

**Dissecting American Policy Toward Israel
What Happened in 2018?**

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Introduction

On May 14, 2018 President Donald Trump followed through with one of his controversial campaign promises. In doing so he changed the paradigm of U.S./Middle East relations. Coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the Israeli Declaration of Independence, the United States officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel by moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This marked a complete reversal in decades of U.S. policy. Previously, U.S. presidents have consistently viewed Jerusalem as an “International City,” refraining from changing the status quo by moving the embassy there. In the past, experts on the conflict assessed that this move would prevent the United States from being an impartial mediator in future negotiations. The stance of prior administrations had made it clear that the issue between the Israelis and Palestinians was bipartisan.

So, what was the United States’ motivation for this radical change? What caused this policy shift by the Trump administration? How will this affect future U.S./Israel and U.S./Middle East relations? To answer these questions, we will begin by analyzing the history of relations between the United States and Israel to further understand what led to this situation. Then President Trump’s personal ties with Israel will be studied. Lastly, with a better understanding of the motivations behind President Trump’s decision, a forecast can be created for the chances of future stability between the Israelis and Palestinians. A majority of the research utilized comes from government documents, peer reviewed journals, books, and contemporary news sources. Qualitative data was the primary focus of this research, with some quantitative data used to contextualize figures such as foreign aid, voter polls, and land usage.

Historical Context

While the concept of Israel as a nation and the struggle of the Jewish people date back millennia, the contemporary history of Israel begins with the Jewish Zionist movement led by Theodor Herzl in the 19th century. In 1896 Herzl published his vision for a Jewish homeland in his book *The Jewish State*. Paralleling similar nationalistic sentiments of the same era, Jews worldwide became attached to Herzl's idea. They cried out for the formation of their own nation state in their ancestral homeland of Palestine, located between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Palestine is the biblical home of the Jews, and was seen as a safe haven from the growing European anti-Semitism. By the first World War, Zionism had gained mainstream support, leading to the creation of the Balfour Declaration which placed Palestine under a British Mandate (Zanotti, 2018). While the declaration explicitly stated “nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, para. 2), the Arabs were not pleased with the European imposition on their perceived territory. With no clear consensus on who was entitled to the region, the mandate only served to create conflict between the incoming Jews and the Arabs occupying the region.

These tensions only multiplied after World War II. Holocaust survivors had worldwide support on their side, lending greater credibility to their claim for a legitimate ethno-nationalist state in the area. However, Arabs in the same region demanded independence and sovereignty from the European colonial powers that had ruled over them until World War II. This dispute between the Israelis and the Arabs over religious differences and land discrepancies set the stage for the protracted conflict that endures to this day (Zanotti, 2018).

One of the first steps towards creating peace was taken by the United Nations (UN). Resolution 181, created in 1947, devised a partition plan that formed the basis for a two state solution. This plan intended to split the Jewish and Arab people into two separate states, with the UN having “trusteeship” over Jerusalem and some of the most contentious areas. The plan was welcomed by the Jews, who saw this as a means to finally have a legitimate claim to what they considered as their homeland. However, the plan was reviled by the Arabs who believed their population majority should allow them to have greater control (Office of the Historian, n.d.). The Arabs attempted to take matters in their own hands on May 14th, 1948, when the forces of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt immediately invaded, but were defeated by the Israelis. The Israeli counterattack came as a surprise to the Arabs, and the Israelis used this advantage to expand their geographic territory, occupying regions that were previously under Palestinian control. The Israelis claimed around 60% of the territory that Resolution 181 had set aside for a Palestinian state. This conflict became known as the Israeli War for Independence, a national event all Israelis could rally around (Office of the Historian, n.d.).

While the Israeli War of Independence was a great victory for the Jews, the acquisition of Palestinian land only served to further divide the Arabs and the Israelis as many Arabs were forced to flee from their homes, and no land remained for a contiguous Palestinian state. Conflicts persisted between the two groups, with wars breaking out in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982. Israel has consistently been able to defend itself. However its strength clearly doesn't come from its size, but rather its soft power skills like diplomacy.

Israel's Diplomatic Ties

There have been several peace negotiations between Israel and the greater Arab communities, mostly organized by the United States. One of the most notable agreements was

the Camp David Accords, which were brokered by U.S. President Jimmy Carter between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The peace process focused mainly on Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories like the West Bank and Gaza, but the newly elected conservative Israeli government was unwilling to cede any land. To expedite the process President Carter brought both Begin and Sadat to his presidential retreat at Camp David for individual face-to-face negotiations. Carter devoted an extreme amount of time to the talks, serving as an intermediary between both states, marking the beginning of the sustained effort by the United States to address this specific policy issue. While the talks officially concluded in March 1979, they did not result in any substantial agreement, but rather a framework for peace negotiations in the future. Middle East tensions continued to rise after the talks, but eventually President Bill Clinton was able to resume with the progress that Carter had made (Office of the Historian, n.d.).

