and a more evenhanded approach to the Israeli politics, did not find a favorable historical moment to be put into practice. On one hand, Israeli government and public opinion were rapidly radicalizing after the Second Lebanese War and the beginning of Hamas’ rule in Gaza. On the other, the United States’ prerogatives in the Middle East had to change as several North African and Arab governments began to fall under the pressure of popular riots in 2011-2012 and civil wars broke out in Libya and in Syria. In the meantime, Obama and Netanyahu were never able to find a compromise over the Iranian nuclear ambitions. After an agreement was finally reached between the P5 +1 and Iran in April 2015, the relationship between the American and the Israeli leader - and public opinion - got even worse.

The two heads of State were simply incapable to find a common strategy in any field, as their priorities in the Middle East have always been incompatible. Nevertheless, the “special relation” between their countries had to be kept safe, and Obama increased the American finance to Israeli military during the course of both his mandates. He was also forced to do so by the Republican Congress that has always sustained Netanyahu against him, so that the President’s politics toward Israel often proved to be incoherent.

## **Chapter II - Benjamin Netanyahu and the United States**

Benjamin Netanyahu was elected Prime Minister for the second time in 2010, even if the election had been won by his adversary Tzipi Livni. As her majority was very narrow and she was incapable to form a coalition, Netanyahu was able to be nominated Prime Minister presenting a stronger coalition with Avigdor Lieberman. As a result, his government was one year younger than Obama's and rather more unstable. As discussed in the previous chapter, Netanyahu is a seasoned leader that has been living in the United States for a long time and has always been traditionally close to the Republican Party. As it is explained in the introduction, he has also been an historical objector of Bill Clinton, of which Obama is considered the natural heir.

Netanyahu was elected again in 2013, together with his American colleague. Once again, he found himself to be the Prime Minister of a rather unstable government without a well-defined majority, so that it fell one year and an half later, in December 2014. He won the elections again in March 2015 though. As discussed in the first chapter, in those years Israel had to face several wars and both the government and the public opinion tended to radicalize. Israel had also to cope with a radical change in the regimes of its North African neighbors as a result of the Arab Spring. In the meantime, however, the Prime Minister's first concern was the Iranian nuclear ambitions and the growing international isolationism of his country.

In this chapter Netanyahu's and the Israeli point of view on Obama's policies in the Middle East will be discussed. In particular, the first part of the chapter regards Netanyahu's priorities and policies, especially those concerning his foreign policies. The second part focuses on his attempt to influence Obama's policies through his numerous linkages with the American Congress and the Jewish lobby in the United States, and in general on his relationship with the American President.

### **1. Netanyahu doctrine**

Benjamin Netanyahu is considered one of the most important exponents of Neoconservatism. His political doctrine is rooted in the right-wing theory conducted earlier by Ariel Sharon, who nominated him as Finance Minister in 2003. According to the scholar Guy Ben-Porat, neoconservatism gained little support in the Israeli political ground until very recently, as the

Jewish country lacks such a tradition, differently from the United States. After the failure of the Oslo agreements at Champs David in 2000 and the attack to the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, this theory suddenly spread out in the Israeli intellectual elite. In particular, in Israel Neoconservatism carried an agenda including a mix of civil rights, a free market economy and obviously nationalism. Netanyahu has always demonstrated to be personally committed to these values, even if he often had to come to compromises with the opposition in the Knesset and with more centrist views to gain a wider popular support in the elections. In a certain sense, he was a predecessor of the development of this political view in Israel, as he exposed a neoconservative agenda as early as in 1993, even before being elected for the first time. In that year he published the book “A Place among the Nations”, providing a series of fundamental points for the very survival of the Jewish State. Specifically, in his perspective the liberalization of the Israeli economy was to be labelled as the first step to ensure prosperity to the country. This prosperity would be translated in a mass immigration from the former USSR (and from Europe in general and particularly from Ukraine and France today) and consequently to a strengthening of Israel at international level, both in diplomatic and military terms. This position of power “would allow Israel to dictate its terms for peace and force its neighbors to reckon with it”<sup>8</sup>. His concept of peace in particular is pretty similar to Bush’s: it includes the diffusion of democracy all over the Middle East as a prerogative for peace and security, and the Western countries would have the right to work for it.

Actually Netanyahu is not considered to have done anything revolutionary in his first mandate as Prime Minister and as Minister of Finance from 2003 to 2006. In fact the Israeli economy was already liberalized and a process of privatization had already invested the country in the previous ten years. As far as his foreign policy is concerned, as stated above, it gained legitimacy especially after the Second Intifada in 2000, the spread of international terrorism and it was completely supported by George W. Bush. The circumstances of his second and third mandate since 2009 further favored the hawkishness of his view and actions.

## **2. Netanyahu and the Middle East**

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, “*A place among the nations*”, 1993



Since 2009 Israel has faced several changes in its region, withstanding in particular a process of radicalization of all its neighbors, and of its population itself. The main challenges that Netanyahu's government had to deal with were first and foremost the growing threat represented by Hamas in Gaza and, within its own borders, the crescent request from the Arab-Israeli community for a greater representation in the public life of the country. Netanyahu, however, was and is more concerned with the Iranian threat than with the Palestinian one, as he considered it more urgent and dangerous. The change of regime in Israel's African neighbors worried Israel only if it could mean a change in their positions with regard to the legitimacy of the Jewish State. In particular that could take place in Egypt, which could have denied the 1979 peace agreement.

However, in the last years Netanyahu's main objective has been to obtain the maximum support from the United States by mobilizing the Congress and the Jewish lobby to press Obama for a more favorable attitude toward Israel: American benevolence is regarded as the base for any successful strategy as far as foreign policy is concerned.

As stated above, the main obstacle in the relationship between Obama and Netanyahu was their different attitudes toward Iran. In particular, the Israeli Prime Minister indicates it as the primary source of his country's problems, as Iran is the most important "patron state" (financing state) of anti-Israeli terrorist organizations in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories. In addition, even if Ahmadinejad's regime has fallen, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei still called to eliminate the State of Israel in November 2014. A nuclear Iran is considered an existential threat to Israel, and a potential Iranian bomb is feared to lead to an arms race in all the Middle East. Any deal with Iran including a possible uranium enrichment in the region is perceived as risky by Israel, especially by a right-winged government that tends to imitate Bush's approach, refusing to communicate with a non-democratic regime. Israel's "red line" is less flexible than the American one. The United States rely on the idea of having the capability to attack Iran if it would decide to use the bomb; for Israel, Iran's ability to produce a nuclear bomb in practice, even if it has not decided to use it yet, is a problem by itself. In Israel's view, moreover, the breakout time required for Iran to cross the nuclear threshold - up to one year - is too risky. Israel has an impressive military capability, but still it would be insufficient to damage significantly Iran's nuclear infrastructure. These are the main reasons why in 2013, after the achievement of Geneva interim nuclear pact, Netanyahu defined it "an

historic mistake” (Netanyahu, 2013). In his view, intensified international sanctions and political pressure on the Iranian government, together with a covert campaign against problematic aspects of the Iranian nuclear program, would have been preferable options. In case of emergence, the Israeli government would have been ready to conduct surgical strikes on the country's nuclear installations.

The Iranian threat is considered a priority even compared to the peace process with the Palestinian Authority. Actually, in the last years Netanyahu demonstrated to have only an opportunistic interest toward a peace process. This view might have been in accordance to Bush's, but it is not acceptable from the perspective of the American Democratic Party or of the international community. Netanyahu cared more about internal sustain though, and his fragile governments depended upon the support of all the parties of his various temporary coalitions. Most of the times these parties, especially Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu until 2015 and the influencing Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home, are absolutely contrary to accept any kind of agreement at the moment. Probably Netanyahu finds it easier to put pressure on the American government for being more compliant than compromising with its own coalition. Palestinian terrorism is feared less than the Iranian one, and Netanyahu tends to prefer maintaining the current *status quo* and deterring Hamas' threat through occasional quick wars that have an high price for Palestinians.

With regard to the Arab Spring, if the United States hesitated to welcome it as a triumph of democracy, it was even more difficult for Israel. In effect, Tel Aviv looked at the events of 2011 and 2012 with a mixture of hope and fear. On one hand, a potential democratization of the region may represent an extraordinary opportunity for it in the long term; however, in the shorter term, this political unrest is naturally a reason of concern. In particular, from an Israeli point of view, the greatest risk was the rise of Islamist political parties following the fall of the previous regimes in North Africa. Those regimes, although authoritarian, are perceived to be more moderate toward Israel. The rise of an Islamist party in an African country, by contrast, might signify the transformation of this anti-Israeli feeling in the official foreign policy of the country itself. For example the growth of a party like the Muslim Brotherhood in a country like Egypt is considered a danger. Moreover a political vacuum provoked by a revolution risked to instigate the creation of terroristic groups. Netanyahu expressed this concern in April 2011, declaring that: “What we hope to see is the European Spring of 1989” (Neta-

nyahu, 2011), but that there was an increasing chance of encountering an “Iranian Winter”. This last observation referred to the danger of an increasing influence of the Islamic groups, controlled by Iran, in the uprisings.

