

Israel and the 2008 US Presidential Elections

Introduction

The US Presidential election on 4 November 2008 has the potential to have a major impact on Israel, the Middle East Peace Process and Israel's relations with its neighbours. November 2007 saw the launching of the first Peace Process in seven years. With an original US-imposed deadline of the end of 2008 for the Annapolis negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, it will be up to the new American President, be that Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain, to decide how Washington will engage with leaders in the region to deliver a lasting peace.

This paper seeks to compare what Barack Obama and John McCain have said in regards to Israel and the Middle East throughout the US Presidential campaign, as well as the statements made by their appointed Vice Presidential running mates. The paper also provides an overview of the policies that the candidates may pursue if they win office, as well as some reactions to the candidates' respective approaches to the US relationship with Israel and the wider Middle East.

Barack Obama

Throughout the Democratic Party Primaries and the ensuing Presidential election campaign, Senator Barack Obama has pitched himself as a break from the current administration, both in his approach to foreign policy and in terms of his ability to improve the standing of America and her allies in the world. He has consistently argued that America has been endangered by a loss influence in the world during the past eight years and that he is the candidate to reverse this trend. Accusing President George W Bush of pursuing a flawed foreign policy that has alienated huge swathes of public opinion, Obama claims that the employment of careful, aggressive and vigorous diplomacy will make America and its allies safer.



Retired Israeli Defense Force Brigadier General, Shlomo Brom, supports this analysis, arguing that the Bush administration's policies have harmed Israeli interests and that "Barack Obama will be a better president for Israel than Mr. John McCain because it seems that the policies of Mr. McCain are too close to the current policies of President Bush".ⁱ

Perhaps the most important endorsement that Obama has received, certainly in the area of foreign affairs, has been from Republican ex-US Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Powell said that both Obama and McCain are qualified to be commander in chief, but he described Obama as a "transformational figure" representing a vital "generational change" in the Presidency and argued that Obama is better suited to handle the nation's economic problems as well as to help improve its standing in the world.ⁱⁱ

Senator Barack Obama declares himself to be a true friend of Israel. In his speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference, he said that "Our [US-Israel] alliance is based on shared interests and shared values".ⁱⁱⁱ Obama and Biden's campaign website, on which Israel features very strongly, states that both the Presidential and Vice Presidential candidate support a two state solution to the conflict. They argue that they have directly supported this approach by co-sponsoring the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act 2006. The Act outlawed direct US assistance to all entities controlled by Hamas until it meets the Quartet's principles of engagement by renouncing violence, recognising Israel's right to exist and abiding by all previous agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority.^{iv}

In an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of the US current affairs magazine, *The Atlantic*, Barack Obama was questioned on the urgency with which the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians should be addressed. Obama, who has pledged to appoint a permanent envoy to the Middle East, answered that he believes the Peace Process will require the close attention of the next US President as the conflict has a negative effect throughout the world:

"I think that this constant wound, that this constant sore, does infect all of our foreign policy. The lack of a resolution to this problem provides an excuse for anti-American militant jihadists to engage in inexcusable actions, and so we have a national-security interest in solving this."^v

In an interview two months later with David Horowitz, Editor of *The Jerusalem Post*, Barack was questioned again on the Peace Process and whether he believed that a two state solution should necessarily follow Israel's pre-1967 borders. Obama recognised that Israel may want borders beyond 1967 for security reasons and that the Palestinians would oppose this, but he argued that there will have to be some "give" on both sides. He urged both the Israelis and Palestinians to "move beyond rigid, formulaic or ideological approach and take a practical approach that looks at the larger picture and says, 'What's going to be the best way for us to achieve security and peace?'"^{vi}

Obama has been a sharp critic of Palestinian terror attacks and the damage that they have done to the Peace Process. In response to Hamas' rockets and mortars against southern Israel, Obama sent a letter to Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, urging that any UN resolution concerning the situation in Gaza should:

