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## Religion In Israeli-American Relations and Its Geopolitical Impacts

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### Abstract

The United States was the first country to recognize Israel as a state in 1948, and the first to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. These positions demonstrate the unbreakable bond between the two countries. This long-standing alliance can be seen in their historical background where religion is highly valued. Americans and Israelis are united by their shared values and their commitment to the widespread of democracy, prosperity, and mutual security. Religion in Israel's support has also been a long-standing cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. While religiosity and partisanship do play a part in how Americans view each side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this unfair posture has increased strained relations between Israel and its neighbors in the one hand, and in the other, the United States and the Arab world.

**Keywords:** history; impact; Israel; geopolitics; relation; religion; United States; stake

### 1. Introduction

Since the founding of the state of Israel in May 1948, Israeli-American relations have continued to strengthen. The compassionate recognition of the early years, which initially followed domestic political motivations, was quickly followed by a strategic partnership, then a military alliance imposed by the evolving geopolitical and regional situation. The crises and tensions that have punctuated these relations have never really altered this solidity.

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Today, more than ever, the two allies need each other in the emerging geopolitical configuration in the Middle East. This religious dimension is undoubtedly one of the useful keys to understanding the relationship that unites these two countries. Their own religious convictions and their assessment demonstrate how important religious beliefs are to both American and Israeli people. The strategic aspects are not sufficient to understand the relational power between the two countries. Several aspects related to morality and the spirituality must also be taken into account. The prophesied return of The Chosen People to the Holy Land is present in their collective unconsciousness. So many similar symbols leading to a common providential history and destiny can be detected between the state of Israel and the United States of America. As a state with special religious significance for many Americans, Israel provides a point of view into how religion functions in U.S. foreign policy. The way religion interferes in Israeli-American relations may change over time, but religion has acted as an independent variable in political and policy outcomes. Domestic politics, U.S. grand strategy, and the personal views of policymakers have each reflected this convergence and have been shaped by the permeable borders between religion and foreign policy. The nature of these relations is to a certain extent the result of the strained relationships between Israel and its neighbors in the one hand and the United States and the Arab world in the other. This article intends to analyze the role of religion in this strategic partnership and its implications. The first part of this work is devoted to the providential history and destiny shared by the two nations in referring to their country as a Promised Land and their citizens as Chosen People. The second part focuses on the geopolitical stakes involving in one part Israel's survival in a hostile environment, and in the other, the United States' desire to reshape the Middle East for its interest and that of its Israeli ally. This strategy constitutes the bedrock of this rise of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism around the world.

### ***1.1. Two nations with the same destiny and providential history***

Since today, the United States and Israel are the closest of friends and allies. The continued strength of the U.S.-Israel alliance is rooted in the shared values of the two nations. The mutual admiration between Israel and the United States is not a recent phenomenon. The profound influence of Jewish tradition on America's Founding Fathers can be seen in the constitution of the United States. Such influence should come as no surprise given John Adams' view expressed in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: I will insist that the Hebrew have done more to civilize man than any other nation. Woodrow Wilson himself stressed on that influence saying that the ancient Jewish nation provided a model for the American colonists. All along the process of state-building, Israelis too have looked to the United States for political inspiration, financial and military assistance and diplomatic support. Americans, in turn, have viewed Israel with a special appreciation for its successful effort to follow the Western democratic tradition, its remarkable economic development, and its determined struggle against its uncompromising enemies. The historical background of such partnership lies upon mutual commitment and shared religious convictions that they hold their positions by a providential decree.

### ***1.2. The concept of promised land for chosen people***

The concept of Promised Land is defined in the Bible as the land of Canaan that was promised to Abraham and his descendants. [1] This land is a place or situation in which someone expects to find great joy and happiness. Such a place was given to Jews by their god Yahve but the Pilgrim Fathers who are the first settlers of the United

