

Putting Israel's Interests First

Former New York Mayor Ed Koch and other neocons are backing the Republican candidate in a special New York congressional race in September to punish President Obama for suggesting that Israel's 1967 borders be a starting point for peace talks. Lawrence Davidson suggests that it's time to start putting American issues first.

By Lawrence Davidson

On July 27, the New York Times had [a front page article](#) about the upcoming Sept. 13 special election for New York City's Ninth Congressional District seat. The article opens a window on the political use of Israel as a campaign touchstone.

The Ninth District, the most heavily Jewish District in the nation, is the one recently vacated by Democratic Rep. Anthony Weiner who was, of course, a loyal supporter of Israel. Alas, he was also a man with a strong libido and no discretion. He was forced to step down after electronically sharing obscene pictures of himself with at least six women.

The Democratic and Republican candidates who seek to fill this seat are not known for gross indiscretion in their private lives (though who knows what skeletons lurk in which closets), yet in their public pursuit of this Congressional seat they seem to be drawn, as by an irresistible political force, to follow Weiner's lead and do obeisance at the altar of Zionism. Is this yet another form of folly?

Both candidates, Democratic Assemblyman David I. Weprin and his Republican opponent, Bob Turner (a retired cable television executive), are involved in a process of "one-upmanship on who is more pro-Israel."

One would think that Turner would have no chance in such a competition seeing as how Weprin is an "Orthodox Jew who keeps a kosher home, observes the Sabbath, and has been to Israel at least eight times." Nonetheless, he is playing this game with some serious support.

"On Monday [July 25], former Mayor Edward Koch, [a Jew and] a Democrat, endorsed the Republican candidate" on the basis that a Democrat, even one who is a strong supporter of Israel, cannot be strong enough as long as President Obama holds the White House.

Koch argues that only the election of a strong Republican supporter of Israel will "rebuke" the president for saying "that Israel's pre-1967 border should be

the basis for a peace agreement.” Koch seems not to care that a Republican candidate may end up supporting domestic positions that can ruin the United States. He is obsessed with a single issue, Israel.

You would think that this obsession with Israel and its 1967 borders is pretty crazy in an election for someone to represent the interests of parts New York City that have names like Queens, Kew Gardens, Flatbush and Sheepshead Bay.

And aren't there numerous other issues, vital to the health of the nation, such as the federal budget and deficit, the fate of Medicare and Social Security, etc. that ought to hold voters' attention? So who cares about some foreign country approximately 6,000 miles away?

Well, according to Cynthia Zalisky, the executive director of the Queens Jewish Community Council, it is not only Ed Koch who is obsessed. She tells us that “how the candidates feel about Israel and the president's concept of the pre-1967 borders is going to resonate in this district.”

Donald Schwartz, an Orthodox Jewish activist from Kew Gardens, agrees. He says the Democratic candidate is not a sufficiently “fierce advocate” for Israel and Weprin's election would allow President Obama to “take the Jewish vote for granted.”

All of this should raise eyebrows. Just how many Jewish voters are we talking about? And, how do we know that most care about what the Zionist activists care about? Why should it always be assumed that the Jewish vote turns on the question of Israel?

The New York Times article answers the first of these questions. The Jewish voters in the Ninth District are numerous. Almost half of the population is Jewish, many of them observant, and a significant number of them, 30 to 35 percent, regularly turn out to vote.

Thus, as political consultant Jerry Skurnik puts it, “you can't get wiped out in the Jewish vote and expect to win a district like this.” Ok. But why assume most of those 30 to 35 percent of Jewish voters prioritize Israel when they vote, or are dissatisfied with President Obama on the issue of Israeli borders?

You know, Mr. Weprin did endorse same sex marriage and that has upset some of the Orthodox community. Yet the New York Times really has its focus on the question of loyalty to Israel and takes it for granted that those Zionist activists who shout loudest know what the silent majority is thinking.

On the other hand, maybe the Ninth is somehow special. Maybe Israeli settlements

do top Social Security for American seniors. It is depressing to think so, but it is possible.

Just for argument sake, let's go with the notion that the Ninth District is indeed special.

So let's say that the candidates do have to cater to specifically Jewish opinion to win this district, and that enough Jewish votes turn on the issue of Israel's 1967 borders that candidates have to play the Zionist card to win. What should those who oppose kowtowing to Zionist influence (and there are organizations of anti-Zionist Jews out there) do about this? Here are three possible approaches:

1. Find a way to increase the non-Jewish voter turnout. The political party that can do this can probably destroy the formula set forth above by Jerry Skurnik.
2. Find a way to get as many of the Jewish voters as possible to shed the single-issue picture painted of them by the Zionists. There is probably an undercurrent of resentment about this one-dimensional representation. Someone should tap into it. To this end, we proceed to #3.
3. Find a way to form a Jewish, but non-Zionist, political cadre to compete for Jewish voter support within the Democratic Party in the Ninth District and others like it. Give the Democratic Jewish voters a democratic choice.

Number one is the least volatile of these efforts. The consequences of pushing numbers 2 and 3 really depend on just how deep the Zionist "Jewish activists" are entrenched.

Depending on that question, one of two things could happen. If the Israeli obsession is in fact only skin deep, that is only an issue for a relatively small, albeit vocal, minority of Jewish voters, it should be overcome pretty easily by insisting on the greater importance of domestic concerns.

Those issues, closer to home, will then come to the fore as candidate touchstones and Israel will recede to the lower end of the list of important factors. If, however, a notable percentage of the Ninth District's Jewish voters are obsessed with Israel, then concerted efforts as described in 2 and 3 could result in blood in the streets.

Either way, something really should be done to challenge the prevailing assumption that Israel is the touchstone political issue for American Jewish voters.

Whatever might be the case in the Ninth District, this level of concern for Israel is probably not true of Jews nationally. On a national level most U.S. Jews vote Democratic and probably do so regardless of the candidate's position on Israel.

In fact, my bet is that both political parties don't really scramble for Jewish votes which, except for rare places like the Ninth District, are minuscule. What they scramble for is Jewish lobby money. And the Jewish lobby is not only obsessed with Israel, for all intents and purposes it functions as unregistered agents of that country. So to get the money you have to do your obeisance at the altar of Zionism.

This situation is potentially more dangerous than most American Jews realize. The Zionist hold over U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has already cost the country dearly.

It was at least part of the reason the United States was attacked on 9/11 and why the U.S. subsequently invaded Iraq. The Israel connection has alienated America from the entire Muslim world and helped encourage domestic racism in the form of Islamophobia.

What happens if this orientation continues and results in more wars, more terrorist attacks and greater debilitation of the domestic budget? At some point the American public, looking for reasons for these disasters, may well focus on lobby influence and the prioritizing of the interests of a foreign land 6,000 miles away.

At that point it will not be just AIPAC that will pay the price. The Zionist insistence that all Jews support Israel, as untrue as it is, will have stereotyped American Jewry and anti-Semitism will quickly become a serious issue.

Therefore, it is in the best interests of the American Jewish community to shed the image of the single-issue voter, to consciously begin to hold those Zionist activists at arm's length, and to join with those groups, such as Jewish Voices for Peace, that reject any demand that they do obeisance at the altar of Zionism.

Quite frankly, the leaders of Israel are fanatics, the true believers of the American Zionist lobbies are fanatics, and Ed Koch is a fanatic. Most American Jews are not fanatics and it is time they let the rest of the country know it.

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National Interest; America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood; and Islamic Fundamentalism.