"clearly and unequivocally condemn the rocket attacks against Israel, and should make clear that Israel has the right to defend itself against such actions."^{vii}

While visiting the town of Sderot in July this year, Obama said he would work from the moment he returns to America, to tell the story of Sderot for the sake of the future of the town's inhabitants.^{viii}

Barack Obama has also spoken out against the Iranian regime's nuclear ambitions and sponsorship of terrorism. He authored and was the primary sponsor of the leading piece of US legislation aimed at containing Iran, the 'Iran Sanctions Enabling Act'.^{ix} During his speech to the AIPAC Policy Conference he stated that he wanted to eliminate the threat that the regime poses to Israel and the world. During the second Presidential Candidates debate in October, he went further, arguing for greater sanctions against Iran. Obama said:

"We cannot allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon. It would be a game-changer in the region. Not only would it threaten Israel, our strongest ally in the region and one of our strongest allies in the world, but it would also create a possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists....And so it's unacceptable. And I will do everything that's required to prevent it."^x

Controversially, however, Obama declared in a debate on *CNN* last year that he would meet face-to-face with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.^{xi} This statement has been criticised by John McCain for demonstrating a naivety about diplomacy. Obama, however, maintains his support for stepped up diplomacy with Iran, stressing that the goal of talks would be for Iran to abandon its nuclear programme and to end its sponsorship of terrorism. Obama has refused to take military options off the table, portraying the proposed US-Iranian talks as an important step in building international support for tougher measures against Iran.^{xii}

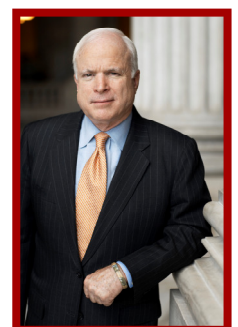
Obama chose Senator Joe Biden as his Vice Presidential Candidate. Biden is an experienced Congressman, having entered the US Senate in 1972. He is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and is widely respected for his knowledge of foreign affairs. During a recent meeting with Jewish voters in south Florida, Senator Biden declared that Israel's security would be improved if Barack Obama is elected US President, asserting that the Democrats would make America more influential in the world and would therefore better protect Israel.^{xiii}

Throughout the election Barack Obama has faced numerous smear campaigns on the issue of Israel. The Republican Jewish Coalition has run a series of newspaper adverts accusing Obama of being "anti-Israel"^{xiv} and Democrat grandee and civil rights activist, Reverend Jesse Jackson, allegedly claimed that an Obama presidency would mean an end to "decades of putting Israel's interests first".^{xv} The Obama team have been quick to dismiss these views, assuring voters that Jackson is "not an advisor to the Obama campaign and is therefore in no position to interpret or share Barack Obama's views on Israel and foreign policy".^{xvi} Wendy Morigi, Obama's national security spokesperson, also re-asserted that Obama has a "fundamental commitment to a strong US-Israel relationship".^{xvii}

John McCain

Whilst Barack Obama and others have criticised John McCain's candidacy as offering nothing more than a continuance of George W Bush's policies, McCain has been keen to stress his unique and personal wealth of experience in foreign affairs, including most recently in the Iraq War.

McCain leads the Republicans on the US Senate Committee on Armed Services and as he has reminded voters on many occasions during his campaign, he was calling for an increased number of troops to be sent to Iraq long before it became official White House policy in January 2007. The 'surge' policy, which has widely been considered a success, was opposed by Obama. McCain



heavily criticised Obama for this during the second Presidential Candidates debate, asserting that “Obama would have brought our troops home in defeat”.^{xviii}

Beyond the Republican candidate’s experience in Iraq, McCain has certainly offered Israel much in terms of warm words during his campaign. In an interview with Middle East analyst Jeffrey Goldberg in May, McCain asserted that:

“Anybody who is familiar with the history of the Jewish people and with the Zionist idea can’t help but admire those who established the Jewish Homeland. I think it’s remarkable that Zionism has been in the middle of wars and great trials and it has held fast to the ideals of democracy and social justice and human rights.”^{xix}