The Clinton administration invested a significant amount of time and resources into creating the Oslo Accords. While lesser negotiations had taken place prior to the Oslo Accords, this agreement was significantly more binding than the agreements that came between Camp David and Oslo. These Accords were signed on the White House lawn in 1993, under the purview of President Bill Clinton. Formally known as the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (DOP), the DOP allowed Palestinian self-rule across the West Bank for up to five years, to provide time for a future, permanent peace settlement. Furthermore, it specifically codified the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the representative body of the Palestinians. As a Palestinian concession, the PLO “renounced terrorism and recognized Israel’s right to exist in peace” (Office of the Historian, n.d. para. 1). This agreement looked promising, yet failed to yield any serious results, partially due to its ineffective implementation

and political assassinations. While there have been more recent talks following these two examples, both the Oslo Accords and Camp David Accords represented major steps in U.S. involvement in the Israeli peace process. Despite both of these initiatives stemming from democratic Presidents, the republican administrations of Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush all had similar plans for peace in the region (Office of the Historian, n.d.). The pursuit of peace through a two state solution has historically been a bipartisan issue. While the U.S. has been closely linked to Israel for diplomatic missions, Israel doesn't solely rely on the United States for diplomatic talks. Much of Israel's military power comes from American financial and technological support as well.

Military Connections between the United States and Israel

Since Israel gained its independence, the United States has given the country over \$230 billion in aid. Most of this aid was given with the intention of bolstering Israel's "qualitative military edge" over its neighbors. Due to Israel's lack of manpower and geographic size, they must compensate with a technological advantage to defend against attacks. As a means to heighten the defense capabilities of both the United States and Israel, both states entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on November 30, 1981. The MOU created a strategy for military cooperation, leading to a Joint Political Military Group in 1983 and joint air and sea military exercises the following year. The MOU culminated in the construction of U.S. military facilities in Israel in 1984. Following the success of this 1981 MOU, another was signed in 1986 with the intention of co-creating a missile defense system. The next year the Reagan administration took a major step to integrate the military alliance between the two states, deeming Israel a "major non-NATO ally" in 1987. Nine years later they were granted

preferential treatment in regards to U.S. defense contracts, meaning they would have a greater access to U.S. military weapons systems for a lower price (Zanotti, 2018).

Israel boasts an impressive traditional military force of approximately 180,000 active duty soldiers with an additional 445,000 soldiers in reserve. These numbers are mainly boosted by a mandatory conscription policy for most men and women. Israel spends approximately \$16.4 billion on its annual defense budget, leading to an impressive homeland security system. Perhaps Israel's best defensive deterrent is their nuclear capacity. Israel is not a declared nuclear power, and is not a signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. As such, several intelligence reports have estimated Israel's nuclear supply to be upwards of 80 warheads. Most notably is the United States' acceptance of Israel's "nuclear opacity" (Zanotti, 2018). While Israel's nuclear arsenal is not confirmed, neither is the 1969 agreement between U.S. President Richard Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir to never publicly acknowledge Israel's nuclear capacity (Zanotti, 2018).

The aforementioned connections point to the deeply rooted relationship between the United States and Israel. America provides Israel with support both militarily and financially. Americans are found to be overwhelmingly supportive of Israelis when compared to Arabs. In response to this, Israel is a staunch ally of the United States on the international stage. Israel has voted the same as the United States in 92.6% percent of UN decisions (Thomas, 2017). Historically, the United States has refused to recognize Jerusalem as the sole capital of Israel, an issue Israel has been pursuing since its creation.

Donald Trump's Ties to Israel

Some of President Donald Trump's most telling campaign comments regarding his personal ties with, and favor of, Israel came during his speech to the American Israel Public

Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March 2016. In this campaign speech, Trump asserted that Israel was America's most strategic ally in the Middle East due to their status as the only democracy in the region. Trump ended this notable speech stating, "I love Israel. I've been with Israel so long in terms of I've received some of my greatest honors from Israel, my father before me, incredible" (Begley, 2016, para. 51). Trump's most prestigious Israeli award was given to him in March 1983. The Tree of Life Award "honors individuals and families for their dedication to promoting U.S.-Israel ties and outstanding community work" (Maltz, Inside Donald Trump's History of Donations in Israel, 2017, para. 8). He was awarded this honor for financing the resettlement of Israelis in the Sinai, who were forced to relocate under the terms of a peace agreement that arose in that period. The money he gave provided for the creation of infrastructure needed to facilitate the movement of these resettled Israelis. In 2005, Trump was asked to give money again to help resettle Jews. While he did provide a donation, he received no recognition of note for his financial support. While these weren't Donald Trump's only donations to Israel, they are some of the most consequential (JNI Media, 2016). Other notable honors include serving as the grand marshal at New York's Salute to Israel Parade, decorating Jewish Federation tzedakah boxes to support victims of Hurricane Katrina, and receiving the Liberty Award at *The Algemeiner's* (a New York based newspaper focusing on international Jewish and Israeli topics) 'Jewish 100' Gala (Ghermezian, 2015). In addition, Trump has a plaque bearing his name located in the Eshkol region of Israel acknowledging the funds he gave to build greenhouses and roads.

