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**God bless Israel: the Christian Zionist discourse on Israel's identity and the  
Iran nuclear deal compared to the Obama and Trump administrations**



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## 1. Introduction

The United States (US) has long been a strong supporter of Israel and considers the state to be its closest ally in the Middle East (Robinson, 2021). The relationship between the two countries has often been called a “special relationship” due to the large amount of military, economic and diplomatic aid Israel receives from the US (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006). During the years of the Trump presidency, the alliance between the two countries became even stronger, with the Trump administration making several foreign policy decisions that went against the US historical position on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The US embassy was contentiously moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and the “Trump peace plan”, the administration's vision for an end to the conflict, was deemed to be highly favorable to Israel.

Many scholars have argued that the special relationship between the US and Israel is for a large part maintained due to the activities of the “Israel lobby” (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006). Mearsheimer and Walt (2006: 40) define the Israel lobby as: “the loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction”. While the lobby mainly consists of members from the American Jewish diaspora, it also includes non-Jewish groups, such as Christian evangelicals, or “Christian Zionists” (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006: 41). Christian Zionists “believe that Israel's rebirth is part of Biblical prophecy, support its expansionist agenda and think pressuring Israel is contrary to God's will” (2006: 41).

Scholars have noted that Christian evangelicals have become a powerful force in US politics over the past decades (Wilcox 1992; Green, Rozell & Wilcox 2003; Lieberman 2009). The influence of Christian evangelicals is viewed as particularly extensive during the years of the Trump administration, with the lobby influencing all kinds of policies, from LGBT rights to abortion (Lynch, 2021). Moreover, Christian Zionists are also seen as having a growing influence within the larger Israel lobby. While some of the foreign policy decisions made by the Trump administration drew heavy criticism from the international community, Christian Zionists welcomed America's rapprochement towards Israel. They also constituted an important part of Trump's electoral base: in the 2016 presidential elections Trump received 81 percent of the white evangelical vote (Durbin, 2020).

The literature on ethnic lobby group influence on US foreign policy has mainly focused on structural material factors, such as organizational strength, financial resources and

the level of government access (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999; Rubenzer, 2008; Rytz, 2013; Rynhold, 2021). In contrast, the role of ideational factors has often been overlooked. Ideational factors relate to indirect influence, that is, “the shaping of discourse surrounding policymaking” (Lieberman, 2009: 240). Rynhold (2021) argues that two ideational factors are critical in explaining the success or failure of lobby groups: discursive authority and identity dissonance. Discursive authority can be defined as “the authority to determine the shared meanings that constitute the identities, interests and practices” (Adler, 1997: 323). Identity dissonance happens “when people must choose between two incompatible beliefs, values or actions” related to identity (Rynhold, 2021:6).

This study builds on the agency-oriented constructivist approach proposed by Rynhold (2021) to examine the applicability of the concepts of discursive authority and identity dissonance. The research question is: *How does the Christian Zionist lobby define what it means to be pro-Israel, and how does this relate to the way that the Obama and Trump administrations construct the identity of Israel?* While Rynhold argues that the concepts of discursive authority and identity dissonance are critical in explaining the success and failure of ethnic interest groups, it is not clear how this can be applied to the Christian Zionist lobby. First, the Israel lobby is not only composed of American Jews, but also of Christian Zionists. While Christian Zionists and American Jews certainly align on a range of policy positions related to Israel, their diffusion across the political spectrum and their different ethnic and religious identity leads to a different understanding of what it means to be pro-Israel. It is, then, unclear how Christian Zionists would compete for discursive authority over the diaspora, since they are not Jewish themselves. Second, Rynhold (2021) argues that the heightened partisan atmosphere in the US poses a challenge to ethnic lobby groups, since partisan identity has to compete with ethnic identity for allegiance, creating the issue of identity dissonance. However, since Christian Zionists are closely aligned with neoconservatives in the US, it is unclear how they overcome this problem. Moreover, it remains unclear if identity dissonance poses a challenge at all since Christian Zionists do not share the same religious identity with the Jewish-American diaspora.

In this thesis, I will test Rynhold’s theory by comparing the Christian Zionist discourse around the Iran nuclear deal to that of the Obama and Trump administrations. The Iran nuclear deal, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an ideal case because it was a high-profile issue for both administrations, as well as for the

Christian Zionists. To examine the Christian Zionist discourse, I will focus on the largest Christian Zionist group – Christians United for Israel (CUFI). I argue that Christian Zionists compete for discursive authority over what it means to be pro-Israel, instead of for the authoritative voice of the Jewish community. Second, I argue that in order to minimize identity dissonance, Christian Zionists will aim to avoid partisanship altogether and instead align themselves more with the Israeli government. Finally, I argue that the Christian Zionist conception of being pro-Israel is more aligned with the Trump administration’s construction of Israel’s identity than the Obama administration. That is, the US government’s construction of Israel’s identity changes over time.

## **2. Literature review**

### *Material factors and the political opportunity structure*

The literature on the influence of diaspora lobbies on US foreign policy predominantly focuses on material factors such as financial resources, number of supporters, organizational strength, social networks, and external allies (Rynhold, 2021: 3; Rubenzer, 2008; Rytz, 2013). These factors can be reconceptualized under the umbrella of a “political opportunity structure”, drawing on social movement literature (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; cited in Rynhold, 2021). Haney and Vanderbush (1999) argue that there is a lack of consensus in the existing literature about the conditions necessary for ethnic lobby groups to effectively influence US foreign policy. They find that the scholarly literature cites five main material factors that explain the effectiveness of ethnic lobby groups. These factors will be briefly discussed below.

