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Why Not in Vegas?

By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)

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I'll make this quick. I have one question and one observation about Mitt Romney's visit to Israel. The question is this: Since the whole trip was not about learning anything but about how to satisfy the political whims of the right-wing, super pro-Bibi Netanyahu, American Jewish casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, why didn't they just do the whole thing in Las Vegas? I mean, it was all about money anyway — how much Romney would abase himself by saying whatever the Israeli right wanted to hear and how big a jackpot of donations Adelson would shower on the Romney campaign in return. Really, Vegas would have been so much more appropriate than Jerusalem. They could have constructed a plastic Wailing Wall and saved so much on gas.



Josh Haner/The New York Times
Thomas L. Friedman

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The observation is this: Much of what is wrong with the U.S.-Israel relationship today can be found in that Romney trip. In recent years, the Republican Party has decided to make Israel a wedge issue. In order to garner more Jewish (and evangelical) votes and money, the G.O.P. decided to “out-pro-Israel” the Democrats by being even more unquestioning of Israel. This arms race has pulled the Democratic Party to the right on the Middle East and has basically forced the Obama team to shut down the peace process and drop any demands that Israel freeze settlements. This, in turn, has created a culture in Washington where State Department officials, not to mention politicians, are reluctant to even state publicly what is U.S. policy — that settlements are “an obstacle to peace” — for fear of being denounced as anti-Israel.

Add on top of that, the increasing role of money in U.S. politics and the importance of single donors who can write megachecks to “super PACs” — and the fact that the main Israel lobby, Aipac, has made itself the feared arbiter of which lawmakers are “pro” and which are “anti-Israel” and, therefore, who should get donations and who should not — and you have a situation in which there are almost no brakes, no red lights, around Israel coming from America anymore. No wonder settlers now boast on op-ed pages that the game is over, they’ve won, the West Bank will remain with Israel forever — and they don’t care what absorbing all of its Palestinians will mean for Israel’s future as a Jewish democracy.

It is into this environment that Romney wandered to add more pandering and to declare how he will be so much nicer to Israel than big, bad Obama. This is a canard. On what matters to Israel’s survival — advanced

weaponry and intelligence — Defense Minister Ehud Barak told CNN on Monday, “I should tell you honestly that this administration under President Obama is doing in regard to our security more than anything that I can remember in the past.”

While Romney had time for a \$50,000-a-plate breakfast with American Jewish donors in Jerusalem, with Adelson at his elbow, he did not have two hours to go to Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority, to meet with its president, Mahmoud Abbas, or to share publicly any ideas on how he would advance the peace process. He did have time, though, to point out to his Jewish hosts that Israelis are clearly more culturally entrepreneurial than Palestinians. Israel today *is* an amazing beehive of innovation — thanks, in part, to an influx of Russian brainpower, massive U.S. aid and smart policies. It’s something Jews should be proud of. But had Romney gone to Ramallah he would have seen a Palestinian beehive of entrepreneurship, too, albeit small, but not bad for a people living under occupation. Palestinian business talent also built the Persian Gulf states. In short, Romney didn’t know what he was talking about.

On peace, the Palestinians’ diplomacy has been a fractured mess, and I still don’t know if they can be a partner for a secure two-state deal with even the most liberal Israeli government. But I do know this: It is in Israel’s overwhelming interest to test, test and have the U.S. keep testing creative ideas for a two-state solution. That is what a real U.S. friend would promise to do. Otherwise, Israel could be doomed to become a kind of apartheid South Africa.

And here is what I also know: The three U.S. statesmen who have done the most to make Israel more secure and accepted in the region all told blunt truths to every Israeli or Arab leader: Jimmy Carter, who helped forge a lasting peace between Israel and Egypt; Henry Kissinger, who built the post-1973 war disengagement agreements with Syria, Israel and Egypt; and James Baker, who engineered the Madrid peace conference. All of them knew that to make progress in this region you have to get in the face of both sides. They both need the excuse at times that “the Americans made me do it,” because their own politics are too knotted to move on their own.

So how about all you U.S. politicians — Republicans and Democrats — stop feeding off this conflict for political gain. Stop using this conflict as a backdrop for campaign photo-ops and fund-raisers. Stop making things even worse by telling the most hard-line Israelis everything that they want to hear, just to grovel for Jewish votes and money, while blatantly ignoring the other side. There are real lives at stake out there. If you’re not going to do something constructive, stay away. They can make enough trouble for themselves on their own.

Sent from my iPad