



***INSS Insight*** No. 732, August 12, 2015

## **The 2016 Race for the White House: The Current Picture**

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With less than six months to go until the first votes are cast in Iowa and New Hampshire, the races for the Democratic and Republican nominations for the White House are gaining momentum. Perhaps predictably, issues and personalities have taken center stage. Israel-related issues have also played a role, especially because of the debate over the Iran nuclear deal, and not necessarily in a way that serves Israel's interests.

On the Democratic side, the clear leader is Hillary Clinton. Her campaign has raised far more money than any other Democratic contender, with polls also giving her a 35 percent or greater edge over the rest of the field. This holds even when the name of Vice President Joe Biden is added by the pollsters, though he has yet to enter the race. Nonetheless, the Clinton campaign is still worried by the FBI inquiry as to allegations that, while Secretary of State, Clinton used private e-mails to send and store classified official documents. As long as this file is not closed, Republicans in particular will tap this issue for attack purposes. Another problem dogging Clinton is her inability to excite Democrats on a widespread level.

Behind Clinton in the polls is a candidate who has in fact generated that grassroots support: Independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, challenging Clinton from the left. Sanders has focused squarely on rising inequality and what he calls the "billionaire class." To curb the outsized influence of the very rich, Sanders proposes hikes to the estate tax and public financing of campaigns (designed to reduce the influence of big corporate money).

While Clinton and Sanders (and certainly Biden) support President Obama on the Iran deal, Sanders also issued a critical statement after Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech before Congress in March 2015, accusing Netanyahu of using the speech for domestic political purposes. For his part, Senator Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat known for his personal friendship with Netanyahu, announced that he will vote against the President on the Iran deal. The opposing Sanders and Schumer positions reflect the rift between US and Israeli political leaders and within the Democratic Party over the Iran deal. The debate in Congress on this issue threatens to be detrimental to overall US-

Israeli relations, as it makes Israel into a partisan issue in an already overheated political environment. To the extent that the Vice President seeks to build bridges with Israel and thereby win support among pro-Israel Democrats, Biden's joining the race might actually have a calming effect within the party.

The race on the Republican side is much stormier. In late July 2015, Israel figured in that storm when former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee said that by implementing the Iran nuclear deal, Barack Obama "will take the Israelis and march them to the door of the oven." That remark earned Huckabee nearly universal condemnation. Democrats pounced, Republican rivals accused Huckabee of overstepping, and Israelis took umbrage. "Dear Mr. Huckabee, no one is marching Jews to the ovens anymore," wrote Israel's Transportation Minister Yisrael Katz, "That is why we established the State of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces, and if necessary, we will know how to defend ourselves by ourselves."

Israel took a lower profile at the Republicans' August 6, 2015 debates in Cleveland, though Middle East policy questions were prominent. Of the seventeen candidates, in two separate groups of ten and seven, some candidates fared better than others, but none emerged as the winner who took all. During and after the debate, Donald Trump, who still leads in the polls on the Republican side, presented a familiar dose of controversy. If Sanders is the independent-minded populist running for the Democratic nomination, Trump carries that banner most prominently on the Republican side. Indeed, the debates strengthened Trump's image as a non-conformist provocateur set apart from a US political scene dominated by controlled, polished politicians. Trump's refusal to commit that he would not run independently if not chosen as the Republican candidate should serve as a warning to the Republican Party, especially if Trump declines in the polls. This may well happen following Trump's offensive confrontation with a Fox News moderator whom Trump attacked, further estranging Trump from the Republican establishment. Many Republicans believe that independent candidate Ross Perot damaged their chances of winning the White House in 1992, and they may yet fret about what an independent Trump candidacy could mean.

One-minute-per-answer debates are not the best way to assess the depth of candidates' views on specific issues, yet they underscored that the Republican camp in the US is adamantly against the Iran deal. Even Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, known for his more dovish stances on foreign policy, argued that the Obama administration should have negotiated from a position of greater strength. Paul added that as president, he would not waive sanctions until Iran proved it had implemented its part of the bargain. Most of the Republican candidates said they would withdraw the United States from the Iran deal as one of their first acts as president. On foreign affairs in general, the candidates heavily criticized President Obama for not being a leader, for trying to lead from behind, and for not stepping up as commander-in-chief. However, the only candidate willing to commit

US forces on the ground to defeat ISIS was Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina. For his part, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush indicated that his father's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was a mistake. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal was the first to point out that President Obama fails to call the real enemy, radical Islamic terrorism, by name. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas repeated the point. Paul, meanwhile, emphasized his opposition to foreign aid, including to Israel. The Palestinian issue did not arise in the debates at all.

Judging by the Republican debates and the basic pro-Israel disposition of the leading Democratic candidate, it seems at least on the surface that Israel has suffered very little damage in terms of the presidential race and among US public opinion. Carly Fiorina (in the eyes of many, a clear winner of the first of the two debates) said that one of her first acts as president would be to call "her good friend Netanyahu." Cruz would move the US embassy to Jerusalem as one of his first moves. Still, all of this is debate talk, before the battle on Capitol Hill over the Iran deal and before the ramifications ensue. The stances of the presidential candidates may also not reflect deeper trends in public opinion – especially among Democrats increasingly alienated from Israel – that could rise to the political surface in the future.

In the fast-changing reality of the Middle East, the status of the Iran deal is just one issue, albeit a major one, in the long race for the White House. In micro-answer televised debates, candidates cannot present viable alternatives to current US policies. The ability of Israel to influence US political and military policies in the Middle East should not be confused by campaign language.

Still, developments in the campaign do provide lessons for Israel. The Republican Party eschewed the non-interventionism of Ron Paul four years ago, with the lion's share of the party holding to a hawkish line on foreign policy and blanket opposition to the Iran deal. On the Democratic side, the rift within the party over the Iran nuclear deal has not yet come to the fore in the campaign. Sometime next year, though, if as expected she is the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton may need to decide how to balance between supporters of the deal (that include a sitting Democratic president) and opponents of the deal among pro-Israel Democrats (including, for example, Israeli-American businessman Haim Saban, a significant Clinton donor). What will her decision mean for continued US bipartisan support for Israel? As the campaign progresses, questions such as this are important to watch.