The first factor is the organizational strength of the interest group, which is dependent on the level of organizational unity, financial resources, and a successful lobbying structure (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999: 344). Second, scholars find that ethnic lobby groups are more effective if there is membership unity, geographical concentration and higher voter participation. The presence of a “large and unified base of politically active members who vote in a concentrated block” has important electoral implications (1999: 344). Third, scholars argue that ethnic interest groups will be more successful if the message they convey is salient and resonates with the broader public, since influencing public opinion is an

important lobbying strategy. The fourth factor is what Haney and Vanderbush (1999: 345) have called “pushing on an open door”. That is, it will be easier to influence foreign policy if the argument of the interest groups on a particular issue is congruent with the position of the government. Finally, the level of access to the government plays an important role. Scholars have argued that ethnic lobby groups will be more effective when targeting the legislative rather than the executive branch, since the former is more susceptible to lobby influence (Haney & Vanderbush, 1999).

### *Ideational factors and the cultural opportunity structure*

In contrast, since the cultural turn arrived in foreign policy analysis, scholars have increasingly taken an agency-oriented approach to study social movements (Rynhold, 2021; Williams, 2004). This constructivist perspective examines “the ways in which actors strategically deploy symbols, identities and other cultural facets to achieve their objectives within the ‘cultural opportunity structure’” (Rynhold, 2021: 5). In the US, the cultural turn was mostly concerned with a renewed focus on meaning. The most well-known approach in this regard is “framing studies”, but scholars also built upon semiotics, discourse analysis, ideology studies, as well as more traditional attention to norms, values and ideas (Williams, 2004: 94). Besides a focus on meaning, these approaches share in common a concern with agency by “parting company with the functionalist collective behavior tradition that viewed culture as a static, integrative, and binding force” (Williams, 2004: 94). Within the social movement literature, the cultural opportunity structure refers to the “role of ideas or culture more generally in the emergence and development of social movements and revolutions” (McAdam, 1992: 5).

Rynhold (2021) argues that scholars focus too much on material factors to explain the influence of ethnic interest groups, while paying insufficient attention to ideational factors. He takes an agency-oriented constructivist approach to explain why AIPAC failed to dissuade the Obama administration to sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also called the Iran nuclear deal. In particular, he argues that two concepts are important in explaining the success or failure of ethnic lobby groups: discursive authority and identity dissonance. First, Adler (1997: 323) defines discursive authority as “the authority to determine the shared meanings that constitute the identities, interests and practices”. He

argues that this form of power “is perhaps the most subtle and most effective form of power because it encapsulates the institutional power to include or exclude, to legitimize and authorize” (1997: 323). Rynhold (2021: 6) argues that a lack of discursive authority on politically important issues undermines an ethnic lobby group’s power and credibility. Second, identity dissonance “occurs when people must choose between two incompatible beliefs, values or actions” related to identity (Rynhold, 2021:6). Rynhold (2021) argues that in the American context, there is an increased risk of identity dissonance because of the growth of negative affective partisanship, which strengthens partisan identity. Partisan identity, then, has to compete with ethnic identity, weakening lobby influence.

### *The Israel lobby*

While the core of the Israel lobby consists of American Jews, it also includes Christian evangelicals, or Christian Zionists (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006). Christian Zionists believe that “Israel’s rebirth is part of Biblical prophecy, support its expansionist agenda and think pressuring Israel is contrary to God’s will” (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006: 41).

Similar to the general debate on ethnic interest groups, scholars have mainly debated the extent of the influence the Israel lobby has on US foreign policy, particularly concerning the Middle East and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Two general positions can be distinguished. On the one hand, scholars argue that the Israel lobby has profound influence on American foreign policy (e.g. Tivnan 1987; Curtiss 1990; Terry 2005; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006). Within this camp, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt are among the most prominent advocates. Their controversial essay *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (2006) sparked a heated discussion among scholars and the media alike (e.g. Massing, 2006). In this essay the authors argue that the excessive economic, military and diplomatic American support Israel receives is not in the national interest of the United States, and yet American foreign policy regarding the Middle East is driven predominantly by the interests of the Israel lobby. They arrive at this conclusion by examining how the Israel lobby tries to influence the legislative and executive government branches, as well as the media, think tanks, universities and broader public discourse (Lieberman, 2009: 236).

On the other hand, scholars have argued that the influence of the Israel lobby on US foreign policy has been greatly overestimated and that other factors such as the national

interest, public opinion and culture (Waxman, 2010) play a more decisive role (e.g. Lieberman, 2009). Lieberman (2009) criticizes Mearsheimer and Walt's empirical argument, arguing that the causal mechanisms through which the authors propose that the Israel lobby directly influences the US government are inherently flawed. Moreover, Mearsheimer and Walt (2006) argue that in addition to directly influencing government policy, the Israel lobby tries to indirectly influence public discourse about US foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East by stifling open debate about issues relating to Israel to prevent public opinion becoming too critical. The lobby does so, they argue, by influencing the media, think tanks and academic institutions. Lieberman argues that while their empirical argument does not hold, the power of the Israel lobby to determine the terms of public discourse around policymaking seems more plausible and merits more attention.

### **3. Theory**

Scholars have argued that power can be both overt and covert (Lieberman, 2009). The covert face of power relates to the authority to "control the agenda of matters that are available for debate and decision", thereby "shaping the ideological environment [so] that certain ideas or proposals are considered outside the legitimate or taken-for-granted bounds of discussion" (Lieberman, 2009: 252).

Rynhold (2021) examines why AIPAC was unable to influence the Obama administration's policy towards the Iran nuclear deal, despite many of the material factors described in the scholarly literature as being beneficial to lobby groups being present in this case. He argues that material factors alone cannot explain AIPAC's failure, and that two ideational factors were critical in particular. First, Rynhold (2021) describes how AIPAC and its allies faced opposition from within the larger Israel lobby, in particular from the liberal Jewish organization J Street. This led to a loss of discursive authority, that is, it prevented AIPAC from representing the communal consensus, or the definitive pro-Israel view. Rynhold argues that discursive authority "is critical to a diaspora lobby's credibility and power, especially on issues of high political salience" (2021: 6). In order to gain discursive authority, an actor needs to be regarded as sharing the collective identity and values of the diaspora. Moreover, undermining the discursive authority of an ethnic lobby group can be a powerful tool in weakening the lobby's influence.