As many analysts suggested in those years, it was impossible to give a general paradigm of the destiny of the Arab Spring. It was necessary making a case-by-case analysis of every country. In fact the uprising of 2011 gave birth, on one hand, to a quasi-functioning democracy in Tunis, and on the other to the creation of a failed State in Libya and in Syria. It is also true that Israel was particularly upset by the situation in Egypt more than that in Tunisia or in other countries, as it is the closest country to its borders and the only one it had a peace treaty to keep. In this context, such as in the conflict with the Palestinians, Netanyahu proved to prefer maintaining a well known status quo than to face a change that might have either a positive or a negative outcome. As far as Egypt is concerned, Israel’s relationship with Mubarak was far from perfect, but his regime had provided a certain stability in the country for a long time. When Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate Mohamed Morsi won the Presidency, Tel Aviv hurried to congratulate with him and with Egypt for its new legislative body, but Israel was really reassured only when Morsi declared to have the intention to respect the peace treaty of 1979. Actually, at the beginning the anti-zionist sentiment inherent to the Muslim Brotherhood had given the new government the temptation to close the treaty. However, Morsi demonstrated to have an experience in real politics and chose to preserve the peace and continue to receive the US aids. Anyway, in 2011 Israel and Egypt faced an all-time low in bilateral relations when the Israeli Embassy was attacked on September 9th. In 2012, the lower house of the Egyptian parliament defined Israel as the number one enemy of the country in a declaration. In general, the 2012 polls confirmed that 85% of Egyptian public opinion views Israel negatively. In short, formally the relationship between Tel Aviv and Cairo remained “minimalist”, but in practice their ties loosened, incrementing Tel Aviv’s isolationism in the Middle East. In conclusion, as far as the other “Arab Spring” countries are concerned, Netanyahu tended to maintain a passive and “wait-and-see” approach, as Israel was not in the position to intervene in any situation. Netanyahu, in other words, did exactly what Obama would have wished to do but could not, that is remaining as distant as possible from these new dangerous dynamics.

### **3. Netanyahu and the United States**

Naturally Israel has always had difficulties, if not inexistent or openly conflicting relations with Arab and Muslim countries. This is the reason why it has developed a tradition of foreign policy based on “the knight move”, that is, the strategy of climbing over the conflicting neighboring countries and reaching more distant ones, the Western in particular. Netanyahu tends to pursue this kind of approach, so that in the last years Israel has established somewhat good relationships with countries such as Greece, Cyprus and India, even if its former alliance with Turkey has been weakened by Erdogan. In the latest period, however, Tel Aviv is going through an even more troublesome process than the increasing volatility in the Middle East: a severe deepening in its international isolationism among the Western countries. Not only the Israeli settlements in the West Bank are considered illegal under international law, so that Netanyahu’s continuous “freeze-not freeze” policy and his direct and indirect sustain to new constructions in the territories has made him rather unpopular abroad; moreover, the current government’s reactions to the Hamas’ rocket fires are often considered disproportionate by the International Community, especially, as stated above, with regard to the civilian victims in Gaza.

This isolationism worsened when the United Nation General Assembly voted by an overwhelming majority to accord Palestine “Non-Member Observer State” Status in the UN, on November 29<sup>th</sup> 2011. As long as the United States will have a veto power in the UN Security Council, Netanyahu remarked in that occasion, there is no possibility to have Palestine recognized as a proper State. Still, Israel witnessed this formal recognition as a new devaluation of its already fragile position in the General Assembly. In the course of 2014-2015, furthermore, several European States have recognized the Palestinian State, although at different levels. For example, in August 2014 Sweden was the first European country to recognize Palestine as a State, followed lately by the Holy See on May 13, 2015. Countries like Italy, on the other hand, have limited themselves to implement a non-binding resolution to encourage the national government to recognize Palestine. It is the first time in history that some Western countries take the same position as the developing ones, that on average recognized the Palestinian State a long time ago. This maneuver in Europe expresses a general frustration for the stagnation of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the West, but from an Israeli point of view it is often interpreted as an unilateral action to put pressure on the Jewish State without

considering the diverse aspects of the current circumstances. Other countries, for instance Spain, put an arms embargo on Israel during the Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014. Moreover, anti-Israeli protests spread around Europe during the same war.

In brief, Israel relies more than ever on the United States support and on the historical special relation between the two countries. Netanyahu had to deal with Obama even if they have two opposite political views and they probably dislike each other at a personal level. Given these conditions, the Israeli leader adopted again the knight move to try to overcome the American President and maneuver his decisions through the Congress and the Israeli lobby in the United States.

As anticipated in the previous chapter, the American Congress is strictly linked to Israel. This is due firstly to the Congress' strong ties with AIPAC, the most important Jewish lobby in the United States, whose objective is to align American policy with that of hard-line Israeli government policy, in particular those of the Likud Party. Since the group is active since 1954, its activity – and that of the other Christian and Jewish lobbies in the US – is considered non-controversial and routine. Lobbying efforts from AIPAC are usually more successful in Congress than in the Executive Branch. In fact administrative agencies are legally restrained in their action favoring lobbyist and much of the decision making is controlled by one person – the elected President, while the Congress is much less controlled and values its relations with fundraisers and Capitol Hill insiders that can return favors during the reelection campaigns. The current Congress, in particular, is closely linked to the Likud party and to Netanyahu himself and hostile to Obama, as it is Republican. During the last Hamas-Israel war, the American press revealed a long list of members of the American Congress – and Executive Branch – enjoying a dual citizenship, American and Israeli. Among them it is important to mention the Head of Homeland Security - Michael Chertoff, the Under Secretary of Defense - Douglas Feith and of course the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board - Henry Kissinger.

Netanyahu routinely exploits his contacts in the Congress to avoid finding an agreement with the President and press him from inside. As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, this alliance between the Israeli Prime Minister and the American Congress has enabled Tel Aviv to continue obtaining financing and military aid from Obama even in circumstances in which the President did not approve the Israeli government's *modus operandi*. The most striking example of how Netanyahu uses his contacts to influence Obama's resolutions in internatio-

nal politics is given by the speech he held in the Congress on March 3, 2015. The talk regarded the Iranian nuclear program, as an agreement between Teheran and the P5 + 1 was supposed to be reached in one month. The speech took place two weeks before Netanyahu was re-elected, and several scholars argue that one of its goals was to show the leader's strength during his electoral campaign. In his speech Netanyahu called on Washington to impose Iran some additional conditions before lifting its sanctions, such as ending threatening to destroy Israel, ending supporting international terrorism and finally ending to aggression in the Middle East. Netanyahu reminded the Congress that the West is not ready to trust Iran and that it still represents an existential threat to Israel. This speech was welcomed by the Congress with a standing ovation and was perceived to be an historical moment in the American-Israeli relations. A moment in which the President Obama was not present, as he was meeting with European leaders in videoconference. In the hours following the talk, he observed that Netanyahu's words contained "nothing new". Finally, the President added: "The alternative that the Prime Minister offers is no deal, in which case Iran will immediately begin, once again, pursuing its nuclear program, accelerating its nuclear program, without us having any insight into what we're doing and without restraint" (Netanyahu, 2015).

According to the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, the "Iranian nuclear question" is the most serious controversy between an Israeli and an American since 1948. In fact it regards the very basis of the relation between the two States: Israel would be the first victim of Obama's choice to give up his country's role of unique world superpower and the end of the "Pax Americana". If Obama considers a potential peaceful Iran as a future regional power, capable of becoming an ally against ISIS's advance and finally of contributing to the stabilization of the area, Netanyahu considers that his country could survive without American armies supply and financial help, but not so close to a nuclear Iran. This is the reason why, as early as 2013, he defined the deal with Teheran "an historic mistake" (Netanyahu, 2013).

In March 2011 Netanyahu held another famous speech to the American Congress, and in that occasion he emphasized that Israel was not dependent anymore on the United States, but the two nations were instead comrades-in-arms against common enemies such as radical Islam. An American pact with Iran is therefore viewed as a treason. But Netanyahu's reaction and his concern reveal Israel's independence from the United States is by large part only rhetorical: the Jewish State still badly needs American support.