David Horowitz, Editor of *The Jerusalem Post*, interviewed John McCain regarding his views on a whole host of regional issues, including the Peace Process. While Obama referred to Israel’s “aggressive settlement construction” in his wide-ranging analysis of the challenges faced by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, McCain avoided such details. Questioned on the issue of settlements, McCain replied that “Israel is not a client of the United States of America”, identifying the main problem between the Israelis and Palestinians as being Hamas’ rocket attacks on the Israeli town of Sderot and surrounding Negev region. Giving his support for a two state solution, but referring to the emergence of a Palestinian state as a development he would not have a direct hand in creating, McCain said “we have a unique relationship between the United States and Israel, but that doesn’t mean we would discriminate against a Palestinian state if it were created”.^{xx}

McCain was also questioned on his approach to the Peace Process in his interview with *The Atlantic*, this time spelling out his vision in greater detail. McCain used this opportunity to disagree with Obama over the relevance of the conflict to global terrorism, saying that if the issue were solved “we would still face the enormous threat of radical Islamic extremism”. He also somewhat backtracked on his assertion that Israel is not a client of the United States and took the opportunity to stress his wealth of experience in foreign affairs:

“I would have a hands-on approach. I would be the chief negotiator. I have been there for thirty years. I know the leaders, I know them extremely well. Ehud Barack and I have gone back thirty years. I knew Olmert when he was mayor of Jerusalem. I’ve met many times with Netanyahu. I’ve met with Mahmoud Abbas.”^{xxi}

As well as the threat posed by Hamas, McCain has demonstrated that he is also keenly aware of the threat that Iran not only poses to Israel, but the entire world. The Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatened Israel most recently during his speech to the UN General Assembly, claiming that “the Zionist regime is on a definite slope to collapse, and there is no way for it to get out of the cesspool created by itself and its supporters”.^{xxii} This is one in a long line of aggressive statements made by the Iranian President, who first called for Israel to be “wiped off the map” on 26 October 2005.^{xxiii} McCain argues on his campaign website that if Iran were to develop a nuclear weapon it would be hugely emboldened and could possibly pass nuclear weapons and materials to terrorist networks.^{xxiv} During an interview with Israeli TV, McCain went further, saying:

“Significant, very painful sanctions might stop Iran, but The United States of American has committed itself to never allowing another Holocaust.”^{xxv}

McCain’s experience in foreign affairs has, however, been arguably somewhat undermined by his choice of running mate, Sarah Palin. The Alaskan Governor, who has touted her state’s proximity to Russia as part of her foreign policy experience, had only ever met the leader of one country (Iceland) until very recently. Since then she has been to New York to meet with a number of foreign leaders at the UN General Assembly.^{xxvi} Palin, who obtained her first passport in 2006, only travelled outside of North America for the first time in 2007, visiting members of the Alaskan National Guard serving on Kuwait’s border with Iraq.^{xxvii}

During the Vice Presidential Candidates debate with Joe Biden, Sarah Palin described Israel as the US’s “strongest and best ally in the Middle East”. She said that if she and McCain won the election they would support Israel, a two state solution and the opening of a US embassy in Jerusalem, a requirement of the bi-partisan US Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 that has not yet come about. In support of McCain’s policy on Iran, Sarah Palin said that “a leader like Ahmadinejad who is not sane or stable... is not one whom we can allow to acquire nuclear energy, nuclear weapons.”^{xxviii}

Conclusions

Whilst both Presidential candidates have gone to great effort to demonstrate their commitment to Israel and the Peace Process and to emphasise the dangers posed by Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, it is only Barack Obama who has stressed that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians must be urgently resolved. In addition, marked differences can also be seen in the two candidates' general approach to foreign affairs. While Obama has certainly faced a large amount of negative campaigning on the issue of Israel, Harvard Professor of Law Alan M. Dershowitz argues that Obama is the best candidate for Israel in the long-term as he offers a liberal perspective. While there is little to separate the two Presidential candidates' rhetoric, Dershowitz believes it is Obama's potential effect upon global opinion of Israel that is important:

