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The Republican Primary Campaign: Lessons for Israel

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The Republican presidential primary campaign passed yet another turning point last week, with frontrunner Mitt Romney handily winning the Illinois primary. Despite conservative challenger Rick Santorum's victory Saturday in Louisiana, Romney likely will win the Republican Party's nomination, after a primary campaign lasting longer than expected. Now, stepping back from the headlines, what lessons should Israel's leaders draw from this election cycle so far?

The long process of picking a US president not only determines who will occupy the White House but also takes the pulse of the electorate. The discussion of foreign policy in this campaign shows just how much the public mood has shifted since 2008, when the US military presence in Iraq provoked sharp debate. Barack Obama built his candidacy on his opposition to the Iraq War, and John McCain attacked that position as evidence of Obama's weakness and cultural liberalism. Aspects of the war on terrorism – such as the future of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp – also played an important role in the campaign.

Foreign policy was clearly far from the major issue in the 2008 campaign, especially with the onset of the global financial crisis in the fall. But foreign policy differences between the parties were sharp, and the electorate viewed them as relevant and as part of the cultural identities of the candidates. In particular, conservative voters searched for a candidate who took what they viewed as a pro-military line. They saw that position as pitting them against not only the world of Islam but also the effete, peacenik liberalism embodied by Obama.

Today's cultural conservatives seem to be making no such demand. Their stances this primary season are based on opposition to the business elite (of Mitt Romney) much more than on a drive for a hawkish foreign policy. Another Republican camp – libertarian supporters of Ron Paul – has taken the opposite tack, with outright opposition to Middle East wars. After an initial burst, Paul's candidacy has faded, but even in this faded state Paul has continued to win over 20 percent of the vote in some contests.

Paul is an isolationist who opposes US foreign aid and military cooperation with Israel. His supporters certainly are not demanding a candidate who takes a hawkish line on Middle Eastern politics. Other Republicans reject Paul's extreme views. Still, even if the average Republican voter is not in the Ron Paul camp, his views on US policy in the Islamic world have shifted. In 2007, an ABCNews/*Washington Post* poll showed 85 percent of Republicans saying that the Afghanistan war was worth fighting. Now, Republicans divide evenly on the question, with only 47 percent supporting the war and 47 percent against it.

On the Republican campaign trail, the debate has shifted accordingly. Four years ago, only Ron Paul wavered from the hawkish party line. Now both Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich, the two candidates waving the conservative banner in the race, have raised core questions about the war. Even Gingrich, long a foreign policy hawk, has said that the Afghanistan mission may be one "that we're going to discover is not doable." Moreover, Gingrich said of the US in Afghanistan, "There are some problems where you have to say, 'You know, you are going to have to figure out how to live your own miserable life...because you clearly don't want to learn from me how to be unmiserable.'"

The Afghanistan mission was once the core part of the Bush-era war on terror. Its abandonment by Bush's own party is an important development. In that sense, 2012 may see the end of the neoconservative era.

To a large extent, the new winds in the Republican electorate on the wider anti-terror issues have not touched candidates' stances on policy toward Israel, and Republican candidates continue to criticize Obama as not supportive enough. Most of the Republican candidates have vied with each other for the position of most outspoken supporter of Israel.

Still, for Israel, the new attitudes among Republicans portend a shift. For the past decade, Israel's outreach efforts in the United States have relied on forging a connection in the campaign against terrorism. Israel's leaders have become accustomed to declare, in the words of Prime Minister Netanyahu in his address before Congress in 2011, "We stand together to fight terrorism." With at least part of the US electorate that connection worked, as terrorism was at the forefront of public concerns and how to approach the terrorism issue was at the forefront of the public debate. Especially in the years after 9/11, much of the US public supported a hawkish response to radical Islam; in that context, Israel was right to sell itself as a logical partner in that fight.

With the changing public mood in the US, however, the anti-terrorism mantras may have become jaded and worn. Even among Republicans, the "war on terror" has faded as a call to arms. If trends in US public opinion continue, Israel will need to change its message to US politicians and to the American public. Fortunately, Republican voters who once

mentally linked support for Israel with the anti-terrorism issue seem to have found a new (or additional) basis for their pro-Israel views, perhaps through evangelical religious beliefs. Still, Israel's leaders must not be complacent.

In the short term, Iran may remain the focus, but the life span of that issue depends on the degree of success in putting an end to the nuclear effort. Success, whether resulting from a military operation or diplomacy and sanctions, would be the emblem of US-Israeli cooperation. Anything less might mar relations for years to come, especially given the US public's unease about Middle Eastern wars.

Israel needs a new message to the American public. In recent years, much outreach has focused on minorities and liberals, as the partisan gap in support for Israel has widened. These efforts should continue. But Israel's leaders risk a fundamental surprise if they take conservatives' support for granted. The 2012 campaign might be bringing the first, subtle stirrings of new foreign policy currents among conservatives. For Israel, the lesson is that its message must adjust to suit the new mood and not be hitched too tightly to the anti-terrorist mast.

