President Lyndon Johnson never cared much for foreign policy. The former teacher from Texas preferred to devote himself to domestic political matters, especially in an effort to advance New Deal Liberalism. Ironically, popular support for Johnson’s presidency eroded largely due to one foreign policy quagmire—the Vietnam War. And also ironically, given Johnson’s preference for the domestic sphere, his presidency witnessed the solidification of a military-strategic relationship with Israel that framed U.S.-Israel relations for decades to follow.

In this article, Olivia Sohns aims to explain Johnson’s pro-Israel presidency by emphasizing his personal affinity for Israel by looking primarily at Johnson’s time in the Senate. Sohns asks what “explains Johnson’s decision to champion so ardently the Israeli-American alliance” and argues that the answer involves “understanding the moral, political, and strategic basis of Johnson’s unprecedented support for Israel whilst he served as a senator” (58). While Sohns’s well-researched article persuasively argues that Johnson’s support for Israel sprang from a personal wellspring of empathy and respect for the Jewish people, Sohns is less persuasive in drawing a direct line from Johnson’s personal convictions to his pro-Israel policies as President. Nevertheless, her article deepens our understanding of the U.S.-Israel special relationship on two important fronts: the cultural and political elements of Johnson’s pro-Israel position, and the potential impact of an influential senator on U.S. foreign relations.

Sohns grounds Johnson’s personal support for Israel in cultural and political terms. Culturally, Johnson’s parents were “devout evangelical Christians,” who instilled in their son the belief “that the Jews had deep spiritual and historical ties to the land of Palestine, a land once constituted Biblical Eretz Yisrael” (60). While Johnson himself was not a Christian Zionist, his grandfather and aunt were, and these family members stressed the need to protect the Jewish people. As Johnson climbed the political ladder in Texas during the 1930s and 1940s, he developed connections with Zionists from Texas, and also friendships with American Jews who were “traditionally an important constituency of the Democratic Party due to their liberalism, and many were strong supporters of Israel due to their feeling of cultural and religious ties to the state” (61). Sohns also notes, as Stephen Spiegel did in 1985, that Johnson’s Texas background “made him prone to
According to the popular view, Texans and Zionists shared a pioneering ethos, along with the burdensome, Kipling-esque task of dispossessioning the allegedly backward people who occupied the land, and bringing desperately-needed Western civilization and values. As a Democrat from Texas, Johnson’s cultural and political priorities merged in his support for Israel.

Johnson’s philo-Semitism came to the fore during the Suez Canal crisis in 1956-1957, and Sohns argues that Johnson, as Senate Majority Leader, played a vital role in changing the way President Dwight Eisenhower handled the conflict. After securing the withdrawal of British and French forces from the region, Israel refused to leave the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip until it received “American, [United Nations] UN, and Egyptian assurances to respect Israel’s sovereign rights” (68). Eisenhower threatened to support UN sanctions on Israel in order to induce a withdrawal. For Sohns, Johnson’s opposition to this high-handed pressure proved critical in changing Eisenhower’s position. Both publicly and privately, Johnson challenged the President’s use of “coercive measures” (70). He sent letters to the White House and met with State Department officials to urge the Administration to take a different course; he released public statements that stressed the need “to engage in ‘give and take’ discussions with Israel” (70). Naturally, Johnson’s efforts received high praise from Israeli officials and Israel’s supporters in the United States, especially Zionists and Democrats. And in the end, Eisenhower moved away from sanctions and supported a compromise—in return for a withdrawal, Israel would receive a guarantee to use the Straits of Tiran, and the first United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) would establish a presence in the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula in order to create a buffer zone between Israel and Egypt. The UNEF presence lasted until May 1967, when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping and requested that UNEF be removed from the area, which UN Secretary General U Thant agreed to do. These provocative moves ignited the June 1967 Arab-Israeli, or Six-Day, War.

Did the Senate Majority Leader actually convince Eisenhower to shift his position? Probably not. In all likelihood, the anti-Communist ambitions of Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles played a bigger factor than Johnson’s critique of Administration policy. While Eisenhower needed an Israeli withdrawal to avoid alienating Arab states into the Soviet camp, he also deplored Nasser and sought to contain Communism and Arab nationalism. Supporting Israel was the preferred technique to contain Soviet influence in the Middle East, most of which was channeled through Egypt. Thus, Eisenhower had to walk a fine line—pressure Israel (and Britain and France) to withdraw, but not to the point that it emboldened an Arab nationalist leader who just purchased hundreds of millions of dollars of weaponry from the Soviet Union through Czechoslovakia, and had also recognized communist China. Aside from Suez, the Soviet invasion of Hungary happened in early November 1956, another poignant reminder for the Administration of the need to contain Communism.

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1 Steven L. Spiegel, The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 123.

Nevertheless, Johnson’s persistent efforts likely contributed to Eisenhower’s change of position, and Sohns’s article adds more complexity to that story.¹ Sohns probably overstates Johnson’s “ardent liberal internationalist” position (64). She notes that Johnson adopted “a liberal internationalist outlook on foreign affairs” while serving a U.S. Representative (62), but offers little to substantiate any deep commitment to liberal internationalism.² Also, Sohns could offer more details about “rising Congressional protest” against Eisenhower’s support for sanctions (69). Beyond Johnson and “Democratic senators from Montana, [Mike] Mansfield and James E. Murray” (72), there is little to suggest any kind of “rising Congressional protest.” Consulting the Congressional Record may have helped in this respect; additionally, Peter Hahn details a broader congressional reaction to the possibility of sanctions.³ On 20 February 1957, in an effort to overcome congressional criticisms, “Eisenhower invited to the White House Johnson … and other leading legislators of both parties.” Eisenhower and Dulles stressed the need for sanctions, and “after voicing reservations, most of the legislators deferred to the president on the issue.” Despite the fact that the legislators fell in line with the President’s position, “public opinion remained sharply critical of sanctions,” and ultimately, according to Hahn, “public criticism convinced Eisenhower to ease his pressure on Israel.”⁶