However, from Rynhold's research it remains unclear how the concept of discursive authority applies to non-Jewish organizations within the Israel lobby, especially to the Christian Zionist lobby. What, then, happens when the Christian Zionist lobby tries to get discursive authority over two groups that differ from religious identity, that is, Jews and Christians? If Christian Zionists do not have the support of Jewish Americans, they will not have a credible claim to discursive authority. In this thesis, I will argue that since Christian Zionists are not Jewish themselves, they will have to compete for discursive authority with liberal Jewish lobby organizations by emphasizing other factors that render them a credible source of authority. In particular, I argue that Christian Zionists will not aim to represent the Jewish diaspora community. Rather, they will emphasize their sharing of Israeli values and the Jewish diaspora's collective identity, and, by implication, what it means to be pro-Israel. This leads to the first hypothesis:

*H1*: Christian Zionists compete against liberal Jewish lobby organizations by aiming to gain discursive authority over what it means to be pro-Israel.

However, Rynhold (2021) argues that possessing discursive authority over an ethnic community is not enough. He mentions a second ideational factor that is critical to explain ethnic lobby group failure: identity dissonance. This occurs when "people must choose between two incompatible beliefs, values or actions (Rynhold, 2021: 6) . He argues that the strengthening of partisan identity in the US weakens the influence of ethnic lobby groups, since partisan identity has to compete with ethnic identity for political allegiance. This, in turn, increases the risk of dissonance. Rynhold (2021: 6) argues that "in a partisan environment an ethnic lobby must be especially careful to be bipartisan on high-profile issues to avoid generating identity dissonance within the ethnic community that constitutes its political base". From this, it follows that Christian Zionists will need to minimize identity dissonance. However, Christian Zionists are regarded as ideologically aligned with the Republican party. In the five previous election cycles, the Republican presidential nominee received a significant majority of the white Christian Evangelical vote. In 2016, for example, over 80% of white Christian Evangelicals voted for Trump (Durbin, 2020). This implies that to limit partisanship, Christian Zionists will need to frame issues related to Israel in a bipartisan way. I argue that one way to do this is by distancing themselves from the partisan

divide altogether, and aligning themselves with the Israeli government, since they have a credible claim to discursive authority. This leads to the second hypothesis:

*H2: Christian Zionists try to minimize identity dissonance by representing their identity in the same way as the Israeli government.*

Finally, it is also possible that identity dissonance does not present an issue for Christian Zionists at all, because they do not share the same religious identity with the Jewish American diaspora. Christian Evangelicals have become a powerful force in US politics over the last decades. From the existing literature on the material factors that determine the success of ethnic lobby groups, it can be argued that Christian Zionists have more influence during Republican administrations than during Democratic administrations. Therefore, a third hypothesis can be derived:

*H3: The Christian Zionist conception of being pro-Israel is more aligned with the Trump administration's construction of Israel's identity than the Obama administration.*

#### **4. Method**

In this thesis, I will undertake a discourse analysis to compare the way that Christian Zionists construct what they believe to be the definitive pro-Israel view with how the Trump and Obama administrations frame the identity of the Israeli state. Discourse analysis assumes that language constitutes or produces social reality (Bryman, 2012). Discourse can become a framework for the justification of certain foreign policy decisions and is therefore particularly useful for this research. Moreover, this method is well suited to analyze how discourse shifts over time, thus helping to explain possible variation from how the Obama and Trump administrations construct Israel's identity. One important theme in discourse analysis is the rhetorical organization of discourse (Gill, 2000). This is the assumption that discourse aims to "establish one version of the world in the face of competing versions" (Gill 2000: 176). Therefore, discourse is not a neutral means of giving meaning to the social world (Bryman, 2012).

The two main variables that will be analyzed are the Christian Zionist lobby's conception of being pro-Israel, and the US administrations' construction of Israel's identity. Since it can be assumed that Christian Zionists are more aligned with the Trump administration than with the Obama administration, comparing the similarities in discourse between the former two point to the Trump administration being more open to Christian Zionist influence. Moreover, a discourse analysis allows us to examine if the Trump administration reforms the idea of what Israel's identity is in a way that favors Christian Zionists. By focusing on two different administrations, variation in the construction of Israel's identity over time can be measured.

Something can be said to be "pro-Israel" when it is framed in a way that it benefits the Israeli state, Israeli Jews and/or the American Jewish diaspora, or the United States and its relation with Israel. Conversely, something can also be said to be "anti-Israel". A frequently invoked argument in this regard is the charge of antisemitism (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006). Being pro-Israel is inextricably linked with the Jewish identity and the identity of the Israeli state as a whole, which can be conceptualized differently by different actors.

I will examine the case of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal. The deal, which was signed in 2015, significantly restricted Iran's nuclear program in exchange for economic sanctions relief (Robinson, 2021). While its proponents regarded the deal as a landmark agreement that increased nuclear safety, opponents claimed that the deal did not go far enough and in fact further endangered Israel and the Middle East. I will focus on three actors: the Obama administration, the Trump administration and the largest Christian Zionist pro-Israel lobby group in the US: Christians United for Israel (CUFI). The case of the JCPOA is a most likely case because the positions of the Trump and Obama administrations significantly differed, and because it is a high-profile issue, increasing the stakes for all three actors. This means that all actors are likely to frame the deal and its implications for Israeli security in a way that makes their position look the most favorable. The time period analyzed will be from the start of President Obama's second term in January 2013 until May 2018, when president Trump announced the United States' formal withdrawal from the deal.

