Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Steven Simon

American Jews in the crossfire

Jewish history includes three episodes of flourishing in exile: the Babylonian diaspora's great academies; the centuries-long experiment in Moorish and then Christian Spain; and the American Jewish experience, particularly after World War II.

But the American experience has come under intensifying threat, and the causes are not mysterious.

Political polarization, the collapse of institutional gatekeepers, and social media's amplification of fringe voices were always going to put pressure on American Jews.

But the effects of these forces have been compounded by one contingent factor: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mismanagement of Israel's relationship with the United States during his decades of dominance over Israeli politics.

Two consequential innovations have marked this period. First, from coordinating a 2015 speech to Congress with Republican leaders—over President Barack Obama's objections—to endorsing President Donald Trump in the 2024 election, Netanyahu has transformed the US-Israeli relationship from a bipartisan strategic alliance into a factional arrangement with the GOP.

Israeli officials would say that this was a defensive maneuver because the Democrats were drifting away from Israel.

But this claim conflates criticism of Israeli policies, unavoidable in a healthy democracy, with hostility to Israel's existence.

Second, Netanyahu has made the safety of American Jews a secondary consideration in Israel's security calculations, tradeable against domestic political advantages.

Again, Israeli officials have a ready response to this charge: a strong Jewish state is in the interest of Jews everywhere, and therefore must be the top priority. But this is a logical trap, which requires that American Jews bear the consequences of Israeli decisions, in which they have no vote.

Antisemitic hate crimes

The consequences are quantifiable. FBI data show that antisemitic hate crimes in the US reached their highest recorded levels in 2023, with 1,832 incidents—a 63% increase over 2022—and rose again in 2024, to 1,938 incidents.

The Anti-Defamation League, which includes non-criminal harassment and vandalism in its statistics, documented 8,873 antisemitic incidents in 2023 and a record-breaking 9,354 in 2024, with physical assaults rising by 21%.

In a February 2025 survey, 77% of American Jews reported feeling less safe than before the October 7 Hamas attack, and 56% said fear had caused them to alter their daily behavior.

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In 2024, major Jewish-voter surveys and post-election polling found then-Vice President Kamala Harris, Trump's opponent, winning Jewish voters by roughly 45 points.

In a shift from past elections, however, Orthodox communities—about 9% of American Jews—broke heavily for Trump.

It does not help that, since the Gaza war began, the Democratic Party's progressive base has increasingly turned on Israel, though as a recent poll showed, American Jews still trust Democrats far more than Republicans to fight antisemitism (by a 28-point margin).

Netanyahu's Iran gambit

Netanyahu's Iran gambit has made matters far worse. He visited the White House six times in the past year, more than any foreign leader in American diplomatic history.

After the US joined Israel in striking Iran, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, apparently accidentally, told reporters that the Trump administration "knew there was going to be an Israeli action," which would "precipitate an attack against American forces," unless the US preempted it by joining the initial assault.

Add to that Netanyahu's comment that he had "yearned" to attack Iran for "40 years," and it was hard to avoid the impression that Netanyahu maneuvered Trump into a Middle Eastern war.

This is fodder for accusations of dual loyalty and conspiracy theories about Jews secretly controlling global affairs. But American Jews did not ask for this exposure.

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Those who supported Netanyahu's policies did not devise them, nor did they consent to fueling antisemitic tropes.

And the majority who oppose his policies are also implicated by Israel's claim to represent all Jews.

Netanyahu's lack of regard for American Jews' safety is, from his perspective, perfectly rational.

He needs American political cover, and the best way to get it is by borrowing it from American Jews—to whom he technically has no political obligation—while cultivating evangelical Christian Zionists, MAGA politicians, and other figures on the pro-Israel right.

What should American Jews do?

What should American Jews do? A full break with Israel is neither realistic nor, for many, desirable.

The historical and emotional connections are genuine and deep, and the Jewish state's security remains a legitimate concern. But reflexive solidarity with the Israeli government's policies amounts to a subsidy without accountability.

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Judaism's intellectual traditions, which prize argument, dissent, and ethical accountability, offer exactly this.

For decades, communal pressure toward unity—which served a legitimate purpose when Israel's existence was in doubt—muted these traditions.

Now that communal pressure serves only Netanyahu's interests, reviving them has become essential.

To be sure, there is no guarantee that a different Israeli government would behave very differently.

A country formed under genuine existential threat, surrounded by enemies who denied its

right to exist, was bound to develop a militant political culture that treats diaspora Jews as a resource, not a partner. Netanyahu exploited and exacerbated this tendency, but he did not create it.

What he did devise, or at least perfect, is the combination of US partisan politics and Middle Eastern adventurism that has placed American Jews in the crossfire.

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