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## How the GOP Became the Israel Party

**Bill Kristol and John McCain have replaced Robert Novak and Pat Buchanan in Republican foreign policy influence.**

By SCOTT MCCONNELL

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When the unexpectedly detailed P5+1 framework agreement with Iran was announced last Thursday, Illinois Republican Mark Kirk made a bizarre comment. “We all know” said the senator, that this is going to end with “a mushroom cloud somewhere near Tehran”—a result of Israel having to go to war to “clean up the mess” made by American and European negotiators.

A few days earlier John McCain had expressed the wish that Israel “go rogue” and attack Iran in order to upend the Iran negotiations.

It would have been one thing if such comments had come from backbench congressmen. But McCain is a former GOP presidential nominee, one of his party’s most prominent foreign policy spokesmen. Kirk is the co-sponsor of what was, until recently, the major Senate legislation intended to scuttle the Iran negotiations—a leader in GOP “pro-Israel” circles. Yet neither remark sparked a repudiation, or even any reaction at all. They were what one expects from the GOP these days, recklessness about war and peace fused with a passion for Israel. It was if all the diffuse sentiments which once fueled American nationalism and militarism were concentrated into a tight stream and displaced onto Israel, turning the country into the fantasy surrogate of American hawks. The conservative belief in American exceptionalism is like Zionism, *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol boasted. Kirk and McCain may know that Americans have little enthusiasm for another Mideast war; the U.S. Army understands perfectly well that no occupation of Iran could be sustained, and America would have zero international support if it tried. But no matter, they have Israel.

Even 20 years ago some Republican senator would have signaled some collegial disagreement with Kirk and McCain. A Bob Dole or Dick Lugar or a Mark Hatfield would have let on that this sentiment wasn’t the only opinion in the party. Now if there are any who dissent, they dare not speak. Benjamin Netanyahu has become the symbolic leader of the GOP, and even he is probably not as aggressive as most in the party would like him to be.

How did this transformation occur? How did the party of Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan come to this? The *New York Times* published two recent pieces exploring this subject. The first, by Peter Baker, takes off from observing Jeb Bush very quickly disassociating himself from former Secretary of State James Baker’s moderate speech at J Street; the second, by Eric Lipton, explored the rapid growth in ties between hawkish pro-Israel donors and the Republican Party.

Baker’s piece fills out the basics: the top realist foreign policy voices of the 1980s and ‘90s GOP, Baker, and Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft have no influence anymore. Jeb Bush threw James Baker under the bus at the first squawk from Sheldon Adelson; support for the Israeli right has become a Republican litmus test. To explain this, Baker mentions the new donors, the rise of right-wing evangelicals within the party, the vague sense emerging from 9/11 that Israel and the United States faced the same enemy in Islamic terrorism, and the pro-Israeli leadership of George W. Bush, who repudiated the foreign policy realism of his father.

Lipton focuses on the new money stream. He shows that Adelson, Paul Singer, and other right-wing, pro-Israel donors, their spending unleashed by the Citizens United Supreme Court decision, have pushed the GOP past the Democrats as recipients of “pro-Israel” PAC money. He

uncovers some fairly shocking facts, such as the rapid infusion of “pro-Israel” funds into Arkansas freshman senator Tom Cotton’s campaigns. This detailed reporting about Israel-related money in a widely read centrist publication is an important and welcome development: until recently, it was subject hidden in whisper and awkward euphemism, as when two election cycles ago, retired general and possible presidential candidate Wesley Clark referred to “New York money people” pushing for war with Iran. Clark had to be walked through an apology with the assistance of Abe Foxman.

But important as the finance angle is, the subject has other important dimensions. If Sheldon Adelson and Paul Singer had tried to purchase the Mideast policy of the Republican Party 20 or 30 years ago, they would have failed, even under the new campaign finance rules. I am not persuaded by the evangelical argument: my rough sense is that Christian Zionism may have peaked 15 years ago within the evangelical movement; increasingly there are prominent evangelical voices calling for justice in Israel and Palestine. In any case, evangelicals hardly make up a decisive segment of the Republican electorate.