In order to analyze the discourse of the Obama and Trump administrations, various documents from the White House archives will be analyzed, including speeches and remarks, press briefings and statements related to the Iran nuclear deal and Israel. In addition,

diplomatic letters from former US diplomats to Congress on the Iran nuclear deal will be analyzed as well as regional editorials endorsed by the two administrations. In order to analyze the discourse of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), press releases and social media posts by the organization will be analyzed, as well as statements from high-profile members of the organization. These documents will be analyzed manually and findings will be structured using color coding. I expect that the most important recurring themes will be religion, American and Israeli values, and the security of Israel and the wider Middle East.

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 The Obama Administration**

#### *5.1.1 Israel's identity*

In the Obama administration's official communication, several themes can be distinguished that relate to the identity of the State of Israel. In particular, the Obama administration often refers to Israel's "founding principles": Judaism and democracy (Kerry, 2014). First, the Obama administration frequently emphasizes the religious nature of the State of Israel. That is, the administration explicitly defines Israel as a Jewish state. Israel has been referred to as the "Holy Land," the "historic homeland of the Jewish people" and to its citizens as "the sons of Abraham and the daughters of Sarah" (Obama, 2013a; Kerry, 2014).

Second, Israel is described as a democratic state. Israel's "vibrant democracy" is often emphasized (Obama, 2013b; Biden, 2015). Obama (2013b) remarked: "Israel has established a thriving democracy, with a spirited civil society and proud political parties, and a tireless free press, and a lively public debate". This "lively public debate" is particularly emphasized when describing Israel's democracy. Notably, it is cited by Obama as something that facilitates disagreement between the Israeli and US governments concerning high-profile topics, such as the Iran nuclear deal. In fact, members from the Obama administration argued that this is a healthy debate that is inherent to a democracy (Obama, 2015; Biden, 2015). This will be explored in depth in the section on the Iran nuclear deal.

Moreover, on several occasions the Obama administration ties Israel's founding principles to the Israel-Palestine conflict. For example, Obama (2013b) argues that "the only

way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realization of an independent and viable Palestine.” Similarly, Obama’s Secretary of State John Kerry (2014) remarks that “a two-state solution is the only way for Israel to stay true to its founding principles – to remain both Jewish and democratic.” Finally, Vice President Joe Biden (2015) believes that “there’s a growing recognition within Israel that the occupation of the West Bank is tearing at the democratic fabric of the Jewish state”, something that President Obama (2013c) himself states in his speech at the United Nations. Thus, the Obama administration explicitly voices their support for a two-state solution. Moreover, the administration acknowledges that the Palestinians, just as the Israelis, have a right to self-determination and justice (Obama, 2013b). However, the administration refrains from specifying where the Jewish homeland ends and the state of Palestine begins, despite expressing the hope that the city of Jerusalem will one day “live up to its name as the City of Peace” (Kerry, 2014).

A third theme relating to Israel’s identity is that of perseverance and resilience. The Obama administration frequently praises the Jewish people for their strength and perseverance in the face of unprecedented hardship (Obama, 2013b). For instance, Obama has said: “after centuries of exile and persecution, unparalleled in the history of man, the founding of the Jewish State of Israel was a rebirth, a redemption unlike any in history” (Obama, 2013a). Moreover, he has remarked that the journey of the Jews to the promise of the State of Israel involved “suffering and exile, prejudice and pogroms and even genocide,” but that “through it all, the Jewish people sustained their unique identity and traditions” (Obama, 2013b).

### *5.1.2 Israel's identity compared to the American identity*

In addition to describing Israel’s identity by itself, the Obama administration also defines the identity of Israel in relation to the American identity. First, the Obama administration consistently describes Israel as America’s “strongest ally and greatest friend” (Obama, 2013a; Kerry, 2014; Obama, 2014). Upon arriving in Israel in 2013, Obama emphasized that Israel was the first stop on the first foreign trip of his second term as President of the United States (Obama, 2013a). This shows the prominence of Israel in Obama’s foreign policy in the Middle East.

Second, on numerous occasions the Obama administration reaffirms the “unbreakable bond”, “eternal alliance” and friendship between Israel and the US (Obama, March 2013a; Obama, March 2013b; Obama, 2015). In his speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference, Obama’s Secretary of State comments: “the foundation of the friendship between the American people and the people of Israel was actually laid centuries before a single stone was set under the U.S. Capitol or under the Knesset” (Kerry, 2014). Moreover, Obama himself and members of his administration do not hesitate to remind the people of Israel that the US was the first country to recognize the State of Israel in 1948, and that this happened “only eleven minutes after Israeli independence” (Obama, 2013b). It is thus often emphasized that the bond between the US and Israel is a historic one that goes back decades.

Third, and most notably, the Obama administration often frames Israel’s identity in the same way as the American identity, suggesting they are in fact the same. This is illustrated by the following quote from Obama (2013a):

“Why does the United States stand so strongly, so firmly with the State of Israel? And the answer is simple. We stand together because we share a common story – patriots determined “to be a free people in our land,” pioneers who forged a nation, heroes who sacrificed to preserve our freedom, and immigrants from every corner of the world who renew constantly our diverse societies. We stand together because we are democracies.”

Moreover, the themes of freedom and democracy are often emphasized to highlight the similar history and values that the US and Israel share. For instance, Kerry (2014), has said: “these democratic values are stamped in the DNA of both the United States and Israel”. In addition, Obama (2013b) has said: “In the United States – a nation made up of people who crossed oceans to start anew – we’re naturally drawn to the idea of finding freedom in our land,” likening the Exodus of the Israelis to the history of slavery and the African American struggle for civil and human rights. The Obama administration thus sees the history of Israel as similar to the history of America, with both societies underpinned by the same values.

