

Rand Paul's Jewish Outreach

Pro-Israel conservatives are skeptical of the senator's foreign-policy views. He might not be able to win them over, but he might be able to soften their opposition.

By: Shane Goldmacher
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When Senator Rand Paul descended onto the Senate floor earlier this month to promote his legislation to end foreign aid to the Palestinian Authority, he stood next to an outsize poster showing the names and faces of three Israeli teenagers who had just been killed.

"Killed," Paul emphasized, "in cold blood."

Not long after Paul stopped speaking, his political operation swung into action. His top strategist, Doug Stafford, packaged the speech into an email that landed in the in-boxes of a clutch of influential Jewish and pro-Israel Republicans across the country.

The episode—the pro-Israel bill, the impassioned speech, the rapid dissemination—is a small window into the early and aggressive Jewish-outreach campaign of the junior senator from Kentucky with his eye on the White House in 2016. As Paul lays the groundwork for a presidential bid—he's already hired two top Iowa Republicans and one veteran New Hampshire strategist—few constituencies have received more attention than Jewish Republicans and pro-Israel advocates.

Rand Paul, who has said he knew only a single Jewish family growing up in small-town Texas, has even found his own rabbi (one he shares with Rush Limbaugh) to help him navigate the cultural divide. Paul has donned a yarmulke and danced to Hebrew songs. He has prayed at the Western Wall and visited a prominent New Jersey yeshiva (a religious school where a major GOP contributor served as his tour guide). He's dialed into one of the country's most popular Jewish radio programs and held off-the-record conference calls with Jewish leaders across more than 30 states. He has introduced pro-Israel legislation (title: the "Stand With Israel Act"), speechified about it in the Senate, and, relentlessly, sought a private audience with the wealthiest and most influential Jewish Republicans in the nation.

"Clearly, he is making a concerted effort and a sincere effort to really build relationships," said Matt Brooks, executive director of the influential Republican Jewish Coalition, a political group that aims to represent Jewish interests within the GOP.

The charm offensive has two goals at its core. The first is to try to establish Paul in the foreign-policy mainstream of Republicanism, particularly on the signal issue of Israel, which is of key importance to both Jewish voters and evangelical Christians. The second is to win over, or at the least neutralize, the moneyed class of hawkish Israel defenders—free-spending billionaires Sheldon Adelson and Paul Singer chief among them—who Paul's advisers know represent among the most significant impediments to his becoming the party's next standard-bearer.

Paul's labors are especially critical given that he has begun the 2016 presidential sweepstakes with a deep deficit of support among pro-Israel advocates—an inheritance from his father, three-time presidential candidate and former Representative Ron Paul, a man viewed with suspicion at best by much of the community. "Pro-Israel people have always felt that Ron Paul is beyond hostile to Israel; he's hostile to Jews as well," said Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, a pro-Israel lobbying group. "So clearly this concerns Rand Paul because people assume, like father like son."

"It's unfair," Klein added, "but it's a natural human reaction."

Paul's team views much of the outreach as correcting his record. "The only thing that we can do is go out and talk about what Rand believes and make sure that people hear his real positions, not others' mischaracterizations of his positions," Stafford said. "Things about politics and money, those things will fall where they will."

Kevin Madden, who was a senior strategist for Mitt Romney's presidential campaigns, said Paul has been the candidate most committed to defining himself for donors, power brokers, and political influencers. "If we were ranking potential 2016 prospects in terms of who is doing the most legwork right now, I think you'd have to rank Rand Paul first," Madden said.

Those being lavished with attention certainly appreciate it. "He was patient, he didn't rush me, he really spent time with me," Klein said of a 45-minute sit-down in Paul's Capitol Hill suite earlier this year. But that only goes so far.

"My discussions with others about Paul, because he's trying to speak to Jewish groups and doing things that pro-Israel people appreciate, people are saying we should give him a second chance and rethink what our impressions were of Rand Paul. So I think he is making inroads," Klein said. "That doesn't mean people are going to be necessarily comfortable."

The Group Paul has most aggressively courted is the Republican Jewish Coalition, whose board of directors reads like a who's who of big GOP contributors—Adelson, Singer, and former Ambassadors Mel Sembler and Sam Fox, among many others. "He has made a significant effort since coming to the Senate, both to establish his own identity and to get to know the folks in our organization and have a real, frank, open, and candid conversation about the issues," Brooks said.

Last year, Paul met with the RJC's board for a question-and-answer session in the Washington offices of Hogan Lovells that stretched for more than an hour. Lately he's been targeting influential members, one by one. Over the weekend, Isaac "Yitz" Applbaum, an RJC board member who coauthored an op-ed in *Foreign Policy* last fall with Paul titled "Peace Through Strength," hosted an event for Paul in the Bay Area.

