

Romney Pleases Political Donor on Israel

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is stopping in Israel to highlight his close ties to Prime Minister Netanyahu. But the visit also will showcase super Super-PAC donor Sheldon Adelson, whose money is aimed at defeating President Obama, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

In this first presidential election since the *Citizens United* decision of the Supreme Court took away Congress's legislative ability to reduce the corrupting influence of big money on the U.S. electoral process, there are worrisome manifestations of that influence every week.

For example, Mitt Romney right now is doing some fund-raising in Britain among banking nabobs on the heels of the Libor-fixing scandal. A co-chair of an event that is charging \$25,000 to \$75,000 a head to schmooze with the presumptive GOP nominee is the chief lobbyist of Barclays. He replaced in that role former Barclays chief executive Bob Diamond, who resigned (from his bank job and from his role in the Romney fund-raiser) because of his bank's central role in the scandal.

But if I had to identify one source of big money whose influence is most worrisome on issues I happen to think about a lot, it would be someone who will meet Romney at a later stop on his current overseas trip, in Israel. That source is casino magnate Sheldon Adelson.

Two things about Adelson's role in this post-*Citizens United* world stand out. One is the sheer magnitude of the money involved. Adelson appears to be on track to be the single biggest individual donor in this U.S. election year, although we may never know that for sure, given the way the bundling of political money works and the refusal of the Romney campaign to identify the sources of its bundled money.

Adelson's fortune is currently estimated at about \$24 billion. He has taken in stride the fluctuation of his wealth by many billions as shares of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation tanked during the recession before recovering, and he has repeatedly commented about how wide he intends to open his wallet to the candidate of his choice. During the primary season, that candidate was Newt Gingrich. Adelson said he would have been willing to give as much as \$100 million to Gingrich's campaign, before that campaign ended and Adelson turned his support to Romney.

The other distinguishing characteristic of Adelson is the strength of his affinity to a foreign government, not just to a foreign country but to the policies of the current government of that country. It is appropriate that Adelson will be one of the greeters when Romney arrives in Israel because, although Adelson is a U.S. citizen, his declared primary allegiance is to Israel.

Adelson once commented that when he did military service as a young man it “unfortunately” was in a U.S. uniform rather than an Israeli one and that all he and his Israeli wife “care about is being good Zionists, being good citizens of Israel, because even though I am not Israeli born, Israel is in my heart.”

Adelson is using his fortune to push a political agenda in Israel as well as in the United States. One way he has done that is by establishing five years ago a free-distribution newspaper, *Israel Hayom*, which has become the highest-circulation daily in Israel. The paper follows a firmly rightist, pro-Netanyahu line. As a business the newspaper is a money loser, but Adelson cheerfully has indicated his willingness to continue losing money on the paper (not a significant loss, in comparison with his fortune) to get its message across.

Israel already has a government to Adelson’s liking, and he is using his money to sustain public support for it. In the United States, it is a matter of still trying to buy a government to his liking. His current hoped-for vehicle for doing that, Mitt Romney, has to date left his foreign policy largely a blank beyond slogans and the most general of themes.

This was fully in evidence in his pre-trip VFW speech, in which the paucity of specific alternatives to the Obama administration’s policies was as evident as the rhetorical vehemence with which the Obama foreign policy in general was denounced. (Jacob Heilbrunn has furnished a good guide on how to interpret that speech.)

It is possible, of course, that very specific foreign-policy ideas are firmly embedded in the candidate’s head, being kept in occultation there until he is elected. It is at least as plausible that there is much opportunity for those who would enjoy influence with a President Romney, including those most helpful in electing him, would have considerable opportunity to influence the policies that eventually emerge.

In Adelson’s case, so much money is involved that it is hard to believe that money would not buy something on matters he feels most strongly about. When Gingrich was his man, it bought a candidate who dismissed the Palestinians as an “invented” people.

Adelson probably has strong feelings about some of the same fiscal and economic matters that some other very wealthy Americans have strong feelings about. He has griped, for example, about the whole idea of progressive income taxes. But given where he has put both his money and his mouth, matters relating to Israel are of prime importance to him.

Romney and the Republicans have, of course, been trying to use sentiment toward Israel as one of the themes for bashing Obama. Here's what Romney said about Israel in the VFW speech:

"President Obama is fond of lecturing Israel's leaders. He was even caught by a microphone deriding them. He has undermined their position, which was tough enough as it was. And even at the United Nations, to the enthusiastic applause of Israel's enemies, he spoke as if our closest ally in the Middle East was the problem. The people of Israel deserve better than what they have received from the leader of the free world. And the chorus of accusations, threats, and insults at the United Nations should never again include the voice of the President of the United States."

The efforts of politicians to win votes by exaggerating differences often makes it hard to recognize how elements of continuity and similarity may be much greater than the differences. The Obama administration's policies toward Israel mostly have followed in the familiar bipartisan American pattern of great deference to the wishes of the Israeli government of the day.

The billions of aid and security support continue unquestioned, regardless of the difficulties that Israel causes for U.S. interests. The acceptance of, and much U.S. help for, overwhelming Israeli regional military superiority continues.

The Obama administration pointed out the unacceptability of Israeli colonization of occupied territory but then promptly caved to Netanyahu on the issue. On Iran, Obama has adopted the Israeli position about the "unacceptability" of an Iranian nuclear weapon, while saying nothing about the Israeli nuclear arsenal. And at the United Nations, it is hard to figure out what those "accusations, threats, and insults" are that supposedly have been voiced by the President, but under Obama the United States has continued to cast lonely vetoes, against the will and moral sense of the overwhelming majority of the world community, on behalf of Israel on subjects such as Israeli settlements built in occupied territory.

A markedly different U.S. course certainly could be envisioned, but it would not be a course that Romney is recommending and definitely not one that Adelson would want. Any difference between Obama's policies on Israel and what Romney is

suggesting or Adelson is seeking is the difference between usual obeisance to Israel and complete obeisance to it.

A change in this other direction would mean not only furnishing Israel with vetoes of U.N. resolutions about settlements but also not even raising the subject with the Israelis. It would mean being more careful around open microphones in commenting about how much of a problem Netanyahu is. It would mean a bigger act of outsourcing than anything done by any company controlled by Bain Capital: the outsourcing of an important segment of U.S. foreign policy to a foreign government. That is contrary to U.S. interests, no matter which foreign country is involved.

What Adelson is doing also is ultimately contrary to the interests of Israel. Those on the Israeli Left obviously are most inclined to see his activity that way. The blatant nature of his fortune-fueled political activism has also caused some unease in Israel because of the danger of eliciting the most damaging forms of prejudice. Ira Sharkansky of Hebrew University observes:

“It’s hard to imagine a better advertisement for the Protocols of the Elders of Zion than Sheldon Adelson. A Jew who is enormously wealthy on the basis of gambling enterprises on the fringes of respectability, who does not shrink from publicity about using his wealth for Jewish causes, . . . Adelson fits in the long tradition of court Jews, using their wealth to gain access to whoever is ruling in order to benefit the Jewish community. Where Adelson differs from Jewish traditions is in making his wealth felt in front of the curtains rather than behind them.”

To the extent that Sharkansky’s concerns about the exacerbation of anti-Semitism materialize, that would be bad in general and bad for Israel. Even if they do not materialize, Sheldon Adelson is doing no favor to the country he says he loves by promoting policies that condemn it to perpetual conflict and isolation. Sometimes love is blind, even in a man smart enough to have made billions.

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