

**FT Swamp Notes** **Israel-Hamas war**

## How Israel lost the American left

Netanyahu blames antisemitism for campus protests. But has he forgotten his own embrace of Trumpism?



A Likud Party election banner shows Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shaking hands with US President Donald Trump © AFP via Getty Images

## Peter Spiegel YESTERDAY

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The US is in the middle of college graduation season, which has forced administrators at several elite universities to grapple with whether they should leave pro-Palestinian encampments on their campuses in place, clear the protesters out — or [cancel commencement ceremonies](#) entirely.

It has also renewed a parallel debate over why, exactly, college students nationwide have decided to pick Israel's war in Gaza as the animating issue of their youth. The horrific images of starvation and death at the hands of an American ally are clearly the trigger. But there are plenty of recent instances of American allies launching widely criticised military campaigns in the Muslim world ([Saudis in Yemen](#), [Turks in Kurdistan](#), [French in Mali](#)) that have gone completely unnoticed on college campuses. So why Israel?

Analyses of the reasons behind student uprisings have generally fallen into three buckets: ideological ([latent antisemitism](#), rearing its ugly head); conspiratorial ([October](#)

buckets: ideological ([latent antisemitism](#) rearing its ugly head); conspiratorial ([Qatari donations](#) to major universities); or generational ([the young](#) only know Israel as a military power, not the endangered democracy of the Yom Kippur war).

But there is another, far more prosaic rationale of why college campuses and the American left in general have increasingly abandoned Israel: party political.

There was a time when Israel's most important foreign policy objective was to ensure bipartisan backing in Washington. It was a goal that was, in many ways, existential: if military aid and diplomatic support from its most important ally was dependent on which party controlled the White House or Congress, then Israel's very survival could be subject to the whims of the American electorate. Indeed, it was the founding principle of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the primary lobbying group for the Jewish state in Washington, which for most of its existence didn't even contribute to US political candidates for fear it could be seen as overtly partisan.

But all that seemed to change 15 years ago when Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power. Almost from the outset of the presidency of Barack Obama, who took office just weeks before Netanyahu's Likud party won the 2009 Knesset elections, the two leaders took a dislike to each other. This is not necessarily unusual. American presidents and Israeli prime ministers have something of a chequered history. Jimmy Carter came to detest Menachem Begin, who he viewed as stubborn and petty — particularly compared to Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian leader who won the Georgian's lasting admiration. The patrician George HW Bush clashed bitterly with pugnacious street fighter Yitzhak Shamir, son of a Polish leather merchant.

The difference, though, is that those personal enmities — which were compounded by fierce policy disputes over regional peace — never spilled over into partisan politics. That changed with Netanyahu. During Obama's re-election campaign in 2012, Netanyahu came close to actively endorsing his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney. The Israeli prime minister briefed the former Massachusetts governor on Middle East policy during the race, and delivered public statements that made clear he would prefer that the incumbent lost.

To add insult to injury, after Romney was defeated, Netanyahu turned to Republican leaders on Capitol Hill to win an invitation to address a joint session of Congress — explicitly to undermine Obama's efforts to secure a nuclear deal with Iran. The [Republican invitation](#), done without informing the White House, was an unprecedented breach of presidential authority. It was rightly seen by the Obama camp as an attempt by Netanyahu to undermine his presidency and improperly intervene directly in domestic American politics

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But Netanyahu's Republican partisanship reached its zenith under Donald Trump. The Israeli prime minister waxed poetic about his long-standing friendship with the ethically compromised Kushner family — he frequently noted that he'd known Jared Kushner since Trump's son-in-law was only a child — and giant posters of the two leaders shaking hands were plastered all over Israeli cities during Netanyahu's 2019 re-election campaign.

To top it off, Netanyahu waited a full day to congratulate Joe Biden after he was declared the victor of the 2020 US presidential election. Even when Netanyahu finally issued a statement on the result, it appeared grudging, since it didn't make clear what he was congratulating Biden for — and it was accompanied by a note thanking Trump “for the friendship you have shown the state of Israel and me personally”.