But the ground for Singer and Adelson and their cohorts has been prepared over 20 years. Several events from the 1990s were critical in the process. During the Reaganite 1980s, Pat Buchanan and Robert Novak were probably America’s most popular media conservatives. Neither was a big Israel backer (though Buchanan had been earlier in his career). Both saw Mideast conflicts through the lens of those in the American foreign policy establishment who knew the region: Israel had done deep wrongs to the Palestinians, which could and should be practically addressed; American had profound strategic needs to get along with the Arab world.

But in a sustained and fairly well documented strike, the neoconservative media establishment began a campaign against Buchanan, who had been far more polemical about Israel than Novak. Buchanan survived the attacks, but they damaged his standing as a Republican. Younger activists got the message that if you were ambitious about advancing in the conservative movement, better just leave the Israel subject alone—or better still, become a passionate Zionist. The attacks took someone who used to be at the core of the conservative polemic industry and essentially neutralized him. Buchanan eventually left the GOP, but the party was not better for it.

Another step in setting the stage for Adelson and Singer was Rupert Murdoch’s starting and funding of *The Weekly Standard*, perhaps the most successful political magazine in history. Before the *Standard*, *National Review* was the most important conservative magazine, pro-Israel but hardly obsessively so, and open to an array of perspectives. James Burnham, the magazine’s principal strategic thinker through the 1970s, was highly skeptical of the Israel-U.S. alliance. But by the 1990s, Burnham was dead and *NR* had a wealthy competitor, one which could count on a reported \$3 million annual subsidy from Murdoch (while Buckley had labored for years to keep *NR* afloat with four- and five-figure donations). Leading neoconservatives, including editors of the *Standard*, played the anti-Semite card against key *National Review* figures: aggressively in

the case of Joseph Sobran, with more subtlety in the case of John O'Sullivan and Richard Neuhaus. By the late 1990s, *National Review* had capitulated, becoming indistinguishable from *Commentary* or *The Weekly Standard* on the Mideast and most other issues.

One should also mention the proliferation of hawkish pro-Israel conservative think tanks. There is the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Hudson Institute, AEI, and dozens of others: if you are conservative, interested in foreign policy, and want a think tank job in D.C., being hawkishly pro-Israel is the way to go. Pro-Israel hawks have done more in 20 years than create a fundraising apparatus designed to impose pro-Israel litmus tests upon Republican politicians; they have forged an entire ideological party inside the Beltway, comprised of think tank staffers and ideological journalists, all of whom can be reliably counted on to advocate for some version of a right-wing Israeli perspective whenever circumstances require it. These forces weren't in place when George H.W. Bush faced off with Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir over Israeli settlements in 1991, but they rule in Republican circles now.

I am pessimistic about the Republican party's short term prospects to overcome and reverse this takeover, but not about the issue overall. All my senses tell me that President Obama, and what remains of a centrist and liberal foreign policy establishment, will succeed in persuading the country that the deal with Iran is a large net-plus for American interests; it helps enormously that what was agreed upon in Lausanne seems to have surpassed expectations, which has been remarked upon by quite a few observers who expected far less. Republican politicians will move on to other subjects if they sense the public is not with them in opposing the Iran deal, Sheldon Adelson notwithstanding. In the medium term, the defeat of Mark Kirk next year—altogether possible—would signal that blind obeisance to a foreign country can be a loser politically.

Finally, there are underlying dynamics in the Middle East which all of Sheldon Adelson's money cannot overcome. Most important is that Iran has clearly become one of the more stable, modern, and democratic countries in the region. Another is that Israel is becoming a harder sell to Americans. As David Shulman put it in the *New York Review of Books*, "What really counts is that the Israeli electorate is still dominated by hypernationalist, in some cases protofascist, figures. It is in no way inclined to make peace." Information flows quite freely in the age of the Internet, and these Mideast realities are slowly seeping into the American consciousness. The same factors which now make divestment from companies doing business with Israel an important issue on many American college campuses cannot forever be ignored by a large political party competing for power in a free society. The process, however, is going to take a while.