Book Review

Browning, C. S., Joenniemi, P., & Steele, B. J. (2021). **U.S. vicarious identity with Israel, 1967–2020.** *In Vicarious identity in international relations: Self, security, and status on the global stage. Oxford Academic.*

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In the chapter "US Vicarious Identity with Israel" from Vicarious Identity in International Relations by Christopher S. Browning, Pertti Joenniemi, and Brent J. Steele, the authors explore the profound and complex relationship between the United States and Israel, focusing on how Israel has served as a symbolic extension of US identity, particularly in military and geopolitical contexts. The authors argue that after the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel became a key identity proxy for the US, allowing Americans, especially the Baby Boomer generation, to project their aspirations of military success and moral authority through Israel's victories. A core argument in the chapter is that this identification stems from the US's ontological insecurity—its struggles with national self-perception during and after the Vietnam War. Israel's military actions, particularly its pre-emptive strikes and decisive victories resonated with a US culture eager for symbols of strength and clarity amidst its military failures. The authors weave in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, contending that the United States' identification with Israel fills a "lack" in the American self-image, providing a sense of security and continuity in a world perceived as increasingly chaotic. Moreover, the chapter delves into the evolution of this relationship over time, noting generational shifts in US foreign policy. It highlights that the Baby Boomers' admiration for Israel, rooted in the iconic 1967 victory, contrasts with later generations, whose formative experiences have led to different interpretations of the US-Israel relationship. This generational analysis provides a deeper understanding of why US policies toward Israel have fluctuated, including the contrasting approaches under the Obama and Trump administrations.

The significance of this chapter lies in its interdisciplinary approach; blending international relations theory with psychoanalytic insights to offer a novel lens through which to view US-Israel relations. The use of Lacanian concepts of "lack" and "fantasy" enriches the analysis, suggesting that the United States' vicarious identification with Israel is not merely a strategic or political convenience, but a deeper psychological need to project power and resolve onto an external partner. The chapter makes a significant contribution to understanding how identity and narrative play a role in shaping international alliances. It challenges traditional realist or neorealist interpretations of the US-Israel relationship, often focusing exclusively on material or strategic interests. Instead, Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele emphasize how cultural and psychological dimensions—particularly the American desire for victory and security—inform the alliance. Furthermore, the chapter's generational analysis is particularly insightful. The focus on how different US generations relate to Israel—based on their formative experiences—adds a dynamic layer to the discussion.

This approach helps explain why the US-Israel relationship has been subject to both intense solidarity and periodic tensions, reflecting not only political or strategic calculations but also shifts in national self-perception over time.

This chapter is highly relevant for scholars in international relations, political psychology, and Middle Eastern studies, particularly in the context of assessing potential US responses in the event of an all-out war between Iran and Israel, following incidents such as Iran's missile strikes across Israel. The intended audience includes both academics and students interested in how identity politics shapes foreign policy. Additionally, the chapter is valuable for historians studying the Cold War, US foreign policy, and the cultural implications of military conflicts, as it offers a deep analysis of how Israel's military actions have been woven into the US national narrative. Policy analysts and diplomats will also find this chapter useful for understanding the non-material, psychological factors behind US support for Israel, which extends beyond strategic interests. This is particularly important for those examining the long-term sustainability of the US-Israel alliance, especially as generational shifts—such as the growing detachment of post-Baby Boomer generations—lead to changing public attitudes toward Israel.

The writers utilize a mixed-method approach, integrating historical analysis, cultural studies, and psychoanalytic theory. Their application of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a framework for comprehending international relations is notably novel. Lacanian notions such as "lack," "fantasy," and "ontological insecurity" elucidate the reasons behind the United States' recurrent identification with Israel as a bastion of strength and moral clarity. The chapter relies significantly on established scholarship in international relations, particularly the contributions of Melani McAlister (2001) and Shaul Mitelpunkt (2018), who have examined the cultural and psychological aspects of US-Israel interactions. The writers combine primary source materials, such as media coverage, political speeches, and government papers, to demonstrate how the US public and leadership have seen Israel's military achievements. Survey data is utilized to monitor changes in public opinion in the US concerning Israel, offering concrete evidence that Israel's successes have significantly influenced American perspectives. The writers extensively utilize cultural sources, including films and news broadcasts, to illustrate how Israel is portrayed as a heroic and moral ally in American popular culture. The multifaceted utilization of sources strengthens the chapter's argument, offering both quantitative and qualitative evidence for the presence of a vicarious connection between the two nations.

While the chapter offers a compelling and well-argued case for the US's vicarious identification with Israel, there are areas where the argument could be further developed. One potential limitation is the focus on elite and governmental perspectives. Although the chapter includes references to public opinion polls, it would benefit from a more thorough exploration of how different segments of the American population—particularly minority groups and political dissidents—view the US-Israel relationship. Additionally, the chapter could engage more critically with the negative consequences of this vicarious identification. While the authors acknowledge that the US's identification with Israel is not absolute or consistent, they do not fully explore the potential drawbacks of this relationship, such as the impact on US credibility in the Middle East or the ethical implications of supporting Israeli military actions without sufficient criticism. In terms of recommendation,

the chapter is a valuable contribution to the field, and I would suggest that scholars interested in the cultural and psychological dimensions of international relations make it a key reference. However, it would be even stronger if it incorporated a more diverse range of American perspectives and engaged with the long-term geopolitical consequences of this vicarious identity.