States of America consider that prophecy to be the fulfillment of the New Found Land. This point of view was developed by Thomas Morton when he said: "This country [...] lies within the limits of the golden mean; it is very suitable for habitation and reproduction, since Almighty God, the Great Creator, has placed it in the area called temperate. It is therefore the most suitable for the dwelling and reproduction of our English nation. [...] The softness of the air, the fertility of the soil, the small number of savages, the conveniences of the sea [...] show that this country is in no way inferior to the Canaan of Israel and that we can, on the contrary, compare it to it in all points." [2] For Edward Johnson, Massachusetts is the place "where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth." [3] So, there was no doubt that the Puritans were swimming in biblical memories in settling in America. They establish the parallel between this New World, and the Promised Land of Israel. The notion of Promised Land is a concept shared by both sides with the firm conviction that God himself presides over the destiny of these two nations. The early Americans, imbued with a biblical sensibility, saw their country as the "Promised Land" and considered settling in a New Canaan. Just look at the toponymy of the United States to discover a myriad of cities named after Old Testament sites, such as Hebron, Bethlehem, Bethesda and Salem or even biblical figures: Maryland as the land of the Virgin Mary. The Mayflower and the Exodus from Egypt are also two common episodes with the same providential meaning. The first European emigrants hasten to put on the new land the mantle of utopia where God is at the base of everything. John Winthrop makes the future City a model for humanity when he said: "We must always think that we will be a City upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we should fail, before our God, in the mission which we have undertaken, and if he thus withdraws his support from us, we will become the reproach of the whole world. We will allow our enemies to denounce the ways of God." [4] These people were thinking that they were chosen and guided by providence to this new Land. They found themselves equal to Jews with whom they share the same story. The arrival of the Founding Fathers in the Mayflower is equated with the exit from Egypt of the Jewish people. The end of the Peregrination which means the wandering of the people of God in the desert is marked among the Puritans by the birth of Peregrine White, the first child born in the Promised Land of America. The crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews thus becomes the crossing of the Atlantic by the Pilgrim Fathers. King James I of England who persecuted the Puritans becomes the incarnation of the Pharaoh of Egypt who subjected the Jews to slavery while also depriving them of religious freedom. America therefore becomes the Promised Land, that is, the territory of Canaan that God has given to the Jews. The Israelites fought the Canaanites to extend their hegemony over the land granted to them by providence. Likewise, the American colonists in their far west massacred the Indians under the guise of "Manifest Destiny" to settle and occupy the Land they consider a gift by the almighty. To justify the legitimacy of the Puritans over others, John Winthrop said: "If God wasn't happy to see us occupy these lands, watch, why would He drive out the natives?" And why does he make room for us, reducing their numbers as ours grows?" [5] This psychology often leads to consider the Palestinians as some kind of Indians. This position dictated by a biblical belief rules out any compromise and strengthens the feeling of Israel's legitimacy to defend itself by all the means. This idea of a Promised Land offered to Chosen People is a shared conception of Americans and Israeli people about themselves. Their mutual commitment and support rest upon moral values and religious principles creating a born of contention with other nations.

### ***1.3. Mutual commitment and reference to religious principles***

The privileged relations between the United States and Israel can be situated long ago but what are the points of

convergence that unite these two countries? Apart from the history of peregrination recalled by the Pilgrim Fathers on their way to America, so many memories related to shared beliefs and to mutual support can be cited. For this purpose, there is in the United States itself the so-called American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). AIPAC is a pro-Israel American lobby whose goal is to ensure that the strategic alliance which has linked the Hebrew state to the United States since 1948 is maintained. This organization is fighting to make other Americans who share their passion for the Israeli-American relationship join the committee to ensure that their voices are heard in the Congress. As we can see throughout history, Americans are also highly religious people. The Jewish people also share this trait with the United States. The sense of gratefulness is another important aspect of this relationship between the United States and Israel. As an example, Jews contributed directly to the American Revolution and President Calvin Coolidge paid tribute to their role in the War of Independence saying «The Jewish faith is predominantly the faith of liberty». [6] As for Richard Nixon, he asserted that the United States stands by its friends and that “Israel is one of its friends.” His successor, Gerald Ford, reaffirmed his “commitment to the security and future of Israel is based upon basic morality as well as enlightened self-interest. Our role in supporting Israel honors our own heritage.” [6] This statement of Gerald Ford recalls the basis of Israeli-American alliance resting upon common heritage. A heritage which involves common faith in God and the same vision on how to deal with international affairs related to their dearest values. Another President Jimmy Carter who was known as one of Israel’s best friend has also said that “The United States has a warm and a unique relationship of friendship with Israel that is morally right. It is compatible with our deepest religious convictions, and it is right in terms of America’s own strategic interests. We are committed to Israel’s security, prosperity, and future as a land that has so much to offer the world.” [6] This statement shows to what extent the United States is committed to defend and protect his friend. The United States spare no effort for the security of Israel which is surrounded by countries calling for its destruction. Israel is then supported militarily and financially by the United States as any country has ever been helped by the United States in the World. President George H.W. Bush who was considered the most devoted president towards Israel declared shortly after taking office that: “The friendship, the alliance between the United States and Israel is strong and solid, built upon a foundation of shared democratic values, of shared history and heritage, which sustains the life of our two countries. The emotional bond of our people transcends politics. Our strategic cooperation and I renew today our determination that go forward is a source of mutual security. And the United States’ commitment to the security of Israel remains unshakeable. We may differ over some policies from time to time, individual policies, but never over the principle.” [6] This declaration of President George W. Bush is an additional proof showing that the relationship is far more than being only based on politics. Aspects related to religious principles among others make the two allies stand side by side to defend each other. Public opinion in the United States holds it from the Bible that there is no doubt about the legitimacy of Israel to take control over the land granted by God. When Ed Mcateer of the Christian Coalition says, “I don’t hate Arabs, I have Arab friends that I love but I believe in the Bible. God gave this land to Abraham and the Jews. I always use the same phrase. Every grain of sand in this little piece of land called Israel belongs to the Jewish people.” [7] The Support for Israel is far from confined to the Jewish community. Much of the Christian evangelical right and mainstream public opinion also sympathizes with the Hebrew State. The Washington Post reporter Arnaud Borchgrave has said: "There are more American Christian evangelists who support Israel than American Jews". They actually share biblical values and solidarity of two states that see themselves as pioneers. It must simply be said that the collective

