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On the Brink of the New Year: The Race to the White House

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With about 300 days to go, the picture of the upcoming presidential race is not yet clear. Caucuses and primaries in January 2012 may narrow the Republican arena but still not point to the likely winner. Meanwhile, December 2011 proved to be a memorable campaign month, when more promises than ever about Israel were made by the incumbent President and all the Republican contenders, bar one.

Speaking to the Assembly of the Union for Reform Judaism (December 16, 2011), and in the presence of Israel's Minister of Defense, President Obama described his vision, achievements, and actions for Israel during his three years in office. The President emphasized his unwavering support for Israel's security, asserting that it was difficult to name any other US administration that had given so much to Israel. "I am proud to say that no U.S. administration has done more in support of Israel's security than ours. None. Don't let anybody else tell you otherwise. It is a fact. I'm proud that even in these difficult times we've fought for and secured the most funding for Israel in history."¹

Unlike many of his previous speeches, Obama did not specify a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or to the settlements issue. However, referring to Iran, the President renewed the threat that had temporarily disappeared from official US rhetoric: "We are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons...And that's why, rest assured, we will take no options off the table. We have been clear."² Three days later, in an interview to CBS, Secretary of Defense Panetta said that Iran would not be permitted to develop nuclear capabilities: "If they proceed and we get intelligence that they're proceeding in developing a nuclear weapon, then we will take whatever steps are necessary to stop it."³

¹ Remarks by the President at the 71st General Assembly of the Union for Reform Judaism, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/16/remarks-president-71st-general-assembly-union-reform-judaism>.

² Ibid.

³ CBS website, December 19, 2011.

Lending concrete evidence of US support for Israel's security, the President signed the bill appropriating \$235.7 million to the development of the anti-missile systems Arrow 2 and 3 and David's Sling. This aid is on top of the \$205 million the US contributed to the development of the Iron Dome system, and both are in addition to the annual \$3 billion in US assistance to Israel.

Nonetheless, Obama continued to be the target of sharp criticism from the Republican candidates and pro-Republican press. A *Washington Times* editorial asked if Obama really meant it when saying he had done more for Israel's security than any other president. The editorial's authors mention Truman's crucial role in establishing the State of Israel, Nixon's role in replenishing the IDF arsenals in 1973, and the military assistance during Reagan's tenure. They accuse Obama of pushing Mubarak out, thus endangering the peace treaty with Israel – an achievement by President Carter, although they would be hard pressed to consider Carter a friend of Israel. "Instead of patting himself on the back, Mr. Obama should come up with a list of tangible things he has done to ensure the security of Israel. It would be an extremely short list."⁴

In an ad published on December 15, 2011 in five key newspapers in the US, the Emergency Committee for Israel, headed by Jewish conservative William Kristol and Christian evangelist Gary Bauer, accused Obama of treating Israel like a punching bag. Those who criticize the President in this vein point to statements such as by Panetta at the Saban Forum on December 2, 2011, telling Israel, "just get to the damn table" (i.e., negotiations with the Palestinians). They also refer to a November 30, 2011 speech made by Howard Gutman, the US Ambassador to Belgium, from which it can be inferred that the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is a cause for anti-Semitism in Europe.⁵ At least three of the Republican candidates called for Gutman's removal.

On the Republican side, candidates competed with each other as to who would take stauncher pro-Israel action. In a CNN interview of December 7, 2011, Newt Gingrich stated that as someone close to Prime Minister Netanyahu, he did not believe that the latter would not inform him of a pending Israeli attack on Iran. Gingrich promised to assist Israel on this matter, arguing that nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran could result in a second Holocaust. If elected, on the day he is sworn, he would move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and would not criticize Israel for settlement activity. He would also consider Pollard's release.

The Israeli government ought not to be overly impressed with this rich list of promises. Some, such as moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem, have been made in the past, but candidates turned presidents very quickly learn the constraints of political realities.

⁴ *Washington Times*, December 7, 2011.

⁵ US Embassy in Belgium website.

What the contest of promises did achieve is attention to the role of Israel and the Jewish vote in the 2012 presidential race. It is common knowledge that foreign affairs capture only a marginal place in the public debate before the presidential elections, and even Israel cannot change this trend. Although 78 percent of Jews voted for Obama in 2008, recent polls indicate a sharp decline in Jewish support for the President, down to 51 percent.⁶ This may constitute a meaningful shift in Florida, for example, but hardly in Iowa or New Hampshire. When Gingrich states that the Palestinians are "an invented people,"⁷ he likely eyes more of the Evangelical vote than the Jewish vote.⁸ If elected president, Gingrich would presumably want to erase this statement, that is, if he is interested in the US brokering attempts to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The January 2012 caucuses and primaries will supply only preliminary and partial indications as to the strength of the Republican candidates. They will probably narrow the Republican field but not produce a clear front runner. The first test will occur in Iowa's 99 counties. The numerical weight of this state does not justify the importance attached to the results there, nor have they served – since 1972, when Iowa became the first to hold the primaries – a good tool for predicting the final outcome of the races. George Bush Sr. won there in 1980, but Reagan subsequently captured the nomination and won the election. Robert Dole won in 1988 but Bush Sr. ultimately won the presidential election. Mike Huckabee won in 2008, but McCain became the Republican candidate.

The latest polls indicate a close race in Iowa – 22 percent to Gingrich, 21 to Congressman Ron Paul, and 16 to Mitt Romney.⁹ In recent weeks Paul has emerged as the "dark horse." His success should worry Israel, as it would focus the debate during the advanced stages of the race on US assistance to Israel, politically and security-wise. While in past races divergence on issues related to Israel was limited, Paul introduces a totally different dimension to the debate. Even if one dismisses the accusation of his former aide, Eric Dondero, that Paul is anti-Israel and wishes that Israel did not exist,¹⁰ if Paul remains in the race, whether as a Republican or as an independent, this issue will stay on the agenda and not necessarily serve Israel well. At 76, Paul is the oldest candidate, and that might be detrimental to his prospects just as it was in the 2008 elections for McCain.

A week after Iowa are the New Hampshire primaries. Even more interesting, however, will be the Florida primaries, both because of the state's relative weight (5 percent of the electors needed to be elected as president) and its large Jewish community.

⁶ Article by Scott Clement in *Foreign Policy*, December 7, 2011.

⁷ Jewish Channel, December 10, 2011.

⁸ "Evangelicals Flocking toward Newt Gingrich," *Daily Beast*, November 28, 2011.

⁹ *Politico*, December 13, 2011; *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2011.

¹⁰ In www.rightwingnews.com.

Important dates in January 2012:

Tuesday, January 3, 2012	Caucuses in Iowa (both parties)
Tuesday, January 10, 2012	Primaries in New Hampshire
Saturday, January 21, 2012	Republican primaries in South Carolina and Democratic primaries in Nevada
Tuesday, 31 January 2012	Republican primaries in Florida