### *5.1.3 The Iran nuclear deal*

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran nuclear deal, was considered the cornerstone of Barack Obama's foreign policy agenda (Landler, 2018). In the administration's speeches on the nuclear deal, Israel predominantly figures as it relates to their safety and security, as well as the unbreakable alliance between the US and Israel. The Obama administration considers the nuclear issue to be one of the two greatest threats to the security of Israel – in addition to the Palestinian conflict (Kerry 2014). In this regard, the administration expresses its unwavering commitment to the safety of Israel on many occasions (Obama, 2013b; Obama, 2013d; Obama, 2013e), framing the nuclear deal as the best way to safeguard its security (White House Archives, n.d.). In his speech on Jewish American Heritage month Obama remarks:

“I'm interested in a deal that blocks every single one of Iran's pathways to a nuclear weapon – every single path. A deal that imposes unprecedented inspections on all elements of Iran's nuclear program, so that they can't cheat; and if they try to cheat, we will immediately know about it and sanctions snap back on” (Obama, 2015).

The administration thus uses hard-line language to invigorate the claim that it will never compromise the security of the State of Israel. In the context of the controversy surrounding the deal, this is hardly surprising. In addition, the administration frequently shows their understanding for the Israeli people's concerns about a nuclear Iran (Obama, 2013b). For instance, Obama remarks:

“When I consider Israel's security, I also think about a people who have a living memory of the Holocaust, faced with the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iranian government that has called for Israel's destruction. It's no wonder Israelis view this as an existential threat.”

The Obama administration thus explicitly ties the nuclear deal to the theme of persecution, but rather sees the deal as a way to prevent history from repeating itself. Furthermore, the administration also notes the “healthy debate” between the US government and Netanyahu on the specificities of the Iran nuclear deal (Obama, 2015). While Obama states that he

welcomes disagreement and scrutiny regarding the deal, he also notes that there will be “disagreements rooted in shared history that go beyond tactics, that are rooted in how we might remain true to our shared values” (Obama, 2015). He denies that disagreements over policy are at odds with American support for Israel, and that this is “not a true measure of friendship”. This is notable, since the governments of Obama and Netanyahu were diametrically opposed on the nuclear issue. The debate around the nuclear deal reached a boiling point when Netanyahu was invited to speak before Congress by the Republican Speaker of the House in March 2015 – without approval from the Democratic party or the White House – and rebuked the deal in his address (Rynhold, 2021). This prompted a fierce reaction from Democrats in Congress who strongly condemned Netanyahu’s actions (Jerusalem Post, 2015)

Finally, the Obama administration acknowledges that even if a good deal on the nuclear issue is achieved, one broader challenge that remains is that of Iran’s support for terrorist groups in the Middle East and its threats against Israel. He argues that this is why America’s support for Israel is unconditional, reiterating that Israel is a friend and ally of the US (White House Archives, n.d.; Obama, 2013c).

## **5.2 The Trump Administration**

### *5.2.1 Israel’s identity*

In comparison to the Obama administration, there are both similarities and differences in how the Trump administration discusses Israel’s identity. First, similar to the Obama administration, the Trump administration frequently underlines the Jewish character of the State of Israel (Pence, 2017a; Trump, 2017a; Trump, 2017c). For example, Trump (2017b) has said that “the Jewish people have built a mighty nation,” while Vice President Pence (January 2018) has also spoken of “the Jewish people’s aspiration to return to the land of [their] forefathers” and “to claim [their] own new birth of freedom in [their] beloved homeland”.

However, compared to the Obama administration, the emphasis on religion is taken even further. President Trump has referred to the people of Israel as “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Trump, 2017b), and has said: “the miracle of Hanukkah is the

miracle of Israel” (2017b). Vice President Mike Pence has referred to the people of Israel “the people of the Book” and has likened Israel to “a tree that has grown deep roots in the soil of [their] forefathers, yet as it grows, it reaches ever closer to the heavens” (Pence, 2018a). This type of biblical language is rarely used by the Obama administration.

Notably, Vice President Pence, who is an avid Evangelical Christian (Boorstein, 2016), uses biblical rhetoric far more than other members of the Trump administration. For example, Pence (2018a) has said: “And today and every day, the Jewish State of Israel, and all the Jewish people, bear witness to God’s faithfulness, as well as your own”. Moreover, he says:

“Because the story of Israel is a story of faith. The Jewish people held fast to a promise through all the ages, written so long ago, that “even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there He will gather you and bring you back...to the land which your fathers possessed.”

Second, even more than the Obama administration, the Trump administration also frequently emphasizes the strength, perseverance and resilience of the Jewish people (Trump, 2017a; Trump, 2017c; Pence, 2018a). The history of the Jewish people is described as one of “persecution, oppression, death, and destruction,” and, above all, perseverance (Trump, 2017b). This message is conveyed in many speeches by members of the Trump administration. Trump himself has called Israel “an eternal monument to the undying strength of the Jewish people” (Trump, 2017a), and “a symbol of resilience in the face of oppression” (Trump, 2017c). Moreover, this theme of perseverance and resilience is often linked to religion. In a speech at a Hanukkah Celebration, Trump states:

“The miracle of Hanukkah is the miracle of Israel. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have endured unthinkable persecution and oppression. But no force has ever crushed your spirit, and no evil has ever extinguished your faith. And that is why the Jewish people shine as a light to all nations” (Trump, 2017f).

The administration often calls the history of the Jews a miracle (Trump, 2017c; Pence, 2018b), and emphasizes how the Jewish people have kept faith. Finally, in this regard Israel is

framed by the Trump administration as an inspiration to the world (Pence, 2018a; Pence, 2017a). Pence (2017a) has said that “the Jewish people have awed the world with their strength of will and their strength of character”. In addition, Trump (2017a) has said:

“The Jewish people have endured oppression, persecution, and those who have sought and planned their destruction. Yet, through the suffering, they have persevered. They have thrived. And they have enlightened the world. We stand in awe of the unbreakable spirit of the Jewish people.”

