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The US Presidential Race: October 2011 Update

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When Sarah Palin announced last week she would not seek the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, she joined a number of other politicians who have recently crossed their names off the GOP ballot. Yet with little more than a year remaining until the election, no clear frontrunner has emerged from the still-crowded field of Republicans seeking their party's nomination to challenge President Barack Obama. While candidates have been campaigning for months, a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll published in early October showed that the distribution of support among several contenders shifted dramatically in a matter of weeks.

The issue of US-Israel relations came to the forefront of the campaign in early September as candidates worked hard to demonstrate their unwavering support for Israel ahead of the Palestinian statehood bid at the United Nations. In mid-September, the Jewish vote became a key subject after a Republican upset in a special election in New York's Ninth Congressional District that was attributed in part to declining Jewish support for President Obama. However, this district's large concentration of Orthodox Jews, who tend to lean far to the right, is likely not representative of Jewish voters nationwide. In fact, a September Gallup poll found that while Jewish support for Obama has declined since the 2008 election, it has done so at a rate no different from that of Americans as a whole.

Still, Israel will remain a hot political topic in the GOP primary as the Jewish vote, which has historically gone to Democrats, plays a pivotal role in the early-voting state of Florida. There are also large numbers of conservative Evangelical Christians, who take a strong interest in Israel, in the early-voting states of Iowa and South Carolina.

What follows is a look at the latest lineup of Republican candidates and some of their recent statements on US policy towards Israel.

Mitt Romney, *Former Governor of Massachusetts*

Mitt Romney, who received 25 percent of support in the poll, is the only leading candidate whose numbers have remained steady in recent weeks. In a September 23 op-ed in the

National Review, Mr. Romney wrote that the United States should not be a “fair-weather friend” of Israel, and “we must work as individuals and as a country to resist the worldwide campaign to delegitimize Israel.” He also called for Obama to declare that the US would reevaluate its relationship with any nation voting in favor of unilateral Palestinian state recognition. In the September 22 GOP presidential debate, Mr. Romney said it would be “unacceptable” for Iran to become a nuclear nation as it was “perhaps the greatest existential threat to Israel.”

Herman Cain, *Former CEO of Godfather’s Pizza and Radio Talk Show Host*

Extreme statements characterize Herman Cain’s rhetoric on Israel. Mr. Cain, whose numbers shot up 12 points since early September, tied Rick Perry for second place with 16 percent of support in the poll. Mr. Cain lost much credibility on Israel earlier this year when he mistakenly suggested that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would support Palestinians’ right of return to lands they left in what is now Israel. Notwithstanding a trip to Israel in late August, Mr. Cain has failed to formulate a sophisticated policy towards Israel. In the September 22 GOP debate, Mr. Cain was asked how he would respond to the unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state. “If you mess with Israel, you’re messing with the United States of America,” he replied.

Rick Perry, *Governor of Texas*

Rick Perry, whose poll numbers fell 13 points since early September, remains one of the GOP’s most conservative supporters of Israel. At a Likud supporters’ rally in New York City on September 20, he declared that Jerusalem should be fully under the control of the Israeli government. The US should “not be ambivalent,” he said, “between the terrorist tactics of Hamas and the security tactics of the legitimate and free State of Israel.” In a September 16 op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, Perry argued that Obama’s policies had encouraged the Palestinians to avoid direct negotiations with Israel.

Ron Paul, *United States Representative, Texas*

Ron Paul stands out from the other candidates as a libertarian who often condemns economic – and sometimes even political – support of Israel. Regarding a unilaterally declared Palestinian state, the twelve-term Congressman, who came in fourth in the poll with 11 percent, said that he had never been a big fan of the United Nations as an institution. In a *Texas Straight Talk* column on September 27, Mr. Paul criticized the US plan to block UN recognition of a Palestinian state. “Personally, I wish the United States would de-recognize the United Nations,” he wrote.

Newt Gingrich, *Former Speaker of the House of Representatives*

Newt Gingrich seems to demonstrate a deeper understanding of some of the issues than other candidates, but many of his statements are no less extreme than theirs. Gingrich has

called the Obama administration's policies towards Israel "suicidal," and he even suggested in 2010 that the White House's mistakes could "bring a second Holocaust." In an op-ed posted on Humanevents.com on August 8, Mr. Gingrich called for the US to cut funding to the UN if it recognized a Palestinian state. "UN recognition would take place totally apart from any negotiation with Israel, and without the Palestinians renouncing violence or acknowledging Israel's statehood," he wrote. With 7 percent of support, Mr. Gingrich tied Michele Bachmann in the poll.

Michele Bachmann, *United States Representative, Minnesota*

Evangelical Michele Bachmann's stance on Israel is mostly defined by her professed belief that those who betray Israel will be, in her words, "cursed." Bachmann has failed to articulate a nuanced policy towards Israel, preferring to talk about her summer experience on a kibbutz and what she considers her Jewish heritage. Although Bachmann seemed to be establishing herself as a frontrunner, her poll numbers fell sharply after Perry announced his candidacy. In the September 7 GOP presidential debate, Bachmann made only briefly reference to Israel, calling the 1967 borders "indefensible." She also urged President Obama to stop Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from traveling to the United Nations headquarters in New York, even though doing so would violate international law.

Rick Santorum, *Former United States Senator, Pennsylvania*

Like most of the other candidates, Rick Santorum has little experience in the international arena. Still, Mr. Santorum attempts to flex his foreign policy muscles by attacking the Obama administration as soft. Santorum, who received only 2 percent of support in the poll, said at a campaign luncheon on September 21 that the Palestinians could feel the "weakness" of the United States under the current administration: "They see it, they know it and they're going to exploit it."

Jon Huntsman, Jr., *Former Governor of Utah and US Ambassador to China*

Compared to the other candidates, the relatively moderate Jon Huntsman has focused less on offering unconditional support of Israel and more on highlighting President Obama's "misguided" Middle East policies. In a September 22 op-ed for the *National Review Online*, Mr. Huntsman argued that Obama's Middle East policies "directly contributed" to a breakdown of the peace process: "The people of Israel have lost confidence in the Obama administration and no longer feel the president understands Israel's security needs." As a former ambassador, Mr. Huntsman is the only GOP contender who can claim real foreign policy experience. Still, Mr. Huntsman ranked at the bottom of the GOP field, finishing with 1 percent of support in the recent poll.

Long-shot declared candidates Buddy Roemer, the former governor of Louisiana, and Gary E. Johnson, the former governor of New Mexico, were not mentioned in the poll.