## 4. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the relation between Israel and the United States from an Israeli point of view. In particular, it focused on Benjamin Netanyahu's political doctrine and on how it was applied in Israel's foreign relations with its Middle Eastern neighbors. It is stated that Netanyahu is considered one of the first promoters of Neoconservatism in Israel since he published the book "A Place among the Nations" in 1993. He firmly believes in economic liberalism, nationalism and in the necessity of an hawkish foreign policy. In the last years he found himself at the head of two rather unstable governments, so that he also had to come to compromises with his opposition and the other sides of his own coalition. His priorities were and are coherent with his political convictions and to the necessity to satisfy his allies as well. For this reason, he has always had an opportunistic attitude toward the possibility of a two-states solution and even toward the freezing of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank. He also faced a series of changes that regarded the other Middle Eastern and Northern African countries, namely the uprisings of the Arab Spring and the different consequences that they brought to each of them. The most threatening situation was found in Egypt, where the anti-Zionist party Muslim Brotherhood, strictly linked to Hamas and other terrorist organizations, took the power after the dictator Mubarak was dismissed. The new Egypt decided to respect the peace treaty signed with Israel in 1979, and even to offer itself as peace mediator between Tel Aviv and Gaza during the Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014. Despite this, the ties between Israel and Egypt are cooling and their relation is still not normalized. In general, Tel Aviv maintained a "wait and see" approach<sup>9</sup> toward the Arab Spring.

The most important reason of concern for Netanyahu, however, is the treaty between Iran and the Western powers - the United States *in primis* - on the country's nuclear ambitions. Even if he can share Obama's objective to prevent Iran from starting developing a nuclear capability clandestinely, he would have never come to pact with a country he does not trust at all and that can represent such a huge threat for Israel. This is the main reason why Netanyahu needs to influence Obama's choices in foreign policy more than ever, and he is trying to do it using the so-called knight move, that is avoiding as long as possible any direct contact with the Pre-

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<sup>9</sup> Benedetta Berti, *Israel and the Arab Spring: Understanding Attitudes and Responses to the "New Middle East"*, 2013

sident and exploiting his reliable ties with the Congress to coerce Obama from inside. In cultivating the “special relation” between Israel and the United States, Netanyahu routinely leans on the Jewish lobbying groups such as AIPAC and on his links with the Congress, that is historically close to Israel. The current one, in particular, is definitely closer to the Israeli than to the American leader. Netanyahu’s last speech held in the Congress is a proof of how fundamental is this tie between them, and above all how coercive it can be in address the President’s choices.

Netanyahu’s actions to maintain the United States’ support even without having Obama’s demonstrate the Prime Minister’s - and Israel’s - capacity to press the American government. However, even if Netanyahu likes presenting Israel as a completely autonomous country, the Jewish State is proved to be still highly dependent on American support, especially when Iran is concerned.



## Chapter III – Conclusions

### 1. The American public opinion

The American public generally possesses little knowledge about foreign countries and events, but it tends to be more informed about Israel and supportive of it. Americans have also continuously view Israel as an ally and have been willing to follow up on their support for Israel with economic and military aid, making the Jewish State the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign assistance since the World War II. This widespread support dates back to Israel's struggle for independence and has remained high throughout the course of the years. This has important consequences, as a favorable view of Israel affects people's attitudes about foreign policy. These attitudes, in turn, influence American foreign policy. The favor of the public opinion is to be considered a fundamental factor in understanding the strong relationship between the United States and Israel. To have an idea of how strong this support is, it is sufficient to look at the data of sixty years of independence: on average, of every five Americans, three sympathize more with Israel, one with Arab nations or Palestinians, and one with both or neither. In particular, in the past decade the trend indicates that Americans have been gradually increasing their support for Israel.



Fig. 2: Percentage sympathizing with Israel and Arab Nations/ Palestinians including both or neither (not graphed).

Source: Roper iPoll Survey Archive, 2010

It is notable that in the course of the two Obama’s mandates the generic American public opinion toward Israel has remained almost unvaried and largely favorable to the country’s interests and politics.

According to a Gallup’s poll of February 2015, seven in ten Americans view Israel favorably, and 62% declare to sympathize more with the Israelis than the Palestinians in the Mideast conflict. By contrast, only 17% view the Palestinian authority favorable, and 16% sympathize more with the Palestinians. According to Gallup, the American public opinion has remained unchanged since 11/9 2001, when the spread of international terrorism.

*Americans' Recent Perceptions of the Israelis and the Palestinians*

	February 2014	February 2015
	%	%
<b>RATE VERY/MOSTLY FAVORABLY</b>		
Israel	72	70
Palestinian Authority	19	17
<b>SYMPATHIES IN MIDEAST SITUATION</b>		
More with the Israelis	62	62
More with the Palestinians	18	16

GALLUP

Fig. 3: Americans’ Recent Perceptions of the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Source: Gallup, 2015

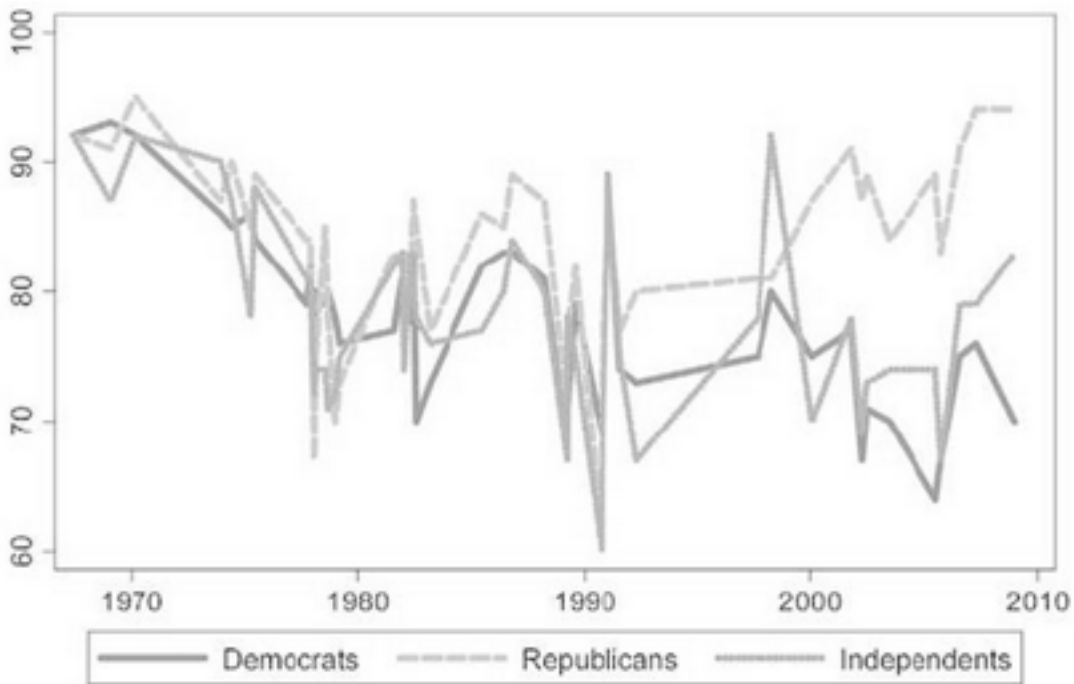
Anyway, treating the American public as a homogenous whole may be misleading. Americans’ views about Israel can be influenced by several demographics such as age, race, education, gender or religious and political difference. In fact group preferences can vary according

to different interests, experiences, environments and position in society. Most of the studies of American public attitudes on this field show that demographic factors (gender, age, region, education and race) are modestly associated with attitudes about foreign policy. On the contrary, partisan and ideological cleavages and religious affiliations are proved to be strongly correlated with policy positions.

Briefing analyzing the data on race, for example, it is easy to recognize that blacks have been traditionally less supportive of Israel than whites: probably African Americans tended to view the Palestinian campaign for national rights as analogous to their campaign for civil rights. As a consequence, African Americans' sustain to Israel increased once they reached the same status as whites. The differences in views toward Israel are far more evident among religious groups. Obviously American Jews tend to be the most supportive group, but as they represent 2% of the population they can hardly make the difference in a generic poll. A more influential source of support for Israel in the United States is Christianity. The United States is in fact the homeland to the unique phenomenon of Christian Zionism, that is historically regarded as more supportive to Israel than the Jewish community itself. This disposition, particularly common among Protestants, is rooted in their conviction that the state of Israel has come to the world in fulfillment of biblical prophecy. According to Jerry Falwell, one of the most famous exponents of this peculiar view, the existence of Israel is "the single greatest sign indicating the imminent return of Jesus Christ", and any change to this status would interfere with the prophecy. Christians' sustain to Israel became far more influential when the most conservative part of the Protestant Church came to be allied with the Republican Party (together with AIPAC and the Jewish lobby, as stated in the previous chapter). In fact, as it is showed by the graph, support to Israel is highly dependent on partisan groups.

