

# The unasked question: What's missing from the debates

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

By mid-March, Democratic presidential candidates will have participated in 20 debates, while the Republican candidates will have debated 21 times. None of these debates offered any substantive discussion of Israel and Palestine.

In a recent forum on the U.S. presidential elections, published by Bitterlemons, an international organization based in Jerusalem, Mark Perry of the think tank Conflicts Forum wrote:

None of the candidates has said a word about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would ruffle any feathers (“We’re not even going to talk about the issue during the campaign,” a senior campaign official told me) and all have expressed their uncompromising support for Israel, their unyielding condemnation of terror and their disdain for the irrational shortsightedness of Israel’s enemies.

American politicians do not reach the presidential Super Bowl by offending the strong pro-Israel lobby groups in the U.S. Politicians see what happens to academics, former presidents, journalists, archbishops and just plain ordinary citizens who forget to abide by the mantra-like question: “Is it good for Israel?”

This caution, however, does not prevail in Israel. The mantra is the same there, but there is more willingness to explore different answers to the question.

In a Bitterlemons online forum, Alon Pinkas, former consul-general of Israel in New York, explained how different segments of Israeli society view the U.S. presidential elections. Some Israelis, Pinkas says, believe that “every four years Americans are privileged to cast a vote on the omnipresent question of ‘who will be the best president for Israel.’” This group expects every U.S. president to focus on the Middle East, and on “every issue that Israel cannot or will not deal with alone.”

Within this group, Pinkas continues, some want an American president who is a “true friend,” meaning a president who “profoundly dislikes and distrusts Arabs, [a president] who will look the other way when Israel deceives and cheats on dismantling illegal outposts and who will forever support ‘the only democracy in the Middle East.’”

Others in Israel are more pragmatic. They want the U.S. to “save Israel from itself” by exerting pressure on Israel’s government and by demanding the removal of settlements.

Another view comes from *Haaretz* senior editor Akiva Eldar, who calls Israel’s settlement policy a failure that has “undermined Zionism.” In a recent speech at Princeton University, he said that the settlements (the home of 4.5 percent of Israel’s population) have been criticized because of the high cost of their military security and the financial incentives given to settler families.

Looking for clues as to how John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama would deal with Israel after the election, Perry found that all three have surrounded themselves with experts from previous administrations (Bitterlemons online forum).

Clinton’s foreign policy advisers include veterans from her husband’s administration, a lineup that suggests she would continue his policies on Israel: Richard Holbrooke, Madeleine Albright, Sandy Berger and Wesley Clark. McCain has turned to veterans from earlier Republican administrations: Richard Armitage, Brent Scowcroft, Colin Powell and Lawrence Eagleburger, a list that suggests establishment Republicans, rather than neoconservative Israel supporters, will have his ear.

Advisers to Obama include former navy secretary Richard Danzig, Africa expert Susan Rice and former National Security Council chiefs Zbigniew Brzezinski and Tony Lake. Perry found two surprises: former Clinton envoy Dennis Ross (who has strong pro-Israel credentials) and Reagan Defense Department stalwart Noel Koch. Another Obama adviser is Robert Malley, special assistant for Arab-Israeli affairs in the Clinton administration. *The Jewish Week* (February 13) reports that Malley is seen “as an astute and balanced Mideast analyst by left-of-center Jewish groups, and as a hardened anti-Israel ideologue by groups on the right.” Malley has disagreed with the conventional wisdom that blames Yasir Arafat for not accepting a “generous offer” from Israel in 2000. Malley insists that what President Clinton and Israeli leader Ehud Barak offered Arafat at Camp David was neither generous nor an actual

offer.

The candidates will no doubt continue to say little on this topic until after the election. But that should not prevent some enterprising journalist from enlivening the debate with this question: "Senator, what will you do to reverse George Bush's seven years of neglect and one year of a failed peace plan for Israel and a future state of Palestine?"