However, the history of Trump's donations date back to before Donald was born. His father, Frederick (Fred) Trump, was ardently philanthropic to Jews as well. Fred Trump donated land in New York for the construction of the Talmud Torah of the Beach Haven Jewish Center

around 1960 (JNI Media, 2016). Fred gave financial support of Israeli bonds, which are used as debt securities for the U.S. Treasury and issued by the Israeli government. Furthermore, most of the real estate that Fred Trump created and sold was to Jewish customers (Haaretz, 2016). One of the most important customers with which Fred had a relationship was Rabbi Yisrael Wagner. They shared a mutual admiration for one another and their religious practices (Fred was a devout Lutheran). Donald Trump worked closely with Rabbi Wagner in his youth, connecting with the Jewish people at a young age (Kaufman, 2017).

As Donald Trump grew older his close circle of those with whom he worked or socialized, continued to grow to be comprised of Jews or Jewish supporters. One relationship, in particular, which may have led to some of Donald Trump's pro-Israel stances is his association with the Kushner family, who are also staunch supporters of Israel. Working with the Kushners in the New York real estate business, the Trump and Kushner families grew close. What solidified the relationship between the two was the marriage of Donald's daughter Ivanka to Jared Kushner. Ivanka converted to Judaism in 2009, when she married Jared (Green, 2016). Jared's father, Charles, donated millions of dollars from their real estate fortune to a myriad of Jewish and Israeli causes, such as hospitals, schools, and settlements. Jared's grandparents both survived the Holocaust, making the need for a secure Jewish homeland of personal importance to the Kushners. President Trump has long deferred to his son-in-law Jared on Middle Eastern affairs. Jared helped write the AIPAC speech, and was essential in arranging meetings between Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu (Kantor, 2017). Jared has had extensive financial dealings with Israelis. Reports suggest that the Kushner real estate business operates a line of credit worth up to \$25 million with Israeli banks. The company also receives investments from Israeli businessmen upwards of tens of millions of dollars. Kushner has bought and refinanced

Israeli properties in New York City for hundreds of millions of dollars (Kranish, 2018). Finally, Jared and the Kushner family have been reliable donors to the Friends of the Israeli Defense Force (FIDF) organization. From 2011 to 2013 the Kushner family donated approximately \$315,000 to the organization, and Jared serving on the national board until he joined the Trump administration (Maltz, Jared Kushner's Business Interests in Israel Revealed in Full, 2018). The connection between the Trump family and the Kushner family, and the Kushner family and Israel, may form some of the tightest bonds that influence President Trump's policy towards Israel.

During the presidential campaign, Donald Trump surrounded himself with pro-Israel individuals-such as former attorney Michael Cohen (whose father survived the Polish Holocaust) and former chief strategist Steve Bannon (who has been noted as a "friend of Israel" by Israeli journalists) (Harkov, 2016). Historically, President Trump's family has had good relations with Jewish individuals, and the Trump family has been rewarded both financially and with recognition awards as a result of these relations. Based on the research into President Trump's familial connections to Israel, it is apparent that President Trump supports Israel, at least in part, due to the fact that he has had positive relations with them in the past.

Predictions for the Future of Arab/Israeli Peace

Much of the world's reaction to the change of the U.S. embassy location to Jerusalem was not positive. The President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas claimed that the move prevented Washington from being impartial in any future negotiations, calling it a "slap in the face" (Farrell, 2018, para. 5). Other world leaders also berated the decision. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javed Zariff referred to the embassy opening as "a day of great shame (Al Jazeera, 2018, para. 16)." The Prime Minister of Lebanon forecasted the decision as "igniting the

anger of millions of Arabs, Muslims, and Christians (Al Jazeera, 2018, para. 25).” Muslim majority nation Pakistan stood in opposition to the United States, with their foreign minister pointing to United Nations Security Council Resolutions 476 and 478 as making the decision illegal. While some major European countries, such as Ireland and the Netherlands, individually opposed the decision. The European Union could not comment officially on the situation because the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania blocked a joint statement (Al Jazeera, 2018). However, the major supranational entity, the United Nations, voted to condemn the United States’ decision with a non-binding General Assembly vote. 128 countries were in favor of insisting the United States reverse its decision, nine were against, there were 35 abstentions, and 21 were not present to vote. As a symbol of disagreement, only 33 of the 86 countries with diplomatic ties to Israel attended the opening of the new embassy building in Jerusalem (Farrell, 2018).