Republicans are traditionally more supportive than Democrats as far as Israel is concerned. Especially in the last years, the difference between the Republican support (more than 90%

2010) compared to the Democrat (60% in 2010) has increased significantly.



*Fig. 4: Support to Israel by Party Identification.*

*Source: Gallup, 2010*

The current polls confirm that Israel is becoming more and more a partisan issue in the United States, particularly because of the increasing security threats from the Middle East and the ongoing pact with Iran, which is dividing the American public opinion. It is interesting to linger on the fact that, according to a survey conducted in April 2015, 67% of American Republicans are more sympathetic with Netanyahu than with Obama, their own President (and 16% say the opposite); among Democrats, by contrast, 76% are more sympathetic with Obama than with Netanyahu.

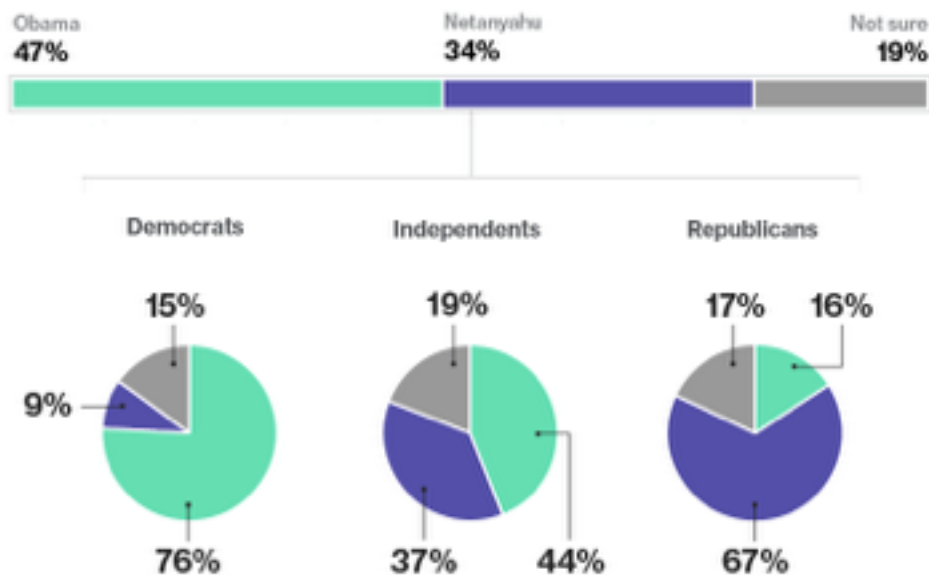


Fig. 5: In the recent clashes between Obama and Netanyahu, who are you more sympathetic for?  
 Source: BloombergPolitics, 2015

The divergent perspectives of Republicans and Democrats are confirmed by another poll, conducted in March 2015, ahead of Netanyahu’s speech to the Congress. In this case, Americans were asked if they had a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the Israeli Prime Minister. Unsurprisingly, 53% of Republicans declared to have a positive opinion, compared to only 28% of Democrats and 38% of Independents. However, it is important to know that the same survey reveals that 35% (more than one out of three) of Americans have no opinion on Netanyahu and probably have never heard of him. According to a poll conducted by the dovish group J Street in June 2015, the approval to Netanyahu’s job is equal to 47% among the American Jews.

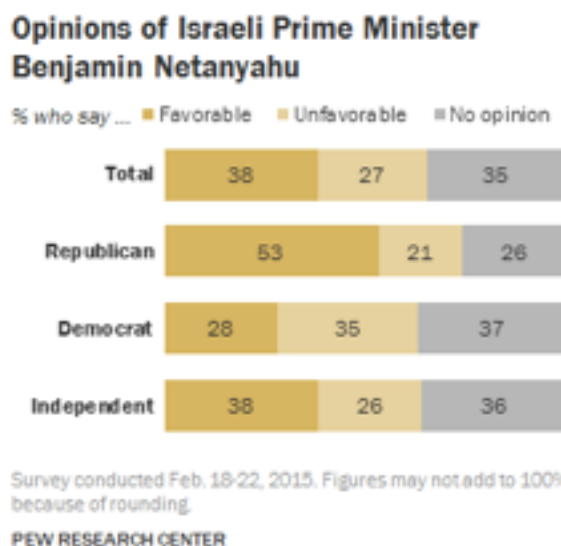


Fig. 6: Opinions on Netanyahu

Source: Pew Research Center, 2015

The last data remarkably reflects the sustain of American Jews to Obama's government. Surprisingly, the surveys reveal that American Jews tend to support the current President more than the average United States citizens.

Although Jews' approval to Obama has weakened in the course of the last two years, in accordance to the general trend, a poll conducted in April 2015 confirms that 54% of Jews approves Obama's work (a higher sustain than the one given to Netanyahu), compared to 46% among all the Americans.

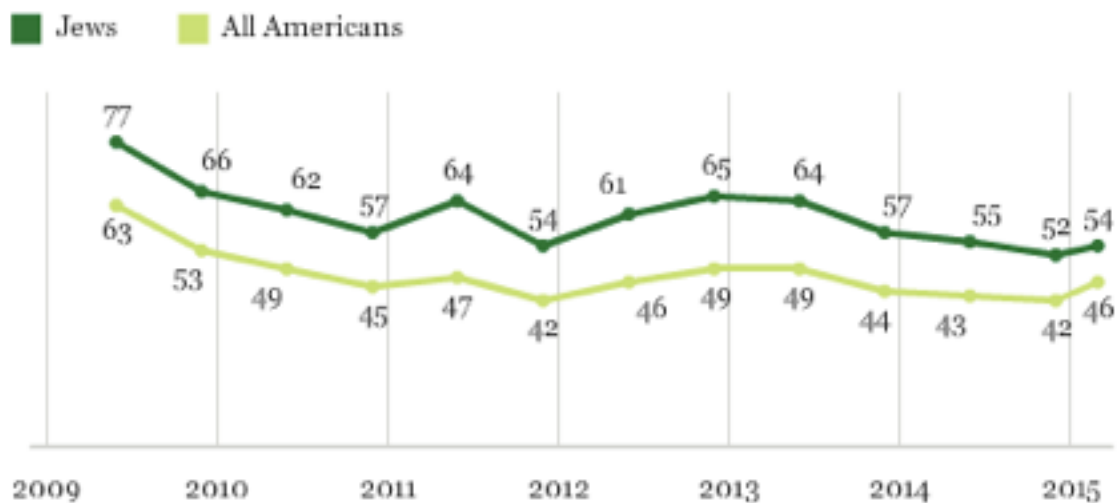


Fig. 7: Trend in President Barack Obama approval among Jews

Source: Gallup, 2015

This sustain is particularly strong among secularized Jews, who only attend religious services seldom or not at all. According to the same poll, by contrast, among the observant Jews only 34% approves the President's job, and 60% declared to disapprove it instead.

In addition, a study conducted by J Street in June 2015 indicates that 59% of American Jews support the final agreement with Iran. Once again, Jews' approval exceeds that of the general population: according to a poll conducted by CNN in April 2015, 53% of Americans being asked the same question declare to agree with the pact, 6 points less than Jews on average.

The polls conducted among the American Jews reveal, in brief, that they tend to stand with

Obama more than with Netanyahu. Above all, once again they confirm how perspectives in life depend upon “the place where you seat”, even more than on your religion.

## **2. The Israeli public opinion**

The Israeli public opinion is relatively easier to analyze, as the Jewish State is a small country and its relationship with the United States is perceived as one of the most fundamental issues by the majority of its citizens, much more than by their American counterparts. This section regards the analysis of the answers given by Israeli citizens when they are asked the same questions demanded in the United States. Once the surveys are interpreted, it will be possible to compare the differences in the perceptions of the American and the Israeli publics.

It is important to note that Israelis historically tend to have a positive view of their greatest ally, that is considered to have the same strategic and economic interests as the Jewish State, and above all to be its most reliable moral supporter, especially in the UN.

A survey conducted in February 2015 by the Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS), internal to the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy of IDC Herzliya, reveals that Israelis preserve on average a favorable outlook of Americans, though they differ in strength along political lines as well. In particular, the respondents to the poll were asked to rate their feeling about the US on a thermometer scale from 1 to 100. 64% of the general Israeli public expressed a positive feeling toward Washington (51 or higher in scale), and 41% a very positive feeling (76 or higher in scale).