### *5.2.2 Israel's identity in relation to the American identity*

Similar to the previous administration, the Trump administration also consistently underlines the “special relationship” between Israel and the US, speaking of the “unbreakable bond” between the two countries and referring to Israel as a “cherished friend and ally” (Trump, 2017b; Trump, 2017c; Pence, 2018b). In addition, Trump has said that the bond between the US and Israel is “woven together in the hearts of our people” (Pence, 2018a). Interestingly, just like the Obama administration, the Trump administration claims that the friendship and alliance between the US and Israel has never been greater (Pence, 2018a).

Importantly, the Trump administration also emphasizes that shared values underlie this special relationship between the two countries (Trump, 2017a). In a speech given by Vice President Pence in a special session of the Knesset, he remarks: “We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause, your values are our values, and your fight is our fight. We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, in good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny” (Pence, 2018a). In this same speech, Pence remarks: “In the story of the Jews, we’ve always seen the story of America. It is the story of an exodus, a journey from persecution to freedom, a story that shows the power of faith and the promise of hope”. Pence also notes that Israel and the US share a commitment to freedom (Pence, 2018a). This closely resembles language used by the Obama administration to describe Israel’s identity and the values the two countries share.

### *5.2.3 The Iran nuclear deal*

While being vehemently against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Trump administration largely connects the nuclear deal to Israel in the same way as the Obama administration. First, the deal is also inextricably linked with Israel's security. Similar to the Obama administration, the Trump administration repeatedly tries to reassure Israel that it will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon (Pence, 2018a; Pence, 2018b). However, in contrast to Obama, the Trump administration argues that the nuclear deal is in fact a threat to Israel's safety. Trump has called the deal "a disaster" (December, 2017c), "an embarrassment to the United States" (2017h) and "one of the worst agreements [he's] ever seen drawn by anybody" (Trump, 2017g).

Second, similar to the Obama administration, the Trump administration characterizes Israel as a friend of the US, while at the same time depicting Iran as an enemy. This is illustrated by the following quote from Trump's National Security Advisor:

"Israel's recent revelation of a trove of documentation of Iran's past nuclear weapons program demonstrates that we share common enemies who do not differentiate between us, and we are safer together than we are individually" (Bolton, 2018a).

The Trump administration thus regards the nuclear issue as a shared threat to the US and Israel. However, in speeches that are specifically about the nuclear deal, it is predominantly about America's security, while Israel is rarely mentioned. In his speech announcing the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, Trump states:

"America will not be held hostage to nuclear blackmail. We will not allow American cities to be threatened with destruction. And we will not allow a regime that chants "Death to America" to gain access to the most deadly weapons on Earth" (Trump, 2018).

This quote is notable, since in more general speeches "Death to America" is mentioned in conjunction with "Death to Israel" (e.g. Trump, 2017j). This therefore marks a significant departure from the Obama administration's discourse on the JCPOA, in which Israel's security is more often emphasized and Israel is referred to as an ally. Instead, the Trump

administration links the nuclear deal more to North Korea. In a press briefing held after Trump's announcement to withdraw from the nuclear deal, Bolton said:

“And I think another aspect of the withdrawal that was announced today is to establish positions of strength for the United States, and it will have implications not simply for Iran, but for the forthcoming meeting with Kim Jong-un of North Korea. It sends a very clear signal that the United States will not accept inadequate deals, as the President said.” (Bolton, 2018b).

### **5.3 Christians United for Israel (CUFI)**

#### *5.3.1 Israel's identity*

The organization Christians United for Israel (CUFI) defines itself as the largest pro-Israel organization in the United States and one of the largest Christian grassroots movements in the world (CUFI, 2022). CUFI claims to have over 10 million members, which the lobby group defines as anyone who subscribes to its action alerts through e-mail (Guttman, 2010). Moreover, CUFI organizes hundreds of events each year in cities across the US, with the annual Washington Summit, drawing in thousands of people, as the pinnacle of Christian support for Israel. By emphasizing their wide reach and many activities, CUFI aims to gain discursive authority over evangelical Christians.

In comparison to the Obama and Trump administration, both similarities and differences can be distinguished with regard to the way CUFI constructs the identity of Israel. First of all, unsurprisingly the religious theme underpins nearly all of CUFI's communication concerning Israel. In his opening address at the 2012 annual CUFI Washington Summit, the organization's founder John Hagee states:

“The Bible is a Zionist text beginning with the fact that God created the world, and as the owner of the world he entered into a contract with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants forever and gave them the land. Israel does not occupy the land, they own the land” (Hagee, 2012).

This interpretation of the Bible constitutes the foundation of Christian Zionists' characterization of Israel. This is further elaborated upon in an op-ed by Hagee in which he argues that "Christian support for Israel starts with the Bible, is strengthened by an understanding of history and endures because of the Judeo-Christian commitment to democratic values" (Hagee, 2010). Moreover, CUFI frequently reiterates that Judaism constitutes the fundamentals of Christianity (e.g. Hagee, 2010; Jewish News Syndicate, 2015). For example, in an interview, Hagee says:

"If you took away the Jewish contribution from Christianity, there would be no Christianity, so fundamentally, Christians owe the Jewish people everything. Period. Once a person sees that, he's committed to take action in defense of the Jewish people" (Jewish News Syndicate, 2015).

Furthermore, CUFI believes that "all Bible-believing Christians have a Bible mandate to support Israel" (Hagee, 2012). This propels CUFI to "speak out, publicly, in defense of the Jewish people and the state of Israel," and to "combat anti-semitism as aggressively as [they] possibly can" (Jewish News Syndicate, 2015). To substantiate this argument, two passages from the Bible are frequently invoked. First, Christian Zionists often refer to "God's promise" in Genesis 12:3 that "He will bless those who bless Israel" (Hagee, 2010), a passage that is also referred to by the Trump administration (Pence, 2017b). The second important passage comes from Isaiah 62:1: "For Zion's sake, I will not keep quiet, and for Jerusalem's sake, I will not be silent" (Jewish News Syndicate, 2015). CUFI's emphasis on the Bible mandate is another way of gaining discursive authority over evangelical Christians.

