



BY THE NUMBERS: Dahlia Scheindlin

Critical Friends

AERICAN JEWS MAY BE ONE OF THE MOST important groups influencing American policy in the Middle East. Some – Jews as well as non-Jews – would say that they are *too* important.

Israel is vital and central to American Jews. But what role should American Jews have in articulating and determining what's best for Israel – and what are the limits of that role?

An earnest American Jew might be hard-pressed to answer. Is the proper relationship one of uncritical support for Israeli positions? (And what in the world is the "Israeli position" anyway?) Or perhaps Israel needs "tough love" from its American brethren, pushing it to take the medicine that some, on the left and on the right, believe it needs.

What's a perplexed American Jew to do?

Here is one guide (there may be others): For American Jews to understand what's best for Israel, they should learn about their counterparts, the Israeli people, and consider what Israelis might want the role of American Jews to be.

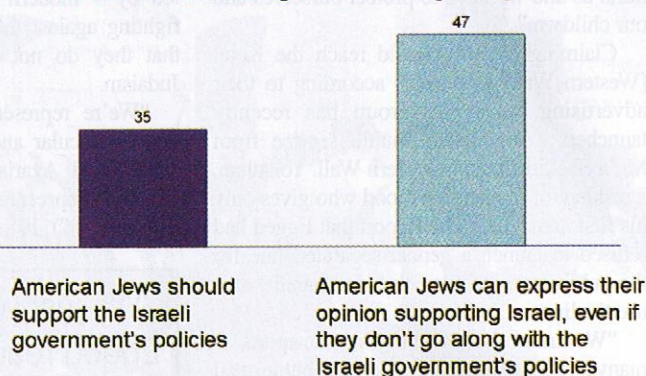
But be prepared: Many Israelis may respond with a great big yawn. The great American AIPAC/J-Street (& Co.) debate about how American Jews should support Israel in American political lobby efforts is almost totally lost on the average Israeli. They haven't heard of Walt and Mearsheimer, whose controversial claim that the nefarious "Jewish Lobby" is hurting America's foreign policy interests has become cause célèbre synagogue talk across 50 states. These are elite debates, carried on among American political leaders and lobbyists, Israeli Foreign Ministry folks, the offices of the Prime Minister, and public relations firms.

What do Israelis know about American Jews? A sample of young Israelis reveals that they know very little. "Roof parties, because that's all they seem to do here in Tel Aviv," said Dafna Arad, a twentysomething television editor for the Children's Channel, adding with characteristic Israeli aplomb, "How did I get into this boring conversation, anyway?" "Brooklyn, haredim, I really don't know much about them," was the sheepish association of Inbal Zeev, a 28-year-old master's student at Tel Aviv University. Another student, 27-year-old Yaniv Cohen, had a minimally more detailed picture: "They're rich, they are very influential on international politics, they're strong in U.S. politics. They're very supportive of Israel," he said.

And what do Israelis expect from American Jews? Israelis seem comfortable with the vague impression of American Jewish "support." When pressed, this refers broadly to continued financial support, promoting Israel's security and, perhaps, defending Israel in the world and in the U.S.

To probe somewhat deeper, The Jerusalem Report asked a representative sample of 500 Israeli Jewish adults, encouraging them to take a side regarding the question of how it is appropriate for

How should the American Jewish community act vis-à-vis the American government regarding Israel?



Shiluv Millward Brown, n=500, 12 May, 2009, margin of error: +/- 3.5

American Jews to express their support for Israel and what role they should play vis-à-vis American foreign policy. Does supporting Israel mean sticking to the official line, or are critical voices, going against that official line, legitimate too? (To make this clearer, we used the term "government" to represent the official line.)

The results of the survey, conducted on May 12, were surprising. On the question of whether Americans should support Israel by sticking to the Israeli government's position, the answer was a decisive "No."

Nearly half of the respondents supported the statement that "American Jews can express their attitudes supporting Israel even if it means going against the Israeli government policy." Only 35 percent preferred instead the statement that "American Jews should support the Israeli government's policies."

The responses revealed the traditional partisan divide in Israeli society, through telltale demographic breakdowns. Higher education and highest income respondents were significantly more favorable toward supporting Israel even in opposition to its government's line. More than half of each – 53 percent and 56 percent, respectively, chose that option – with a gaping 20-point lead over those who said support means sticking with the government (30 percent and 33 percent among highly educated and high-income respondents). By contrast, the lowest educated were tied between the two responses (41 percent each) and among the lowest income respondents, the plurality said Americans should stick to the Israeli government's line, by 44 percent to 38 percent.

Respondents born in Israel and veteran immigrants chose the "critical" option by 48 percent to 35 percent in contrast to post-1989 immigrants from the former Soviet Union who answered in reverse proportions (44 percent to 37 percent who favored American Jews supporting the Israeli government line).

In Israel, religious identity is traditionally the indicator most highly correlated with political ideology. Sure enough, the plurality of both *masorti* (traditional) and religious respondents preferred Americans to back the government line (45 percent and 42 percent respectively, compared to 38 percent and 35 percent who approve the critical line). Interestingly, the small haredi (ultra-Orthodox) sample showed a few more who favored opposing the government on Israel's behalf (46 percent to 40 percent); secular respondents also supported the critical statement by a powerful 55 percent to 29