After thumbing his nose at Democrats' most beloved president since John F Kennedy, and embracing their most hated Republican since . . . well . . . since forever, is it any wonder that young liberals and a good portion of the Democratic establishment has now turned on Netanyahu?

The political consequences are clear for all to see. Charles Schumer, the Democratic leader in the Senate who has long been one of Israel's most ardent supporters in Washington, has [called for Netanyahu's ouster](#). On the other side of the aisle, Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson has called Biden's recent decision to suspend weapons shipments to Israel “a senior moment”. Israel's most important foreign policy objective now lies in a rubble of partisan warfare up and down Pennsylvania Avenue.

In recent remarks, Netanyahu has laid the blame for the American student protests on “antisemitic mobs” that have “taken over leading universities”. There is no doubt that avowed antisemites are among the campus demonstrators. But to fully understand why his country has lost the American left, and along with it America's youth, Netanyahu may want to take a look in the mirror.

Ed, you've covered Netanyahu's provocations in Washington for as long as I have, and [in a recent column](#), you blamed a far broader group of “adults from all walks” for mishandling the campus protests. I also happen to know you've been doing a lot of research into the history of American presidents and Israeli prime ministers — particularly the bad blood between Carter and Begin — for your hotly anticipated biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski. Am I giving Netanyahu too much blame for what is happening on college campuses right now?

## Recommended reading

- For a different take on the campus protests, Minouche Shafik, the embattled president of Columbia University — where the demonstrations started, and the school that in many ways remains at their spiritual epicentre — [penned an op-ed](#) for the FT last week. The thing that struck me most was right at the beginning of her piece: I hadn't realised Shafik was inaugurated on October 4, just three days before Hamas' horrific
- attack on Israeli civilians. Baptism by fire, to say the least.

- As a London-based news organisation, the FT (we like to think) offers a somewhat different take on American politics. Similarly, it sometimes takes a US-based publication to put British politics into perspective. That is certainly the case with the [recent New Yorker take](#) on 14 years of Tory rule in the UK. It doesn't paint a pretty picture. Still, the piece provides the kind of sweep and context needed for those who want to get up to
- speed heading into the UK general election, expected later this year.

- The weirdness of Mar-a-Lago has been chronicled before, but Donald Trump's ongoing criminal trial in New York prompted the [Washington Post to take another look](#), given how it is now his sanctuary away from a chilly, dilapidated courtroom in lower Manhattan. The piece is filled with strange and amazing anecdotes, including the fact that almost anyone who pays club fees can still offer unsolicited policy advice for the once
- and (possibly) future president.

## Edward Luce responds

Peter, to be blunt it's very hard to give Netanyahu too much blame for anything. I honestly don't know the breakdown between antisemitic elements among the student protesters and those who are motivated by humanitarian concerns. There does not seem to be reliable student polling to give us an answer to that question. My hunch is that there is probably quite a large group somewhere in between, who do not know the name of the river or the sea to which they're referring, nor to the eliminationist implication of that chant. But when Netanyahu dismisses any criticism of how he's

conducted this war as antisemitism, we can be sure he is wrong.

You very kindly mentioned my forthcoming Brzezinski book (and neglected to mention that you've been one of the generous and highly astute readers of the manuscript). I cannot help but think that if part II of the original 1978 Camp David agreement had been implemented, Israel would not now be facing such turmoil, and Hamas would never have taken root.

As Swampians will know, part I was the normalisation of relations with Egypt, which happened and for which Sadat paid the ultimate price. Part II was Palestinian autonomy, leading to an eventual homeland to be negotiated in the future. Begin scuppered part II. Reagan did not insist on it; a re-elected Carter would have.

One product of that failure, and the subsequent demise of the Oslo Accords, was Netanyahu. Another was Hamas. Most people I know, including I suspect you Peter, see a lethal symbiosis between the two. To be sure, Hamas needs to be wiped out. By taking out so many civilians in the process, Netanyahu is guaranteeing that Hamas will live on, perhaps in even more lethal form. Another seven months of Netanyahu will make that even worse. As you imply, one of Bibi's legacies could be to contribute to Biden's defeat in November, which would permanently alienate Democrats from Israel. Let us hope Chuck Schumer gets his wish.

## Your feedback

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