The theme of religion can be identified in both the Obama and Trump administration's discourse about Israel, but both administrations see the Jewish character of the State of Israel more through a historical lens. For instance, the Obama administration does so by describing the journey of the Jewish people throughout the centuries from exile and persecution to the founding of the "Jewish state of Israel" (Obama, 2013a). The Trump administration, in turn, to a large extent uses the same type of language. However, there are also differences between the discourse of the two administrations. While the Obama administration does at times use biblical language to describe Israel and its citizens, such as referring to Israelis as the "sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah", the Trump administration uses direct quotes from the

Bible. Consequently, the discourse of CUFI around religion resembles that of the Trump administration more than that of the Obama administration.

Notably, the idea of having to speak out in defense of Israel is seen by CUFI as something that transcends politics due to the “Bible mandate”. In his speech at the 2012 CUFI Washington Summit, Hagee argues that “the covenant that God made with Abraham is eternal and it cannot be repealed by the president of the United States, by the president of the United Nations.” This can be interpreted as criticism of Obama, whose Middle East foreign policy CUFI openly opposed. Moreover, Hagee says: “we will not be intimidated by any person, by any groups of people when Israel is on the line. We are the front line of defense for Israel in the United States of America.” The organization thus feels very protective of Israel and sees it as its duty to assume the role of Israel’s protector.

The second theme that is prevalent in CUFI’s discourse is the characterization of Israel as something that needs protection. For example, CUFI claims to stand up for Israel’s right “to make decisions free of international interference or pressure – including U.S. pressure” (Hagee, 2010). This closely resembles language used by the Trump administration. For instance, Vice President Pence (2017a; 2018b) has reiterated that “the days of Israel-bashing at the United Nations are over”. In addition, Pence (2017b) has called the Human Rights Council “a forum for antisemitism and invective against Israel”.

CUFI frames the theme of Israel’s protection in a zero-sum way, that is, as ‘them versus us’ – ‘us’ being Israel, CUFI and its “pro-Israel” allies, whereas ‘them’ includes anyone who is anti-Israel. Consequently, anyone who is anti-Israel is regarded as constituting a danger to the country. This starkly differs from how the Obama and Trump administrations talk about Israel. For example, both Obama and Trump voice their support for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict (e.g. Kerry, 2014; Pence, 2018a). Trump has even ended some of his speeches with “God bless the Palestinians” (Trump, 2017k). In contrast, CUFI rarely mentions the Palestinians, except in the context of terrorism (e.g. Hagee, 2010; 2012).

### *5.3.3 The Iran nuclear deal*

Similar to the Trump administration, CUFI strongly opposes the JCPOA. Shortly after the deal was reached, CUFI published talking points condemning the deal. One of their

arguments against the deal was that the relief of sanctions revived the Iranian economy just as it was crippling (CUFI, 2015). This argument was also repeated by Trump in his statement announcing the US' withdrawal from the deal (Trump, 2018).

Similar to the Trump administration, CUFI argued that the deal further endangers Israel, as well as the US and the rest of the world (CUFI, 2015; 2018). Moreover, CUFI also frames the nuclear deal in the context of the history of persecution of the Jewish people. In his op-ed in *The Forward*, the founder of CUFI, John Hagee writes that Christian Zionists “will stand with the Jewish people as they face threats of a second Holocaust from Hitler’s ideological kin in Tehran and elsewhere” (Hagee, 2010). Furthermore, in response to Prime Minister Netanyahu’s speech before Congress in which he criticizes the Iran nuclear deal, Hagee says:

“Today America and the world had the opportunity to experience a Churchill moment with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel. In the dark days of World War II, when Hitler and the Nazis were destroying Europe, Winston Churchill addressed the British making this statement ‘You ask what is our aim. I can answer in one word: It is victory... for without victory, there is no survival.’” (The Jerusalem Post, 2015).

Hagee thus makes multiple references to World War II, using apocalyptic language. Notably, in the run up to Netanyahu’s visit to Washington, CUFI called upon its members to write to their elected representatives in Congress to attend the Israeli president’s speech (Cohen, 2015). In this regard, Hagee commented:

“I never make up my mind on an important issue without first listening to a variety of views. I expect the same from my elected officials. Prime Minister Netanyahu is a very important voice on the issue of Iran. Attending his speech is not a partisan statement. It’s a basic requirement of their job.”

The Iran deal is thus framed here as something that should be bipartisan, thereby minimizing identity dissonance. This is echoed by David Brog’s response to Netanyahu’s speech: “Prime Minister Netanyahu is confirming something that we in CUFI have long

believed. The fact is that we are all in this together. Radical Islam – both in its Shiite and Sunni forms – targets America and Israel, Christians and Jews” (The Jerusalem Post, 2015).

### 5.3.3 *Discursive authority and identity dissonance*

CUFI’s conception of what it means to be pro- or anti-Israel largely aligns with political party divides. That is, the lobby group regards the Republican party as pro-Israel, while the Democratic party and their foreign policy in the Middle East is more often viewed as anti-Israel. David Brog, former executive director of CUFI, defines being pro-Israel as to “sympathize with Israel first and foremost” (Times of Israel, 2012). In CUFI’s view, this means supporting a hardline stance on the Iran nuclear deal and the Israel-Palestine conflict, countering external pressure on Israel and combatting antisemitism. This hardline stance is found more in the discourse and policies of the Obama administration than that of Trump.

CUFI also depicts the Democratic party as less pro-Israel than the Republican party. In an essay published in the *Middle East Quarterly*, David Brog argues that the Democratic party is experiencing an erosion of sympathy for Israel among its liberal base (Brog, 2010). In contrast, he argues that within the Republican party, support for Israel “is not uncritical, but it’s very strong, solid support”, adding that “the problem is on the left” (Times of Israel, 2012). Hence, Brog argues that the left is not pro-Israel enough. However, Brog ultimately stresses that supporting Israel should be a bipartisan effort. He argues that within the pro-Israel community, everyone has a specific task. Therefore, he argues, the erosion of sympathy for Israel on the left should be dealt with by “our liberal friends, our progressive friends” (Times of Israel, 2012). Brog thus also refers to Democrats in a reconciliatory manner.