Despite this negative reaction, a few states were in favor of this decision. Following the lead of the United States, Guatemala and Paraguay are also moving their embassy as well. The Czech Republic, Romania, and Honduras are considering taking the same actions. Most scholars agree that these states are falling in line with the United States to stay in its good graces in order to continue to receive foreign aid (Turner, 2018). Within the United Nations vote, several small island nations voted in favor of the United States, such as the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, and Togo. Unsurprisingly, other “no” votes were Guatemala, the United States, and Israel. The United States’ Ambassador to the United Nations (at the time), Nikki Haley, fought back against the vote proclaiming that “the United States will remember this day in which it was singled out for attack in the General Assembly for the very act of exercising our right as a

sovereign nation” (Dwyer, 2017, para. 4). While it is correct that this move was within the sovereign authority of the United States, was it in its best interest?

Legally, the United States has been required to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel since 1995 when the United States’ Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act. There was a deadline by which the embassy must be moved, but the legislature allows the sitting President to delay the move every six months if the suspension is “necessary to protect the national security interests of the United States” (Waxman, 2017, para. 2). Every president has exercised this clause to avoid inflaming regional tensions and skewing the U.S. position to broker a peace deal. With President Trump declining to maintain the status quo of his previous counterparts, this represents a whole new set of challenges for American relations with Israel and Palestine.

One of the biggest challenges that the peace process now faces is bringing the Palestinian Authority back to the negotiating table. The representative body of the Palestinians has been boycotting American diplomats since the announcement of the changed policy. Their actions have complicated the peace process, especially since the new embassy building will serve both Israelis and Palestinians. The refusal to meet face to face with the Americans (and by extension the Israelis) marks this as a low point in the diplomatic process. The former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern affairs, Tamara Wittes, cited the boycott as a “loss of a diplomatic channels both physically and verbally (Epatko, 2018, para. 12).” Some scholars were even more pessimistic than Wittes regarding the peace process. Former Ambassador to Israel and Special Envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations Martin Indyk lambasted the decision, arguing that “five years from now, we’ll look back and see that this decision represented the last nail of the many nails that have been put in the coffin of the peace process (Epatko, 2018, para.

15).” Many individuals with intimate knowledge of the peace process cite Jerusalem as the core issue of the conflict. With both sides feeling entitled to the city as their capital, neither is willing to cede this point for the sake of peace. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that any future presidents can, or will reverse this decision. For any future president to reverse the decision that established the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, would make U.S. foreign relations appear unstable. Despite President Trump’s break from previous presidential policy, many scholars agree that presidents must maintain the status quo if the state is to be respected internationally (Epatko, 2018). However, no matter what future presidents decide to do regarding the embassy, peace in the region still seems unlikely following the move.

The situation on the ground has not improved since the decision. On the day of the unveiling of the new embassy, 60 Palestinian protesters were killed by Israeli forces. Protests and violent conflicts have been occurring consistently regarding the decision since March 2018. Regardless, in an official White House statement President Trump proclaimed, “This decision is not intended, in any way, to reflect a departure from our strong commitment to facilitate a lasting peace agreement... We are not taking a position of any final status issues, including the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, or the resolution of contested borders... The United States remains deeply committed to helping facilitate a peace agreement that is acceptable to both sides... The United States would support a two-state solution if agreed to by both sides” (White House, 2017, para. 15-16). Time has yet to tell if a two-state solution is still viable.

Conclusion

As previously discussed, the United States has a long history of involvement in the development of the modern Israeli state. America has long been providing Israel with financial

aid, military technology, and diplomatic support. Yet despite these efforts, there has still not been any conclusive peace for the beleaguered state. Still, the bonds between the United States and Israel remain as strong as ever. There is a deep commitment and precedent for finding a lasting solution to the regional problem. Many Israelis believe that enduring peace can be created by current U.S. President Donald Trump. He has taken the most dramatic steps yet regarding this international issue. Breaking with the established status quo, President Trump moved the Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a city that is claimed by both Israelis and Palestinians. As demonstrated by the number of riots and deaths in the region since this U.S. decision was announced, it appears that moving the embassy to Jerusalem is unlikely to improve long-term stability in the region. Unfortunately, this is the reality of the current situation in Israel, and the United States may have to take dramatic diplomatic steps if still committed to a two state solution for this enduring conflict.

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