American unconsciousness instinctively tilts in favor of Israel. In addition, the story of the construction of Israel challenges Americans to their common identity, which is the story of rooted people from several distinct countries in a new territory." [7] Since 1980, United States-Israel relations have become increasingly entangled in broader religious currents both nationally and internationally. The role of Christians and Jews expanding to include major lobbying support by American Jews, millions of evangelical Christian Zionists helping to create an organized pro-Israel lobby. This has increased Orthodox Jewish to lead settlement activities in the occupied territories and its corollary of Islamist radicalization that regards Israel and the United States as the two chief agents of Jewish and Christian domination of the Islamic world. The confluences of these religious forces have reinforced a Judeo-Christian affinity but increased anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism around the world.

#### ***1.4. The geopolitical stakes of the religious dimension***

The Israeli-American cooperation has taken on inescapably religious symbols, as some of the major threats to stability in the Middle East. Since the Iranian Revolution has come from Islamist or secular leaders such as Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and Iraq's Saddam Hussein who have invoked Islam to justify their opposition to U.S. policy mainly because of it way of handling the Palestinian issue. Islamist organizations that have worked against U.S. interests include the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. Each of these organizations has also featured religiously motivated anti-Israel platforms, further defining a basic religious cleavage. The American support for Israel has become then the result of anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism in most of Arab countries.

#### ***1.5. Religion in the Israeli-Palestinian issue impasse***

If we had to reduce the explanation of the relationship between the United States and Israel to one statement that of Michael Ledeen would probably be the best to express it. He said: "The only way to accept American policy in the Middle East is to understand that Israel is an integral part of the American body politic. I would say that if we wanted to explain our policy in the Middle East to the Arabs, they just had to come to terms with the idea that Israel is the 51st state of the "United States. In fact, we treat Israel better than most American states." [8] These few sentences already give us a glimpse into the nature of relations between the United States and Israel. It is generally agreed that in the United States and in Israel, religion is primarily a positive force, but the importance given to the religious bond does not only have a positive impact on both countries. Religious influences, even the smallest, can be problematic in assessing the common interests between the United States and Israel, but beyond, have external repercussions. To some extent anti-Americanism and Islamist anti-Semitism are the result of a common position regarding the belonging of the Holy Land to the Jewish people. According to a national poll conducted in June-July 2003 by "Pew Research", 72% of evangelical Protestants believe that God gave the land of Israel to the Jews (compared to 44% of Americans. Many of them think that as long as the United States will support Israel, their country will continue to be blessed by God, but if they withdraw their support they will be cursed, so they are applying these Bible verses to the letter: "I will make your name great Abraham, and you will be a source of blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed in you." [1] "Ask for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you enjoy rest!" [1] So for the American Christian Right, which is over sixty million strong, the State of Israel must exist