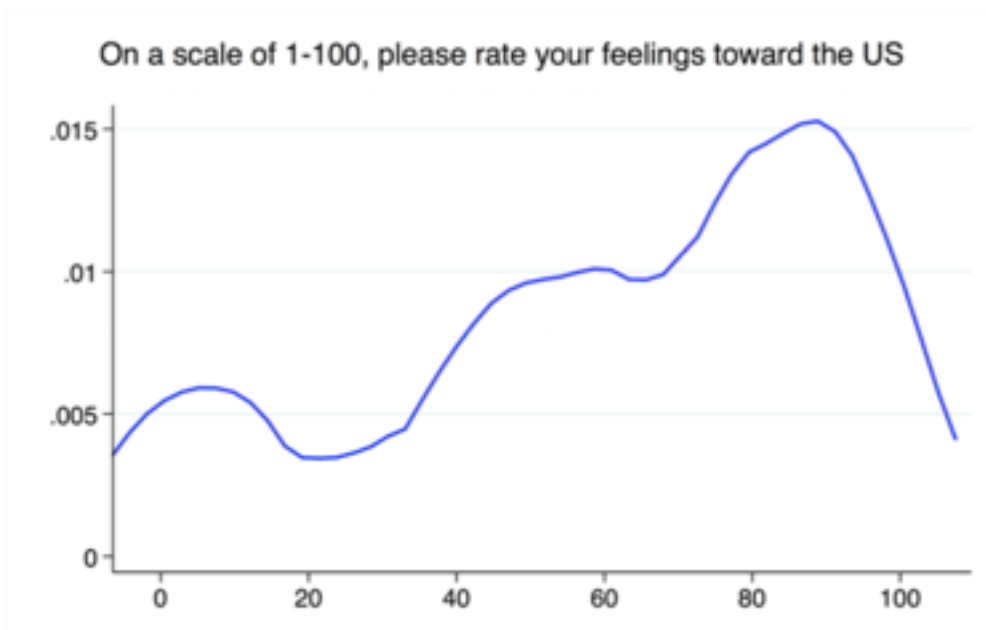


Fig. 8: Density curve of Israelis' feeling toward the US

Source: IDC Election Survey, APOI Project, IDC, 2015

As in the United States, the “special relation” is regarded as a partisan issue, and people’s opinion differ greatly according to their political views. In the same study conducted by IDC, these contrasts are based on the respondents’ report on which party they would vote for in the next elections: they were thus divided into Left party voters (*Meretz* and *Hamahaneh Hatzioni*), Center party voters (*Yesh Atid* and *Kulanu*), Right party voters (*Likud*, *Israel Beitenu* and *Habait Hayehudi*), Arab party voters (*joint Arab list*) and Ultra- Orthodox party voters (*Shas*, *Ha’am Itanu* and *Yahadut Hatora*). According to the poll, the left-winged voters have the highest feeling toward the United States, as 80% of them rated their sympathy over 50 on the scale and 60% over 75 on the scale. By contrast, right-winged electors still declare to have a positive opinion of the Americans, but only 60% rated it over 50 and 34% over 75. The Orthodox party voters retrace almost the same percentage (52% over 50 and 34% over 75), and the most critical portion of the electorate is represented by the Arab party voters, displaying mostly negative feelings (72% under 50 and 52% under 25 on the scale).



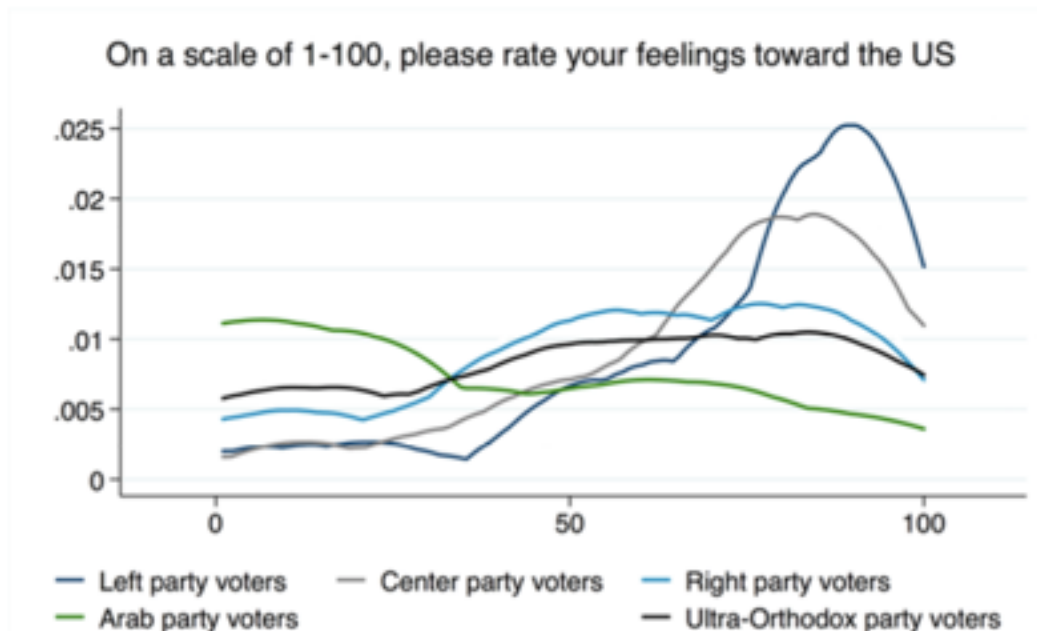


Fig. 9: Density Curves of Israelis Feelings toward the US, by Party Bloc

Source: IDC Election Survey, APOI Project, IDC, 2015

The higher opinion left-winged Israelis have on the United States compared to their right-winged compatriots can be interpreted as the consequence of the greater sustain left-winged voters provide to the Obama's administration and the lower appreciation they tend to have on their own Prime Minister, Netanyahu. By contrast, right-winged electors tend to view the United States' current policies as too intrusive toward Israel and in general not enough favorable to Tel Aviv.

These divergent perspectives are mirrored in the sympathy right-winged and left-winged Israelis tend to have toward the American President and their Prime Minister. In fact the same survey by IDC contains a question on the recent clashes between the two leaders, asking the responders to give their opinion on who they sympathize for and who they hold responsible for the decline in the relationship between the two countries. In general, 51% showed to perceive Netanyahu as the guilty party, versus 41% indicating Obama. However, 93% of left party voters lay responsibility on Netanyahu and sympathize more with Obama, while 84% of right party voters hold Obama responsible. Positions on this issue are clearly correlated to one's political views.

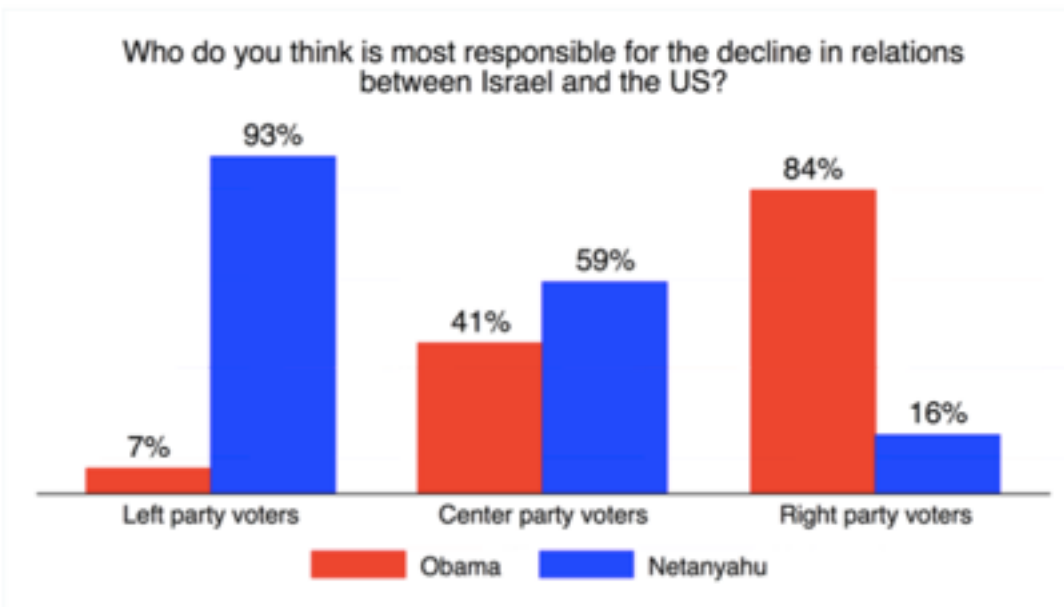
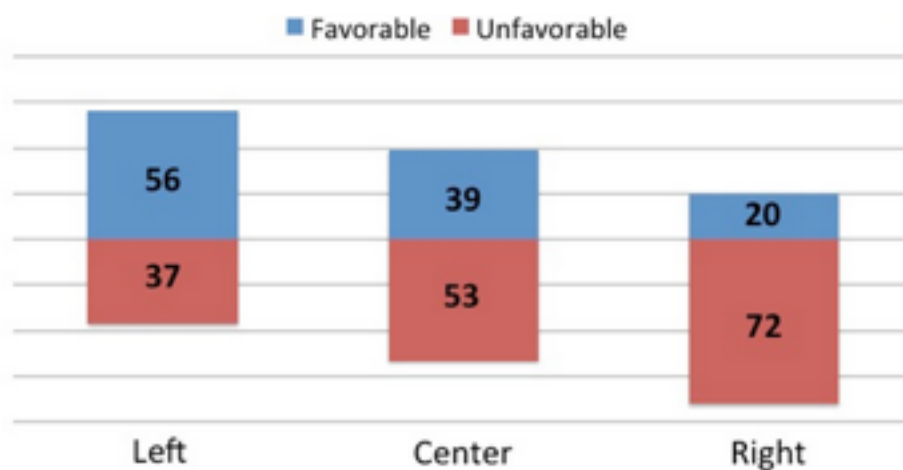