However, the importance of bipartisanship seems to figure less in CUFI’s discourse on Israel over time. In particular, during the years of the Trump administration this was significantly less pronounced, with CUFI largely approving of the administration’s policies. CUFI’s founder has said that under Obama’s leadership, the “alliance with the Jewish state has suffered” and that “Israel’s foes have been repeatedly appeased by the current Administration” (Hagee, 2017). In an interview, Hagee has said:

“I think the person who inspired anti-Semitism was [former United States president] Barack Obama. He gave \$150 billion to Iran, a celebrated terrorist state, and that \$150 billion was used to advance their nuclear program to murder Jews, and superior missiles to kill you in a more efficient way. And no one ever called his hand about being an anti-Semite. In my opinion, he was the greatest traitor Israel has ever had in the history of the United States of America. What [President Trump] has done is more for Israel in less time, than the last four or five presidents combined, and that’s positive” (Hagee, 2018).

Hagee thus all but accuses Obama of being an antisemite. This reduced emphasis on bipartisanship is also noted in the media. One journalist reporting on the 2017 CUFI Washington Summit notes:

“CUFI remains ostensibly nonpartisan – there were no Democrats speaking at the conference, but they were invited, staff said. But deference to bipartisanship, eagerly observed once upon a time, was treated almost as an amusing afterthought at this conference” (Kampeas, 2017).

From the scholarly literature it follows that the depiction of the Democratic party as anti-Israel risks creating identity dissonance within the evangelical Christian community (Rynhold, 2021). However, since the majority of evangelical Christians are ideologically aligned with the Republican party, this risk is likely to be minimal. In contrast, this strategy may prove more of an issue for American Jews, over whom CUFI also tries to gain discursive authority. CUFI does so primarily by debunking myths around Christian support for Israel, arguing that Christian Zionists are on the side of the Jewish people (Jerusalem Post, 2015). For instance, Hagee addresses the mistrust many within the Jewish community feel towards Christian Zionists’ support for Israel. He attributes this skepticism to two myths: that Christians only support Israel with the goal of converting Jews to Christianity, and that Christians support Israel in order to hasten the second coming of Jesus. First, Hagee writes that the first rule adopted by Christians United for Israel is that the practice of conversion is prohibited at their events. “CUFI exists only to honor and support the Jewish people, never to

convert them.” Second, Hagee argues that the vast majority of Christian Evangelicals do not believe that they can “change God’s timetable” and hasten the second coming of Christ.

From the above analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. First, CUFI aims to gain discursive authority over what it means to be pro-Israel in two ways: by emphasizing that they have a Bible mandate to sympathize with Israel first and foremost, and to depict Israel as something that needs to be protected, with the lobby group’s role being that of the protector. However, from the analyzed statements it seems CUFI does not compete for discursive authority with liberal Jewish lobby groups. Rather, they condemn the Democratic party and the Obama administration as a whole. Therefore, *H1* can be rejected.

Second, CUFI at times tries to minimize identity dissonance. This is particularly apparent from the lobby group’s discourse on the Iran nuclear deal, in which it is emphasized that “we are in this together”. However, identity dissonance is seemingly used as a tool to gain discursive authority over Jewish Americans. By accusing President Obama and the Democratic party as a whole of being anti-Israel, CUFI does not represent their identity in the same way as the Netanyahu government. Therefore *H2* can also be rejected.

Finally, it is clear that Christians United for Israel (CUFI) supports the Trump administration’s Israel policy more than that of the Obama administration. In regard to how these actors frame Israel’s identity, moreover, CUFI’s discourse on Israel resembles that of the Trump administration more than that of the Obama administration. While all actors regard Judaism as an important characteristic of the State of Israel, the Trump administration uses more quotes from the Bible. In addition, in both the Trump and CUFI discourse, the characterization of Israel as a victim – of anti-Israel bias at the UN, antisemitism, and Iranian threats – is more prevalent. Therefore, *H3* can be confirmed.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research has examined how Christians United for Israel defines what it means to be pro-Israel, and how this relates to the construction of Israel’s identity. CUFI defines being pro-Israel as to “sympathize with Israel first and foremost” (Times of Israel, October 2015). Moreover, CUFI’s construction of Israel’s identity as the Jewish homeland and something that must be fiercely protected directly relates to the lobby group’s conception of what it

means to be pro-Israel. Because of CUFI's zero-sum interpretation of what it means to be pro-Israel, sympathizing with Israel, then, means supporting a hardline stance on Israel. This hard-line stance is found more in the discourse and policies of the Obama administration than that of Trump. In the Obama administration's discourse on Israel, the most important themes are religion, democracy and perseverance and resilience. The themes of religion and perseverance/resilience are also prevalent in the discourse of the Trump administration, however, both are emphasized more, while democracy does not figure much in the Trump administration's discourse.

In comparison to the Obama and Trump administrations, Christians United for Israel (CUFI) the religious theme is far more prominent. Still, the language used by CUFI aligns more with that of the Trump administration. Notably, members of the Trump administration – Vice President Pence in particular – make use of Bible quotations when talking about Israel. This is something that the Obama administration refrains from doing. With regard to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), all actors frame the identity of Israel from a security perspective. However, Obama sees the nuclear deal as something that will protect Israel – and the world – while the Trump administration and CUFI see the deal as something that further endangers Israel and compromises its security.

One shortcoming of this research is that by looking only at the Obama and Trump administrations and CUFI, it is not clear how other organizations within the Israel lobby relate to CUFI, in particular AIPAC and the liberal organization J Street. Future research should look at the effects of the Trump administration adopting much of CUFI's discourse on other lobby groups.

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