until the end of time and so they will all go to Heaven. But, if Israel disappears or falls into the hands of enemies, they will all end up in hell. In this regard, the will to keep the promise and the commandments of God becomes the theological explanation for American and more particularly evangelical support for Israel. This kind of position excludes any possible solution to the Palestinian problem. Such a declaration does not date from today for when Jews started to settle in Palestine, the United States urges Zionist movements everywhere in America to support this initiative. "Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine, though he feels that neither he nor his descendants will ever live there, will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so ... There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry." [8] The fate of U.S. policy toward Palestine in the decades leading up to Israeli statehood was bound up in American attitudes toward internationalism and its relations with Israel. These two factors will deeply influence the U.S position in favor of Israel and compromise the search for a solution, judging by the unfair attitude of America from the very beginning of the problem. Almost all the U.S presidents have taken an active part in trying to open peace talks in this conflict but the religious aspects governing most of the judgments made the initiatives unsuccessful. One can remember President Bush's attempt to restart the Israeli Palestinian negotiations and why it has failed. For Tony Carnes, the divine promise of Palestine to the people of Israel, enshrined in the Bible, is a belief that weighs heavily in the tradition of the chapel attended by President George W. Bush. "The belief that at the end of history a great battle will be fought on the land that is now Israel, and that this cataclysmic confrontation will require the participation of the Jews, is also important." [1] The State of Israel is therefore an essential validation of biblical history and a vital prerequisite for Christian redemption. While this doctrine does not necessarily require a larger Israel, it does require an Israel that is secure within its borders, and for that Israel can rely on the unconditional support of the United States. In addition, for American Evangelical Protestants, the state of Israel is the fulfillment of the divine will expressed in the Bible, and it is divine duty to love and bless the Jewish people. They derive their beliefs from passages in the book of Genesis to justify the legitimacy of the Jewish state. And the Lord said unto Abraham, depart out of thy land, and out of thy fatherland, and out of thy father's house, into the land which I will show thee. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you" [1] "In that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, and said, I have given this land to your seed, from the river of Egypt to the great river in the river Euphrates. [1] Passages from the Bible are used to justify the right of Israel to occupy Palestine. Despite international demands and condemnations to stop Jewish colonization, Israel does not seem to change its policy toward Palestine because any compromising decision would be rejected by the American veto in the Security Council. The United States, by giving its unconditional support to Israel, is making a compromise difficult to find between Israelis and Palestinians and is drawing at the same time the wrath of Arab countries.

### ***1.6. The rise of islamism, anti-americanism and anti-semitism***

There is no doubt that U.S. policy is very close to Israel's preferences. The weight of religion in this alliance is no longer to be demonstrated, but obviously this support is not without consequences. This relationship has become something of a hot potato for the United States, which rightly believes that if it ceased its support, Israel would immediately be attacked by neighboring countries. Moreover today, Israel is costing the United States financially and especially strategically, because the nature of its relations with Israel is inseparable from the resurgence of anti-Americanism in certain Arab countries. This amounts to legitimizing all the actions carried out by Israel, which sees itself in its right to defend itself by all means, including military, against the

“Palestinian occupiers”. Its corollary is of course the fury that pushed Osama Ben Laden to declare war on the United States for, among other things, their support for Israel which resulted in the attacks of September 11, 2001. Michel Gourfinkiel notes in this regard: “According to Al Qaeda, responding to this injustice requires the destruction of Israel which is the United States’ “dearest friend” or better, to strike the United States itself. This is also the long-held view of groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which are also directly concerned with the existence of Israel”. [9] Thus, the Hebrew state finds itself in the crosshairs of several organizations and states calling for its destruction. It is not the number of Jews in the United States that explains this desire to declare war to America, but above all the extremely important involvement of a fraction of the population in the defense of the survival of Israel. Ted Olson, general counsel until 2004, whose wife was among the victims of the plane crashed by terrorists against the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 said: “It’s probably true that a lot of people in the Middle East hate this country because we support Israel. But what a tragedy and what an aberration of despising us because of the comfort and support we have given to a people so long and still so recently victims of indescribable persecution.”[10] As proof of this support, President Bush met with former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon nine times more than any head of state in the world, which clearly demonstrates the importance of Israel to the eyes of the United States. Ariel Sharon’s appearance before Christian Zionists earned him standing ovations. For them Sharon was the man God has chosen to fulfill end-time prophecy. However, on the Palestinian side Sharon is a criminal and indirect actor in the massacres of Palestinian civilians by Lebanese Christians in the Sabra and Chatila camps in 1982 in Lebanon. For Pat Robertson founder of the “Christian Coalition” who is a member of the Republican Party, Ariel Sharon’s stroke was divine revenge on his withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Speaking on his show “The 700 Club” on “Christian Broadcasting Network” (CBN) he declares: “God is hostile to those who divide His land [...] And to every Prime Minister of Israel who decides to divide it up and give it up, God said, “No, this is Mine”. Ariel Sharon divided the land of God.” [11] The Israeli Embassy and many American Jewish organizations protested, and Pat Robertson apologized. Such a statement also appears to interpret the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin as divine punishment. It must be said that even if the most virulent source of contemporary religious intolerance on the international level, is Islamist extremism, there is also a Jewish and Christian extremism which was harmful in the past and could still be in the future. As an example, we can say that it was in the name of this fanatical devotion to God that the Israeli theological student Yigal Amir assassinated Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin. The murder was punished with the equivalent of a Jewish “fatwa” because he was prepared to give up sacred Jewish land. Rabin was seen as endangering the redemption of the Jewish people as a whole. The theme most often associated with evangelical American foreign policy activism is therefore that of support for Israel. The deep evangelical attachment to the Hebrew state finds its roots both in political positioning and in theological reasons. 54% of Evangelical Protestants who support Israel say their religious beliefs are the most important influencing factor in their view of Israel, more important than the media or their education. It also rejects the justifications for Palestinian violence put forward by observers focused on Palestinian frustration. This theologically inspired school of thought has representatives among Republican Congressional leaders including House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who “referred to the occupied West Bank by his biblical names Judea and Samaria”[11]. Tom DeLay’s predecessor as majority leader, compatriot Texan, Richard Armey, also uses the same language and once publicly supported the idea of expelling their Palestinian inhabitants from these territories. He said: “There is no risk for the US government to agree with a policy of expelling Palestinians from the occupied territories; the strong American reaction to such a