Fig. 10: Who do you think is most responsible for the decline in relations between Israel and the US?  
 Source: IDC Election Survey, APOI Project, IDC, 2015

It is notable that, among the Arab party electors, 99% see Netanyahu responsible, while 77% of Orthodox party voters hold Obama as such. This is not surprising, considering that the Arab parties are traditionally closer to left-winged perspectives while the Orthodox ones tend to be considered as right-winged parties' allies.

When it comes to judge Obama's job, however, the majority of the overall Israeli population tends to have a negative opinion. According to a survey conducted by the magazine The Times of Israel In February 2015, only 33% of Israelis have a favorable view of the President, while 59% maintain a negative perspective (9 points more than in 2014). Also in this case, people's perspectives are remarkably influenced by their political values. In fact, 56% of left-winged voters have a good opinion of Obama, while 72% of the right-winged hold a negative one. It is notable, however, that the consensus Obama receives from left party voters is much lower than the disapproval he suffers from the right party ones. In brief, the American President is generally unpopular in the Jewish country.



*Fig. 11: opinions on Obama*  
*Source: The Times of Israel, 2015*

Finally, The Times of Israel’s survey underlines that 72% of Israelis do not trust the deal Obama is making with Iran. The Iranian question is probably the main reason why Israelis’ opinion about the American President has worsened in the latest period.

### **3. Conclusion**

This last chapter aimed at comparing the views, the opinions and the feelings of the American and Israeli publics. In fact the two sections analyze the answers that the two public opinions give to the same questions, focusing specifically on the differences in the perceptions of people belonging to antagonist political parties and various religious affiliation and ethnicities. Now it is possible to drive some conclusions from the gathered data.

The most visible result is that both Americans and Israelis tend to have a reciprocal positive opinion toward each other (70% of Americans and 64% of Israelis have a good feeling about the other country). This is an important statistics, as it confirms that the “special relation” between the two States goes beyond the current lowering of the relationship between their leaders and that the two peoples maintain their historical empathy despite their diplomatic problems.

In both countries, however, the level of support of the other has recently become a partisan issue. It is interesting to note that, while in the United States the political group with the hi-

ghest feeling toward Israel is the Republican party, while in Israel the contrary is true: in this case, the left-winged voters show to have the best opinion of the United States (80%). In fact, while in America having a strong sympathy for the Jewish State is typical of those who feel more threatened by Islamic terrorism (notably the Republicans), in Israel right-winged voters tend to consider the United States an useful but somewhat too intrusive ally. American Democrats, by contrast, still have a positive view of Tel Aviv but appear to be more sensible to Israel's faults in the conflict against the Palestinians; finally, Israeli left-winged electors show to have a special admiration for the American democracy.

When it comes to the two public opinions' comments on the job of the opposite country's leader, things get even more complicated. The results show that people support the closest leader to their political values, not necessarily that who governs their own nation - and should thus represent their own interests -. Consequently, 67% of Republicans sympathize with Netanyahu in the clashes between him and Obama. Conversely, 93% of left-winged Israelis stand with the American President. For the same reason 53% of Republicans have a favorable opinion on Netanyahu, while 56% of left voters in the Jewish country have a good view of Obama. However, it is notable that both the leaders tend to be rather unpopular among the general public of the opposite country: only 38% of Americans have a clear positive vision of Netanyahu (and almost 1 on 3 does not know who he is). With regard to Obama, things worsen: only 33% of Israelis judge his work positively. Notably, however, 54% of American Jews have a positive opinion of their President, showing to have a contrasting perception in comparison to the majority of the Israelis.

In short, both leaders are supported abroad only by those who really share their political value, but are normally distrusted by the majority of the two publics.

In conclusion, the Israeli and American people generally seem to dislike the leader of the opposite country almost as much as their own governments. Despite this, both public opinions still perceive respectively the United States and Israel as an important ally and have a friendly feeling toward the country. The problems between their governments and the antipathy between Obama and Netanyahu do not seem to be a significant enough reason to abandon the two countries' "special relationship".

## Conclusion

This brief dissertation had the aim of analyzing how the relationship between Israel and the United States has changed during Obama's two administrations, from 2009 to the present. It focuses, in particular, on both sides of the dual relationship, and finally on both the Israeli and the American public opinions on the recent developments of the two governments' interaction.

The introduction reassumes the history of the relations between Israel and the United States, trying to explore the political, economic and strategic interests that the two countries have always had in common and that have led to the creation of a historical "special relationship". Their alliance survived even in periods in which the Israeli and American governments were pursuing completely different - and sometimes opposite - interests. These last years, as it emerges from the dissertation, can be definitely considered as one of these periods.

On the one hand the Democratic American President, Barack Obama, has tried, and is still trying, to apply his doctrine based on multilateralism and the accommodation of the potential rivals to the United States' relations with the Middle Eastern countries. As far as this delicate area is concerned, his administrations have constantly used a mix of hard and soft instruments of power - or "smart power" - and, in order to appear more even-handed toward the Arab countries, has progressively cooled its relationship with Israel. Despite this, Obama has also tried to enter a pact with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in exchange of a real freezing of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, but he has always refused to cooperate. Obama has never been vigorous enough, in part because of the strong opposition from the Congress to any attempt to obstruct the job of the Israeli government. In fact the American military aids to Israel have increased, not decreased, under Obama's administrations.

On the other hand, Benjamin Netanyahu is one of the first neoconservatives in Israel, and as such he has a completely different vision of how a democracy should behave with its enemies. In particular he believes in a unilateral approach, even at cost of pursuing harsh policies. His governments proved to have only an opportunistic interest toward a peace with the Palestinian Authority, and the current one is more concerned about the development of the Egyptian process of democratization and above all about the threat of a nuclear pact between Western countries and Iran. This last issue is probably the most important problem in the

Israeli-American relations. To obtain the United States' support, Netanyahu tends to use the so called "knight move", bypassing the President's authority and influencing his decisions with the help of the Republican Congress, which is historically close to Israel and to his government. The role of the AIPAC and the Jewish American lobbies in general are fundamental in this sense. Netanyahu is aware of the fact that his country needs the US' support more than ever, now that it is isolated even among many Western countries for its controversial policies. This is the reason why he is trying to be influential in American foreign policy decisions.

The public opinions of both the countries reveal that the "special relationship" between them is perceived as intact even if both the governments are judged negatively by the opposite public.

It appears obvious that this relationship is certainly enduring, despite the reciprocal antipathy of the current administrations. However, it is likewise evident that the two governments will never be adapt to cooperate. Faults and mistakes can be found in both sides. Obama has never proved to be a courageous leader, capable of imposing his solutions to the problems of the Middle East and to really understand the perspectives of his Israeli allies in their complexity (the new security threats and developments that radicalized the Israeli public opinion and government).

On the other hand, in the course of its career Netanyahu has showed to be more concerned with the maintenance of his fragile coalitions (often far-right coalitions supporting the settlements in the West Bank and harsh policies in the Middle East) than with the peace process with Israel's neighbors. His current coalition is not ready to make any compromise to achieve an agreement with the Palestinian Authority, at least not by the American conditions. The majority of the government considers Obama's administration too intrusive instead.

In synthesis, it is obvious that the two countries, and even the two governments, still have many urgent problems to solve together. Probably, as long as these two leaders will remain in power, they will agree on at least one solution: trying as long as possible to maintain the *status quo* with the Palestinian Authority. It is certain that if a solution will be found to reach a peace agreement between the two factions, it is not going to happen under their administrations.