While Sohns aims to use Johnson’s pre-presidential philo-Semitism to explain his decidedly pro-Israel policies as President, herein lies the principle weakness of the article—there is little discussion of Johnson’s tenure as President, and one must integrate Cold War calculations into Johnson’s decision-making to explain his pro-Israel policies. Johnson’s support for Israel was not “unconditional” (58), nor did Johnson decide “to arm Israel on an almost unconditional basis” (77). Johnson made no decision to champion such a relationship. As Zach Levey has documented, Johnson expended considerable energy in trying to avoid entering into a strategic alliance with Israel.⁷ Scholars note that, time and time again, Johnson tried to avoid selling weapons to Israel.⁸ The inability to secure an arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union, combined with the possibility of Soviet military sales to Jordan and the breakdown of the tank deal between Israel and West Germany, forced Johnson to do what he preferred not to do—increase weapons sales to Israel. When it came to Johnson’s foreign policy, the situation in Vietnam (and in Moscow) dwarfed all other concerns. The Middle


⁵ Hahn, 213-216.

⁶ Hahn, 215.


⁸ Spiegel, 118-165; Mitchell Bard, The Water’s Edge and Beyond: Defining the Limits to Domestic Influence on United States Middle East Policy (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 189-211.
East was just not that important to Johnson, who hoped to avoid another foreign policy distraction from his main concern as president--advancing the Great Society and New Deal Liberalism.

Additionally, Sohns's argument that an influential senator can impact U.S. foreign policy seems just as relevant for President Johnson as it does for Senate Majority Leader Johnson. Increasingly during his presidency, Congress pushed President Johnson to be more willing to open up the U.S. arsenal to Israel; this became especially acute during discussions on the sale of the controversial F-4 Phantom jets in 1968.\(^9\) As Sohns demonstrates, Senate Majority Leader Johnson proved able to impact Eisenhower's handling of the Suez crisis. About ten years later, President Johnson had to deal with congressional pressure that aimed to position the United States closer to Israel than he wanted. If Congress influenced Eisenhower's foreign policy in the Middle East, did it not influence Johnson's, too?

It seems that Senator Johnson--the consummate politician that he was--recognized the domestic political advantages of supporting a pro-Israel position. Sohns's portrayal of President Johnson, however, could be more complex and allow for his frequent struggles with domestic political pressures to adopt a pro-Israel line beyond his intentions. Johnson’s personal support for Israel conflicted with his effort to maintain an evenhanded foreign policy in the region, meaning, a foreign policy that favored neither Israel nor Arab states, but aimed primarily to contain communism. This would strengthen the article’s argument that certain members of Congress can influence presidential foreign policy, even if they do not actually articulate or execute those policies. Sohns demonstrates that Senator Johnson, with deep personal and political convictions, proved able to influence President Eisenhower's handling of the Suez crisis, albeit in a perhaps necessarily imprecise way. Cultural and political factors naturally influence presidential decision-making, but in a hard-to-define way.

Rather than trying to connect Senator Johnson's philo-Semitism with President Johnson's pro-Israel policies, Sohns could perhaps focus more on the ways in which American Jews and Israeli officials influenced Johnson's perspective (and implicitly, other U.S. officials). Sohns details a developing relationship between Johnson and Isaiah Leo “Si” Kenen, the founder of the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, which became the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, and between Johnson and Israeli ambassador Abba Eban. Johnson’s relationships with Israeli officials and pro-Israel advocates, as much if not more than his personal convictions, informed Johnson's policies as President.\(^10\) Importantly, Johnson seemed to adopt a particular position based on these relationships. For example, as Sohns notes, “Johnson’s view on the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly the Palestinian refugee problem, starkly echoed Eban’s position” (69). This suggests that Johnson did not necessary have a “coherent conceptual framework” (71), but instead--like so many congressional officials--relied on others to formulate the details of his position. Johnson worked quite closely with Eban and Kenen. One underdeveloped and perhaps more pertinent issue is the extent to which

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\(^9\) Spiegel, 161-164; Bard, 201-204.

Israeli officials, along with a developing pro-Israel lobby, influenced Johnson’s thinking about U.S.-Israel relations.

Sohns relies principally on materials collected at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, along with an assortment of secondary sources. Michelle Mart’s *Eye on Israel* seems to be a curious omission, since it deals with the cultural foundations of the U.S.-Israel “special relationship,” especially during the 1950s. As noted above, referencing the *Congressional Record* may have helped to demonstrate rising Congressional protest against Eisenhower’s threat of sanctions.

Sohns’s article makes a genuine contribution to scholarship by analyzing the cultural and political elements of Johnson’s pro-Israel position prior to being president, and the potential impact of an influential senator on U.S. foreign relations. Once he became Senate Majority Leader—and eventually President—Johnson’s philo-Semitism colored his interpretation of Middle East events, and by extension, U.S.-Israel relations. Regardless of whether or not Sohns’s article convinces the reader about the basis for Johnson’s pro-Israel policies as President, her research points to the profound influence of culture and domestic politics on how U.S. officials conduct relations with the state of Israel. Overwhelmed by the Vietnam War and domestic turmoil, President Johnson likely drew upon his personal empathy for Israel when making decisions about U.S.-Middle East relations. At the end of the day, President Johnson did agree to sell offensive weapons to Israel, including the Phantoms, and Sohns’s article is a welcomed contribution to understanding that larger story.


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