“Obama's views on Israel will have greater impact on young people, on Europe, on the media and on others who tend to identify with the liberal perspective... The election of Barack Obama - a liberal supporter of Israel - will enhance Israel's position among wavering liberals.”^{xxix}

Former Haaretz Washington correspondent, Akiva Eldar, however has argued that whilst Obama, as a Democrat, may be more likely than McCain to be involved in the Peace Process, he will have to work to convince Jewish Americans to support him on this. McCain he argues does not rely on the American Jewish vote, nor the conservative Christians that supported Bush, giving him more space to work for peace in the Middle East.^{xxx} A poll released by the Gallup organisation revealed that American Jews favour Obama over McCain, by a 74 to 22 percent margin.^{xxxi}

Whilst Barack Obama has only been a Congressman since January 2005, John McCain is widely regarded as being a long-time authoritative and independent voice in the Senate, having first become a Congressman in 1983. Unlike McCain, however, Obama is not associated with the hugely unpopular Iraq War and whilst lacking experience, can offer a clean break from the Republican Party's foreign policy failures over the last eight years. While Obama has chosen a running mate that complements his own message of change with significant experience in foreign affairs, McCain has chosen a partner that arguably undermines his own Presidential campaign's focus on authority and foreign policy experience.

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i 'Retired Generals of the Israeli Defense Forces and high-ranking Mossad officials discussing Barack Obama and Middle East policy', website of the Jewish Council for Education and Research (JCER), as viewed on 27 October 2008

ii NBC's 'Meet the Press', 19 October 2008

iii AIPAC Policy Conference, 4 June 2008

iv 'Israel Fact Sheet', Barack Obama campaign website, as viewed on 27 October 2008

v 'Obama on Zionism and Hamas' The Atlantic, 12 May 2008

vi 'Obama on Iran, Syria, and Jerusalem', Jerusalem Post, 24 July 2008

vii Sen. Obama's Letter to U.N. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Barack Obama campaign website, 22 January 2008

viii Obama Press conference, Sderot, 23 July 2008

ix 'Israel Fact Sheet', Barack Obama campaign website, as viewed on 27 October 2008

x Second Presidential Candidates Debate, Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, 7 October 2008

xi CNN, 24 July 2007

xii 'The O'Reilly Factor', FOX News, 4 September 2008

xiii Joe Biden public meeting, Deerfield Beach, Florida, 2 September 2008

xiv 'Concerned about Obama', <http://www.rjchq.org/>, as viewed on 27 October 2008

xv 'The O Jesse Knows', New York Post, 14 October 2008

xvi Wendy Morigi statement, 14 October 2008

xvii Wendy Morigi statement, 14 October 2008

xviii Second Presidential Candidates Debate, Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee 7 October 2008

xix 'McCain on Israel, Iran and the Holocaust', The Atlantic, 20 May 2008

xx 'The nature of the enemy is hydra-headed', Jerusalem Post, 20 March 2008

xxi 'McCain on Israel, Iran and the Holocaust', The Atlantic, 20 May 2008

xxii Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech to the UN General Assembly, 23 September 2008

xxiii 'World Without Zionism' conference, Tehran, 26 October 2005

xxiv 'John McCain on Security in the Middle East', John McCain campaign website, 2 June 2008

xxv Arutz Shtaim News, 21 July 2008

xxvi 'Palin gets an introduction to foreign policy', LA Times, 24 September 2008

xxvii 'Palin camp clarifies extent of Iraq trip', Boston Globe, 13 September 2008

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xxix 'Double Standard Watch: Why I support Israel and Obama', Jerusalem Post, 15 October 2008

xxx 'US vote stirs little anxiety in Israel', Kuwait Times, 13 October 2008

xxxi Gallup, 24 October 2008