In the meantime, Obama's second mandate is coming to an end in 2016. It is too early to make a prevision on how the new elections will influence the relations between Israel and the United States, as at the moment we only have the names of the candidates for the primaries. Among them, the most well-known are Jeb Bush (Republican), Joe Biden (Democrat) and Hillary Clinton (Democrat). But Obama's work in Israel may not be finished yet: far from the public's eyes, negotiations for an over long-term cease fire between Israel and the Gaza Strip are going on since December 2014. Little is known about these new developments that Israel would accept as "cheap" improvements for its position against Hamas (at least there is any problem of settlement freezing to compromise on in Gaza). The United States is not officially involved yet, but it may be in another, contrasting situation: in the last month, repeated attacks from the Strip have reached Israeli southern towns. Apparently these rockets are not sent by Hamas, but by several groups of Salafists, affiliated to ISIS, that aim at substituting Hamas' authority in Gaza. In the case of an Israeli intervention in a potential civil war in Gaza, it is likely that the United States will provide additional support.

As far as the deal with Iran is concerned, it is well known that the final agreement is to be signed on 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2015. According to the magazine *Haaretz*, however, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June Obama formally invited Netanyahu in the White House to discuss any ultimate change to the pact. Evidently, the American President has realized he needs to compromise with the Israeli Prime Minister if he wants to have a support for the agreement from the Congress. If the two leaders will meet before the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, it is possible that the terms of the pact will be compromised between them. This would obviously strengthen their relationship.

These developments, still unpredictable, and the election of a new American President will be the basis for a new chapter in the "special relationship" between Israel and the United States.

16-06-2015

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# Israele e le amministrazioni Obama

## Introduzione

Questa tesi descrive gli ultimi sviluppi delle relazioni tra Israele e Stati Uniti nel periodo tra il 2009 e il 2015, ovvero negli anni dei due governi di Barack Obama, del Partito Democratico. Lo stesso periodo coincide con gli ultimi tre governi (2009, 2013 e 2015) del Primo Ministro israeliano Benjamin Netanyahu, del partito conservatore Likud. La tesi si sofferma sulle posizioni e gli interessi di entrambi i governi, concentrandosi anche sull'analisi di alcuni sondaggi che rivelano il punto di vista delle opinioni pubbliche americana e israeliana. Nella breve conclusione, in fine, si comparano le scelte dei due governi e le motivazioni che li hanno portati a compierle, cercando anche di fare ipotesi sui futuri sviluppi di questa "relazione speciale".

L'analista politico Aaron David Miller ha spiegato in una conferenza che "il nostro modo di pensare dipende dalla posizione in cui ci troviamo, che si tratti di vita privata o di diplomazia". Questo spiega perché, pur avendo quasi sempre gli stessi interessi e gli stessi obiettivi geopolitici, Israele e Stati Uniti hanno una politica estera molto diversa, e spesso contrastante. Gli Stati Uniti, una potenza egemone con dei confini ben protetti, tende ad essere idealista nelle proprie scelte. Israele, al contrario, è un Paese sotto costante minaccia, dunque più propenso a ricorrere a politiche aggressive.

Israele e Stati Uniti hanno un lungo passato di interessi comuni, che li ha portati a formare una delle alleanze più solide e durevoli della storia delle relazioni internazionali. Washington, infatti, è la patria della più grande comunità ebraica del mondo, e soprattutto vede nello Stato ebraico l'unico alleato democratico del Medio Oriente, indispensabile per tenere sotto controllo i focolai terroristici da vicino e per avere un appoggio nel perseguimento dei propri interessi economici nella regione. Per Israele, gli Stati Uniti rappresentano non solo il principale alleato commerciale, ma anche il Paese che gli fornisce il maggior numero di finanziamenti militari e finanziari in assoluto, garantendogli anche un'importante protezione nel contesto

della comunità internazionale. I due Paesi possono considerarsi un buon esempio di interdipendenza.

Durante la guerra fredda, gli Stati Uniti consideravano Israele una “base occidentale” in una zona dominata prevalentemente dall’influenza Sovietica, e dove la nascita del movimento politico dei Fratelli Musulmani stava alimentando un forte sentimento anti-americano tra la popolazione locale. D’altra parte, un altro motivo per finanziare Tel Aviv e mantenerla forte era evitare, come temevano Johnson e Kennedy, che decidesse di sviluppare l’energia nucleare - cosa che Israele ha notoriamente fatto comunque -. Dopo la Guerra Fredda, Israele è rimasto vitale per gli interessi strategici statunitensi, tanto che il Presidente Clinton ha dedicato gran parte dei suoi mandati a cercare una soluzione per il conflitto arabo-israeliano. Com’è risaputo, nessun tentativo di Clinton è andato a buon fine, tantomeno dopo la prima elezione di Netanyahu nel 1996. Dopo i due mandati di George W. Bush, caratterizzati da un atteggiamento incongruente e opportunistico nei confronti di Tel Aviv, l’elezione del Presidente Barack Obama sembrava dover riportare la speranza per un maggiore coinvolgimento degli Stati Uniti nelle riprese dei trattati. Obama e Netanyahu, tuttavia, si sono rivelati incompatibili a livello personale e politico.

## Capitolo I

Eletto per la prima volta nel 2009, Obama ha subito cercato di distanziarsi dalla politica unilaterale del suo predecessore. Per questo, secondo il Professor Robert G. Kaufman dell’Università di Pepperdine, ha adottato una politica estera basata sul multilateralismo, rinunciando a “democratizzare il mondo” e al concetto di “eccezionalismo americano”, secondo cui gli Stati Uniti sarebbero autorizzati a intervenire nelle questioni interne degli altri Paesi. Obama ha cercato anche di avvicinarsi a regimi condannati dagli Stati Uniti, come quello iraniano, preferendo ricorrere al “*soft power*” ed evitando qualsiasi intervento militare che non fosse approvato dalla comunità internazionale. In particolare, per avvicinarsi al mondo arabo Obama ha deciso di distanziarsi momentaneamente da Israele.

Durante il suo primo mandato Obama ha tenuto due discorsi pubblici in Medio Oriente, uno a Il Cairo e uno a Istanbul, in entrambi i casi facendo riferimento alla necessità di creare due Stati, uno Israeliano e uno Palestinese, indipendenti e pacificati. Al contrario, il Presidente non ha visitato Israele fino al 2013, durante il suo secondo mandato, quando ormai il Primo Ministro turco Recep Tayyip Erdoğan si era rivelato un tiranno antidemocratico e l'Egitto di Hosni Mubarak non aveva resistito alla Primavera Araba. Proprio le rivolte popolari che hanno interessato i Paesi del Nord Africa tra il 2011 e il 2012 hanno costretto Obama a rivedere completamente le proprie priorità nella regione. Obama ha dichiarato di appoggiare una “genuina transizione verso la democrazia” solo quando Mubarak, probabilmente il leader più influente in assoluto tra quelli caduti durante le proteste, era già stato costretto a dimettersi. Secondo molti analisti, in quelle circostanze Obama non ha potuto far altro che appoggiare ogni vincitore, nel tentativo di mantenere le alleanze di questi Paesi, fondamentali per gli Stati Uniti. Il Presidente sperava di poter assistere agli sconvolgimenti di questa regione e di utilizzarli in seguito a proprio favore. Tuttavia, lo scoppio di due guerre civili in Siria e in Libia e l'elezione nel 2012 in Egitto di Mohamed Morsi, dei Fratelli Musulmani - un movimento Islamista e alleato di Hamas -, sono dimostrazioni del fallimento di questa strategia.

Coerentemente con la sua politica del riavvicinamento ai regimi rivali, nel 2013 Obama ha approfittato dell'elezione di Hassan Rouhani in Iran per cercare un patto con Teheran per trovare un compromesso sullo sviluppo dell'energia nucleare nel Paese.

L'Iran ha subito per anni sanzioni dal Consiglio di Sicurezza dell'ONU e un embargo economico dagli Stati Uniti e dall'Unione Europea per le proprie ambizioni nucleari. Il 2 Aprile 2015, tuttavia, Teheran e i cosiddetti P5 + 1 (Stati Uniti, Germania, Francia, Russia, Cina e Regno Unito) hanno firmato il “*Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*” (JCPOA) dopo due anni di negoziazioni. Il trattato sarà confermato il 30 giugno e prevede che l'Iran rinunci a parte del proprio programma nucleare in cambio della fine delle sanzioni. Tale accordo è considerato da molti un risultato storico, ma in Israele si teme che non ci si possa fidare di un Paese che non riconosce lo Stato Ebraico e il cui leader storico Mahmud Ahmadinejad ne voleva l'annientamento. L'Accordo di Ginevra dell'Aprile 2015, dunque, è considerato uno dei più grandi ostacoli nella relazione tra i governi Obama e Netanyahu.

