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On Israel, Jews and Leaders Often Disagree



Stephen McGee for The New York Times

Phillip Moore, Claudia Hershman and Irving Hershman talked about Israel in Farmington Hills, Mich., recently.

By PAUL VITELLO Published: May 5, 2010

FARMINGTON HILLS, Mich. — Criticizing Israel has long been the equivalent of touching a third rail in many Jewish families and friendships, relegating disagreements to a conversational demilitarized zone where only the innocent and foolhardy go.

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“You cannot really engage in that conversation,” said Phillip Moore, a teacher in this Detroit suburb who has embraced strong opinions on many topics in his life — on politics, education, even religion — but avoids the subject of Israel at gatherings of his Jewish relatives.

“You raise a question about the security forces or the

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Stephen McGee for The New York Times  
Bob Maggid listens to a discussion about Israel in Farmington Hills. Many Jews have differing views on Israeli policies.

settlements and you are suddenly being compared to a Holocaust denier,” said Mr. Moore, 62. “It’s just not a rational discussion, so I keep quiet.”

But the recent tension between the Obama administration and the Israeli government over the stalled Middle East peace process has put the questions underlying those long-avoided family discussions directly in the public spotlight. They have raised serious questions about whether the traditional leadership of the American Jewish world is fully supported by the mass of American Jews.

The issues arose last month when American officials openly rebuked Israel over the announcement of new housing plans in east Jerusalem, and are likely to grow as indirect talks between Israelis and Palestinians, mediated

by the Obama administration, resume this week. [President Obama](#), working to ease those tensions, met on Tuesday with the Nobel laureate [Elie Wiesel](#), who had criticized the administration in an advertisement last month.

Many other prominent Jews, representing the conservative organizational leadership that has been the dominant voice of the Jewish community for decades, have also recently criticized the Obama administration’s pressure on Israel. Some have even accused the White House of sabotaging the foundations of the Jewish state.

Former Mayor [Edward I. Koch](#) of New York spoke for many stalwart Israel backers last Sunday when he told an angry crowd of 500 gathered outside the Israeli Consulate in Manhattan, in a videotaped statement, that President Obama’s demand for a settlement freeze in East Jerusalem was nothing less than an orchestrated effort “to undermine the legitimacy of the state of Israel.”

But while those voices have been strong and their message unmistakable, a newly outspoken wing of Israel supporters has begun to challenge the old-school reflexive support of the country’s policies, suggesting that one does not have to be slavish to Israeli policies to love Israel.

“Most Jews have mixed feelings about Israel,” said Rabbi Tamara Kolton of the Birmingham Temple, a secular humanistic congregation in Farmington Hills. “They support Israel, but it’s complicated. Until now, you never heard from those people. You heard only from the organized ones, the ones who are 100 percent certain: ‘we’re right, they’re wrong.’”

In the 2008 election, 78 percent of Jewish voters supported Mr. Obama, and surveys have suggested that most continue to back his policies.

In a [survey](#) taken after the diplomatic skirmish of March, the [American Jewish Committee](#) — the heart of the traditional mainstream — found little change in the level of Jewish support for Mr. Obama’s handling of relations with Israel. The survey found that 55 percent approved of his handling of Israeli relations, compared with 54 percent last year. (His disapproval rating rose five points, to 37 percent.)

Jeremy Ben-Ami, the founder of a Washington lobby known as J Street, the latest of several organizations representing the voice of liberal Jews who support Israel but not all its policies, said many people have long felt ignored or silenced by the pro-Israel establishment in the United States.

“People are tired of being told that you are either with us or against us,” he said. “The majority of American Jews support the president, support the two-state solution and do

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not feel that they have been well represented by organizations that demand obedience to every wish of the Israeli government. If you had taken their word for it, Obama should have gotten 12 percent of the Jewish vote. But he got 80. That should say something.”

Within the vast spectrum of opinion, though, American Jews continue to have strong attachments to Israel, and the recent tensions have produced intense, often angry, debate. The rancor led delegates at the annual convention of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an umbrella community relations group that includes almost all major American Jewish organizations, to adopt a resolution in February calling for a halt to “a level of uncivility, particularly over issues pertaining to Israel, that has not been witnessed in recent memory.”

[Abraham Foxman](#), the national director of the [Anti-Defamation League](#), predicted that Mr. Obama’s approval ratings among Jews would soon reflect what he called “a deep distress” over his approach.

“People are angry,” he said. “Americans do not want peace shoved down the throats of the Israelis.”

But Professor Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist at Hebrew Union College in Manhattan who co-wrote a study last year charting a steep decline in attachment to Israel among younger Jews, said the younger and liberal-leaning are frustrated at being labeled “anti-Israel” or even anti-Semitic for expressing opposition to Israel’s treatment of [Palestinians](#) in the occupied territories.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: May 5, 2010**


An earlier version of this article gave an incorrect first name for Former Mayor Edward I. Koch of New York.

A version of this article appeared in print on May 6, 2010, on page A15 of the New York edition.

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