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**The Race for the White House:
What the "Invisible Primary" Has Taught Us So Far
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The long campaign for the US presidency is well underway. The spate of campaign launches in recent weeks only formalizes what has been unfolding for months, namely, the so-called "invisible primary," in which candidates jockey behind the scenes to raise money, hire campaign staff, and win over key activists. Voters have eight months to wait before even the first of the caucuses and primaries. Still, among the donors and activists, much is taking place, some of it of interest to Israel.

With Barack Obama leaving the scene, no incumbent is in the running. That said, the Democrats have a candidate with some of the attributes of incumbency: Hillary Clinton, whose name recognition, experience, activist base, and fundraising potential give her an exceptional head start over any possible challenger. For that reason, only one Democrat – Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont – has fully stepped up to challenge Clinton for the party nomination. Former Maryland governor Martin O'Malley is expected to join the race soon, and other potential challengers – such as former senator Jim Webb from Virginia, and former senator and Rhode Island governor Lincoln Chaffee – could step forward in the coming months. One or more could, at some point, gain traction by challenging Clinton from the left. Still, observers agree that ultimately, Clinton is highly likely to win the Democratic nomination, even more likely than at this stage in the 2008 campaign, which she ultimately lost to Barack Obama.

he Republican side is crowded with talented candidates in a potential field of a dozen or more hopefuls. Establishment Republicans have so far sidestepped New Jersey governor Chris Christie and coalesced around Jeb Bush, former governor of Florida and potentially the third in his family to reach the Oval Office. Bush has done well in fundraising, but the party's more right wing activist base is questioning his bona fides. That activist base can choose from a plethora of more conservative candidates. Among these, former Wisconsin governor Scott Walker has gained momentum at the grassroots. Still, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, or others could emerge with greater strength, and both Rubio (\$40 million pledged) and Cruz (\$31 million already raised) have registered

significant fundraising achievements, in Cruz's case due mainly to a single big-check donor. Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky will carry the libertarian banner in the campaign, and in recent years Paul has made efforts to build good relations with pro-Israel groups in Washington.

All candidates have voiced support for Israel, which remains, despite the tension of the past few months between Obama and Netanyahu, a linchpin of American politics. Republican candidates have taken aim at President Obama's record on Israel and now, his position on Iran. In this, Hillary Clinton finds herself torn between, on the one hand, her ties with the Obama administration and the party's activists, and on the other hand, a set of Democratic pro-Israel donors skeptical of the emerging Iran deal.

In fact, the *New York Times* reported, some pro-Israel campaign contributions have shifted from Democratic to Republican candidates. The extent of the shift is unclear, mostly because US campaign funding in general is so opaque. If this does happen, though, it could have consequences for Israel and the US-Israel relationship. Traditionally, Jewish donors, some not necessarily focused on policy toward Israel, have given a substantial share of the funds raised by Democratic presidential candidates (estimated by some as one-third of the total). A shift in pro-Israel funds toward Republicans could fray ties with Democrats and tilt the fragile balance sustaining bipartisan support for Israel. Some pro-Israel donors are, in fact, staying put; media mogul Haim Saban has pledged to give "as much as needed" for Hillary Clinton's campaign.

On the Republican side, prominent pro-Israel donor Sheldon Adelson is as active as ever, despite brewing legal troubles. A number of Republican candidates met with Adelson during a Republican Jewish Coalition confab last month, in what the *Politico* news site dubbed the "Sheldon Adelson primary." Still, the influence of even big-dollar donors like Adelson promises to be dwarfed by truly massive funding from the billionaire Koch brothers, who are not Jewish and whose interest in politics is unrelated to Israel and who are expected to infuse nearly \$900 million into the race. To match the combined firepower of Republican fundraising (including the Koch brothers), the Hillary Clinton campaign (and supporting groups) have set a fundraising target of \$2.5 billion.

In addition to raising money, candidates are also recruiting their teams of advisors, including on Middle East policy. Jeb Bush has nabbed Harvard professor Meghan O'Sullivan, viewed as tied with the Republican realist camp more than with the neoconservative one. Other big names, including from the neoconservative wing, are quietly in contact with the campaigns. For her part, Hillary Clinton has drafted Jake Sullivan, one of her aides at the State Department. Sullivan played a role in early contacts with Iran but is known as more skeptical toward the regime than others in administration

circles. The make-up of advisory teams may signal candidates' thinking on policy, and the recruiting season is now, during the "invisible primary" stage. This bears attention in the months ahead, even before the campaign before voters begins in full force.

Going into that intensified campaign, it is not yet clear what role foreign policy will play in voters' decisions. Generally, elections in the US – as elsewhere – are decided on domestic issues, especially the economy. Still, some polls have shown a heightened interest in foreign policy, given the emergence of ISIS and resurgence of the threat of terrorism. A foreign policy debate could be interesting in this campaign field, as many candidates bring with them either a substantial foreign policy record (Hillary Clinton) or a fully-formed worldview (Rand Paul and Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina). Public debate on foreign policy could serve as a barometer of the US electorate, especially on the crucial questions of policy toward Russia, the emerging deal with Iran, and the level of US involvement in the Middle East. Specifically, is the US public still haunted by the aftermath of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? The state of public opinion and the signals sent to the incoming president could prove important in directing the next administration's approach.

For now, that debate will wait. The process is still in its "invisible primary" stage, when donors and activists are more important targets for the candidates than is public opinion. At this point, the key takeaway for Israel is that the pro-Israel consensus has remained solid at the apex of US politics. The arena to watch is the Democratic side. Strong open criticism of Israel among some left wing activists has already weakened Israel's standing on US college campuses. The campaign may reveal whether, or at what pace, that same dynamic moves upward. The potential movement of pro-Israel donors from the Democratic to Republican column may signal that they too feel a change in political winds. If so, that signals that Israel and its supporters must work even harder to build support among Democrats and keep the bipartisan balance that has been so essential to the US-Israel bond for so long.