Proprio i due governi hanno sempre coltivato non solo interessi divergenti, ma anche una certa antipatia reciproca. Obama ha sempre enfatizzato l'importanza della "relazione speciale" tra i due Paesi, ma anche il diritto dei Palestinesi ad avere uno Stato proprio. In particolare, si è sempre opposto alla costruzione di nuovi insediamenti Israeliani. Netanyahu, dal canto suo, ha continuato dal 2009 in poi a congelare e scongelare la costruzione di nuove colonie a seconda delle circostanze, e nel 2010 ha abilitato il progetto per dei nuovi insediamenti in un quartiere arabo di Gerusalemme proprio mentre il vice-presidente Joe Biden era in visita in Israele. Obama, d'altra parte, non è mai riuscito ad avere una vera influenza su Netanyahu in quanto il Primo Ministro Israeliano ha sempre avuto il Congresso americano dalla propria parte. Per questo, pur non approvando le sue politiche, Obama ha sempre continuato a finanziare gli armamenti Israeliani, arrivando perfino ad aumentarli firmando l'Atto delle Appropriazioni Consolidate nel 2014, che stanziava 235 milioni di dollari per il programma dell'Iron Dome.

## Capitolo II

Netanyahu è considerato uno dei più grandi esponenti della dottrina neo-conservatrice in Israele. Infatti, ha sempre perseguito ideali come il neo-liberalismo economico, il nazionalismo e i diritti civili. La sua idea di pace nel Medio Oriente si rifà a quella di Bush, e comprende la democratizzazione della regione, anche a costo di scelte politiche aggressive.

Per quanto riguarda il Medio Oriente, la minaccia che Netanyahu considera più urgente per il suo Paese è un Iran nucleare. Dal suo punto di vista, Teheran è una forza egemone della regione che finanzia gruppi terroristici come Hezbollah ed Hamas e che non esiterebbe a utilizzare armi nucleari contro Israele. Per questo il Primo Ministro ha definito l'accordo di Ginevra "un errore storico" e ha minacciato di condurre attacchi selettivi contro le centrali iraniane in caso di emergenza.

Al contrario, al momento Netanyahu non sembra sentire la necessità imminente di fare la pace con i Palestinesi. Dal 2009 in poi, infatti, si è trovato alla guida di un Paese sempre più radicalizzato e soprattutto di tre governi fragilissimi, la cui sopravvivenza dipendeva e dipen-

de dall'appoggio di partiti di estrema destra come Yisrael Beiteinu e Jewish Home, più interessati ad espandere gli insediamenti che a trovare un compromesso con l'Autorità Palestinese. L'unica cosa che Netanyahu ha continuato a fare nel corso dei suoi mandati è stata cercare di indebolire progressivamente Hamas con delle guerre rapide a Gaza, che hanno un costo molto alto per la popolazione civile.

Per quanto riguarda la Primavera Araba, Israele ha assistito a queste rivolte con un misto di speranza per una futura democratizzazione del Nord Africa e di paura per una possibile deriva autoritaria delle rivoluzioni. Soprattutto, il governo Netanyahu temeva per l'Egitto, con cui aveva segnato un trattato di pace nel 1979. Persino i Fratelli Musulmani, tuttavia, hanno accettato di mantenere gli accordi con Israele: Morsi di certo non amava lo Stato Ebraico, ma voltargli le spalle significava rinunciare a ogni finanziamento americano per l'Egitto. Il nuovo leader del Paese, Sisi, ha perfino ospitato gli ultimi colloqui tra Hamas e Israele nell'estate 2014.

Per quanto riguarda le sue relazioni con il governo Obama, d'altra parte, Netanyahu ha sempre utilizzato la cosiddetta "mossa del cavallo": ovvero, ha sempre sorpassato l'autorità del Presidente cercando di influenzare le sue decisioni attraverso l'intervento del Congresso Repubblicano, che storicamente appoggia Israele e soprattutto Likud, il suo partito. Oggi più che mai, Israele è isolato a livello internazionale anche in Occidente, soprattutto per le politiche controverse che ha condotto negli ultimi anni. Per questo, Netanyahu sa di avere davvero bisogno dell'appoggio degli Stati Uniti, e l'ha ottenuto attraverso il Congresso. Infatti questo mantiene uno stretto contatto con l'AIPAC, la più importante lobby Ebraica Americana, e molti dei suoi membri hanno anche la cittadinanza Israeliana. Inoltre, il Likud e il Partito Repubblicano sono da sempre alleati storici. Nel marzo 2015, nel pieno della sua ultima campagna elettorale, Netanyahu ha dunque tenuto un discorso al Congresso per convincere il governo degli Stati Uniti a introdurre delle condizioni in più nel trattato nucleare con l'Iran. Obama, dal canto suo, non ha nemmeno assistito al discorso, definendo "niente di nuovo" il tentativo di Netanyahu.

Il discorso di Netanyahu al Congresso, in ogni caso, definisce i termini esatti della relazione attuale tra Israele e Stati Uniti: se Tel Aviv ha un enorme potere di influenzare le decisioni

Americane passando per il Congresso, ciò non toglie che oggi più che mai ha bisogno dell'appoggio statunitense per sopravvivere, che Netanyahu lo dica apertamente o meno.

### Capitolo III

Mentre i governi di Israele e Stati Uniti si confrontano e si scontrano sui temi più importanti della geopolitica mediorientale, i dati sulle opinioni pubbliche dei due Paesi confermano che la loro “relazione speciale” è ancora considerata importante dai cittadini ordinari, ma che il sostegno al governo del Paese opposto è diminuito da ambo le parti. In particolare, in entrambi i Paesi il supporto per l'altro è diventato una questione di simpatie politiche. Per questo, se negli Stati Uniti il gruppo che ha un'opinione più positiva d'Israele sono i Repubblicani<sup>10</sup>, nello Stato Ebraico sono i partiti di sinistra a sostenere maggiormente Washington<sup>11</sup>. Infatti, se i Democratici americani sono più pronti a screditare Israele per le politiche controverse dei suoi ultimi governi, gli elettori israeliani di destra sono invece più portati a considerare gli Stati Uniti come un alleato utile, ma troppo intrusivo<sup>12</sup>.

Per gli stessi motivi, i Repubblicani americani tendono a sostenere Netanyahu più del loro stesso Presidente (che dovrebbe perseguire i loro interessi nazionali)<sup>13</sup>, e tendono a simpatizzare con lui più che con Obama nei loro scontri politici. Gli israeliani di sinistra, al contrario, tendono a incolpare il proprio Primo Ministro per le incomprensioni tra il proprio governo e quello statunitense<sup>14</sup>. In questo caso, condividere degli ideali politici sembra più importante che abitare nello stesso Paese.

Tuttavia, i dati sulle simpatie per Obama dimostrano che il posto dove si vive influenza davvero le proprie prospettive: ecco perché, se gli ebrei americani tendono a supportare il Presi-

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<sup>10</sup> Gallup 2010

<sup>11</sup> IDC 2015

<sup>12</sup> IDC 2015

<sup>13</sup> Bloombergpolitics 2015

<sup>14</sup> The Times of Israel 2015

dente più dell'elettore medio<sup>15</sup>, gli israeliani hanno in media un'opinione piuttosto bassa di Obama. Perfino a sinistra, tra gli elettori che più lo sostengono, c'è un'alta percentuale che non approva la sua politica estera.

Quello che si evince dai sondaggi sulle due opinioni pubbliche è che queste riflettono in buona parte la visione dei propri governi, ma anche che i due pubblici sono più pronti dei propri leader a superare le divergenze tra i Paesi in nome della loro “relazione speciale”.

## **Conclusione**

La tesi ha riportato quali siano le attuali problematiche delle relazioni tra Israele e Stati Uniti sotto i governi Obama e Netanyahu, concentrandosi sui temi su cui questi si sono scontrati di più: gli insediamenti Israeliani, la Primavera Araba e il Patto con l'Iran. In conclusione, anche analizzando l'opinione pubblica di entrambi i Paesi, si può affermare che l'alleanza tra i due Stati resterà salda nonostante i diversi interessi che caratterizzano i due governi attuali. Le future relazioni tra Israele e Stati Uniti saranno sicuramente influenzate, da un lato, dalle elezioni presidenziali americane del 2016, e dall'altro dagli sviluppi dei rapporti tra Israele e Hamas. Se infatti il governo israeliano e Hamas stanno discutendo per una potenziale tregua a lungo termine, al tempo stesso Gaza sta diventando il campo di battaglia tra questa organizzazione e alcuni gruppi Salafiti che si ispirano all'ISIS, e un intervento israeliano non è da escludere nei prossimi mesi.

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<sup>15</sup> Gallup 2015