

8-25-2000

IBPP Research Associates: Israel

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Recommended Citation

Nadav Morag - Tel Aviv University (2000) "IBPP Research Associates: Israel," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 7 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol9/iss7/1>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: IBPP Research Associates: Israel

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Volume: 9

Issue: 7

Date: 2000-08-25

Keywords: Gore, Grein, Israel, Lieberman, Morag

The following interview with Dr. Nadav Morag, Department of Political Science, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel 69978, Fax: +972-3-6409515, was carried out by IBPP research associate Gil Grein.

(The following questions are in the context of focusing on United States Vice Presidential Candidate Joseph Lieberman's religious affiliation with Orthodox Judaism.)

Grein: How would a Gore-Lieberman win affect the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of the White House's role in the Middle-East peace process?

Morag: One must distinguish here between four separate Issues: 1) the personal feelings that a political leader may hold for any given Issue or country, 2) the institutional role that that leader plays, 3) the extent to which personal feelings influence policymaking, and 4) the extent to which a change of personnel at the White House can have on the Middle East peace process.

Al Gore's choice of a Jewish running mate for the upcoming elections must be viewed in the context of these Issues. Firstly, while it seems safe to say that Mr. Lieberman, as a traditionalist Jew (I'm not sure that in Israel, we'd refer to a Jewish man who does not wear a skullcap - kippa - from sunrise to sundown an "Orthodox Jew."), feels a strong commitment to the State of Israel, this does not immediately translate into favoritism. The American-Israeli relationship, despite periodic low-level spats, is, I believe, stronger than it has ever been. It is hard to see how Mr. Lieberman could make the relationship stronger. Therefore, from the point of view of personal feelings, Mr. Lieberman can feel content that the relationship with Israel is very strong.

Secondly, we must remember that under the American system of government, the role of the Vice President in terms of influencing foreign policy is very limited--as long as the President is alive and capable of performing the functions associated with his or her office. Therefore, if Gore and Lieberman win the election, it will be Gore who will be making policy. He may turn to Lieberman for advice, but the decisions will be made by Gore. Hence, Lieberman as Vice President will probably not have too profound an impact on American policy vis a vis the peace process or relations with Israel in general. Of course, after Gore's period in office, Lieberman may choose to run for President, which would be a different matter altogether.

Thirdly, there is no reason to assume, even if Lieberman were able to have a significant impact on policymaking, that he would allow his personal feelings towards Israel and his Jewish identity to have a substantial impact on his decision making. Henry Kissinger is a Jew and as US Secretary of State under Nixon and Ford, he presided over a period, surrounding the Yom Kippur War of 1973, that was characterized by great tensions and difficulties in US-Israel relations. American officials, be they Jewish or not, will be acting first and foremost as Americans interested in achieving the strategic objectives of the United States in the region. These have not changed since 1967 and involve Israel withdrawing from territory in exchange for recognition and normalized relations with its Arab neighbors. No American leader has substantially wavered from this formula.

Finally, the breakdown (temporary or not) of the Camp David talks illustrates the fact that there are limits to what the United States can do in terms of forcing the parties to make concessions. One should not make the mistake of assuming that the United States is in a position, or has any desire, to force its will on the parties. Therefore, regardless of who is in the White House, there is only so much the US can do to achieve Middle East peace. Besides, American leaders will be expected by the American public to devote most of their time to domestic issues. I'm not sure, had Clinton been in his first term of office now and not at the tail end of his final term, that he could have allowed himself to invest so much time and energy in the Camp David talks.

Grein: What do you foresee will be the reaction to a Gore-Lieberman administration from governments/states whose population consists of an Islamic majority?

Morag: I expect that there will be some concern in Arab and Muslim countries regarding Lieberman's candidacy. However, as everyone knows, Gore-Lieberman haven't won the election yet and might not, so this may not be a problem at all from the Arab perspective. In addition, the Clinton Administration counts quite a number of Jews in influential foreign policymaking positions (more important than the position of Vice President in this context) and this has not resulted in a deterioration of American relations with pro-Western Arab countries. While the Egyptian press and that of some other Arab countries will no doubt, as is their habit, create some sort of conspiracy theory about Israel conquering the White House, it is not likely that Arab leaders will view a Gore-Lieberman victory as a serious problem.

Grein: Should a Gore-Lieberman administration come to power, do you foresee an increase in anti-government fanaticism from among the neo-Nazi/white power/white supremacy. etc., groups in the US and abroad?

Morag: I would imagine that having a Jewish vice president would give anti-Semitic, racist organizations in the United States (most, but not all, of which are white) cause for "celebration" in that it would seem to reinforce their deep-seated belief that the United States Government is really a "Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG)." What better proof of the seeming "control" that Jews "exercise" over the United States than the election of a Jewish VP. Naturally, there is no use arguing with such a thesis, as its holder is unlikely to be willing to participate in a calm, rational and open-minded discussion. I would not be surprised if some Jewish Americans might feel a bit uncomfortable at the prospect that a member of their ethnic community might fill such a visible public office. Post-Holocaust Jews are characterized by a pervading sense of insecurity, be they in Israel or the Diaspora, and many Jewish Americans might not want to "rock the boat," by having a Jewish VP. I'm not sure that a Gore-Lieberman victory will necessarily lead to a significant rise in anti-Semitism as long as the American economy is going strong and there is less overall social frustration--which often leads to hatred of minority groups.

Grein: So far as you can tell, what do you feel is the general reaction of Israelis and Palestinians to Gore's pick?

Morag: Most Israelis whom I have talked to feel a sense of pride that a Jew could be a candidate for this position and hope that this will lead to an even stronger relationship with the US. Naturally, each side in the ongoing Israeli debate over the peace process feels that Lieberman as Vice President will either help advance the peace process or help stop the erosion in Israel's position (depending on whom you talk to).

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Palestinians have evidenced some very moderate concern, but it is unlikely that they would expect American policy to change in any significant way as a result of a Gore-Lieberman election.

Ultimately, I think that the importance of Gore's decision to choose Lieberman has very little to do with the Middle East and lies in its domestic symbolic impact--signaling total Jewish integration into American social, cultural, economic and political life. If a Jew can run as Vice President, and his religiosity act as a factor in his favor (despite the fact that its Jewish religiosity and not Christian religiosity), then Jews in the United States have really come a long way.(Keywords: Gore, Grein, Israel, Lieberman, Morag.)