policy is one reason why this will never happen". [12] However, a religious extremism that can lead the majority leader in the House of Representatives to support such a solution highlights the slippery moral ground on which U.S. foreign policy in general and its support for Israel in particular could lie if it leaves the humanist and secular foundations which have guided it for half a century. However, American negotiators in this conflict believed that the less we talk about religion the better. This was understandable given the volatility of the region, but it is impossible to dismiss the religious dimension and all the history that goes with it in this peace process.

Israeli leaders refer to Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state based on the Bible. Palestinians, as divided as they may be, are unanimous that they do not envision a two-state solution without Jerusalem as their capital, which represents for them the third holiest site of Islam. The question is therefore how to make two peoples coexist whose territories are also intertwined? How to live separately in the same house? How to reconcile two parties which invoke the providence to justify their legitimacy. Surprisingly, on December 6, 2017, the US President Donald Trump announced the United States recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and ordered the planning of the relocation of the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This decision implicitly means that Jerusalem belongs to Israel which of course has set fire to the powder. At the time of the division of Palestine we had overlooked the peaceful coexistence of peoples drawing their antagonism from religious references. Today, the problem is resurfacing and it will have to be resolved, but how? For more than 60 years, therefore, the United States has played the role of arbiter in this Israeli-Palestinian conflict to negotiate a lasting peace in the region. From Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton, including George W. Bush Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, all the American presidents have played to varying degrees and with sometimes divergent interests of their influence with Israel to find a solution in vain. President Obama intended to rebuild relations with the Arab world and with Islam, which has always criticized the partisan management of this conflict. He spoke out in favor of stopping settlements in the West Bank and the right of Palestinians to have a state and denounced the humiliations of the occupation. These declarations had made a big impression in the land of Islam. There was renewed hope that America would once again play a leading role in the solution of the Palestinian problem. In particular by exerting pressure on an Israeli government dominated by ultra conservatives. Even if it means jeopardizing the support of the pro-Israel lobby, which is very influential in Washington, but the weight of political reality has caught up with Obama. His successor Donald Trump by transferring the Us Embassy in Jerusalem sent a message to the Arab world that Jerusalem belongs to Israel which was another way to rekindle the flame. From Camp David to the Oslo Accords, from the Six-Day War to the Gaza conflict, we attempt to better understand the privileged, complex and at times ambiguous relationship between the United States and Israel. A crucial relationship, on which the outcome of the Middle East crisis depends. Criticisms against the United States are fired from everywhere in the management of this conflict. Meanwhile, the political fallout of this conflict is obviously the difficult relationship between the United States, which supports Israel, on the one hand, and the Arab League countries, which support Palestine, on the other. While waiting for a hypothetical outcome, the populations of this part of the world will continue to live in fear. The pervasive tensions between Christian Jews and Muslims will then exacerbate the confrontation that extends beyond the Middle East and seriously threatens to shake the whole world.

### **1.7. Conclusion**

By the second decade of the 21st century, United States–Israel relations became inextricable from religion. The foreign policy process, key American and Israeli actors, and the very strategic categories that shape U.S. policy toward Israel are tied to religious pressures, religious language, and the personal convictions of U.S. policymakers. This has always been the case, dating to 17th century clergy who speculated about the role of Jewish migration to Palestine in God’s plans. But the rise of an organized pro-Israel lobby, of deep U.S. involvement in the Middle East, and of global religious tensions that have radicalized religious adherents in the Middle East are all developments that have emerged in the wake of the Camp David peace process. These dynamics will continue to play a significant role in United States–Israel relations for the foreseeable future.

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