Lunch was followed by a lengthy phone call in which Zeidman and his son, Jay, the national cochair of George P. Bush's Maverick PAC, pressed Paul on his posture toward Israel. Consider Zeidman's fears allayed. "I didn't have any reservation afterward introducing him and exposing him to my fellow Jewish Republicans," he said. "I think that he is having a great deal of success." "I needed to know where he stood" on Israel, said Fred Zeidman, a top Jewish GOP fundraiser who also sits on the RJC's board and with whom Paul shared an intimate lunch in Houston in February. "I know what happens when America doesn't pay attention or gets apathetic," said the former chairman of the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Council.

Not everyone, however, is so persuaded.

"I'm not buying it," said Elliott Abrams, who served as a top national-security adviser to President George W. Bush and is now a senior fellow for the Council on Foreign Relations. Paul and Abrams had a private sit-down on Capitol Hill last fall. "You can't be an isolationist and credibly pro-Israel. The idea that you're isolationist for every other country and every other issue in the world except Israel just is not persuasive." (Paul, for his part, vigorously rejects the "isolationist" label.)

Stafford said Paul is reaching out to many constituencies, not just Jewish and pro-Israel leaders, including fiscal hawks, gun enthusiasts, and African-Americans. "This is not a one-off thing where we're just targeting one community," he stressed.

Still, the math is daunting if Paul finds himself on the wrong side of the biggest-spending Jewish Republicans. Singer, whom Paul met with last year, has established himself as one of the most influential GOP moneymen in America. Meanwhile, Adelson and his wife, Miriam, poured \$93 million into super PACs in the 2012 election, making them the largest political financiers in the nation. In the GOP presidential primary alone, the Adelsons spent \$15 million against Romney and for Newt Gingrich. Paul would have to raise \$200,000 every week between now and the beginning of 2016 to match the \$15 million that Adelson can stroke in a single check.

Michael Fragin, host of a weekly radio program, *Spin Class*, on Jewish politics, said Paul's endgame isn't to be Singer's or Adelson's pick. "He will not be the RJC's first choice and his political people know that," Fragin said. Indeed, in an interview with *National Journal* last fall, Adelson didn't even name Paul as among the Republican Party's top 2016 contenders. The more achievable objective: not to be perceived as an enemy.

Mallory Factor, a conservative political analyst who has been helping Paul raise money and introducing him to prominent Jewish Republicans, said Paul is steadily climbing the ranks of the community's 2016 rankings. "The one negative," Factor said, "is that in many cases he is not their first choice—yet."

One of the unlikely Paul allies to emerge in the Jewish community has been Richard Roberts, a major GOP contributor who has worked closely with Adelson. (They teamed up, \$1 million apiece, on a 2012 super PAC that unsuccessfully tried to reelect Representative Allen West.)

"Rand Paul's father, Ron, is clearly anti-Semitic," Roberts said in an interview.

But that hasn't colored his view of the younger Paul, whom he first met at the 2012 GOP convention in Tampa. Roberts quickly took a liking to Paul and volunteered to bankroll his January 2013 trip to Israel ("The senator paid for himself. I paid for everybody else," Roberts said). Later, Roberts accompanied Paul as he toured a New Jersey yeshiva, one of the world's largest, and hosted a luncheon for him at his Lakewood home. Roberts said he's impressed with Paul's "integrity," how he could agree to disagree on some issues—and yet still be open-minded.

"He's not about to compromise for political expediency," Roberts said. Yet, he added, "As he learns new facts, as he learns new things, he can modify things."

During their time together in Jerusalem, Roberts organized a group dinner for the Sabbath. The eating and drinking was repeatedly interrupted by song as they would all rise from the table and dance, arm in arm, around the room. "By the fourth or fifth song, I had my arm around Rand," Roberts recalled. "I whispered in Rand's ear, 'If only your father could see you now.' He laughed hysterically."

Another behind-the-scenes figure laying the groundwork for Paul in the Jewish community has been Rabbi Nate Segal of Staten Island. It was Segal who introduced Paul to Roberts. And Segal has done advance work in the Orthodox Jewish community as Paul travels the country, including for his two conference calls with Jewish leaders. Segal has long conversed in conservative circles. He delivered the invocation at the Conservative Political Action Conference this year, and radio shock jock Rush Limbaugh has called him "my rabbi" for helping get Limbaugh out of a PR pickle in the early 1990s when he referred to the "Jewish lobby" on air. Segal accompanied Limbaugh as a religious guide on a trip to Israel in 1993; 20 years later, he reprised the same role for Paul.

"I'm pretty boring in this whole scheme of things," Segal insisted.

If Paul's philosophy would lead to a less interventionist America abroad, he's couching it in the most aggressive rhetoric possible to satisfy domestic politics. He's also talking about Israel a lot. In fact, since 2013 three of the top four Republicans in the Senate who've mentioned Israel are potential 2016 candidates: Ted Cruz of Texas (No. 1), Marco Rubio of Florida (No. 3), and Paul (No. 4). The only exception on the list is Senator Lindsey Graham, one of the leading GOP hawks, according to the Sunlight Foundation's Capitol Words project.

"Senator Paul has been very outspoken, even compared to some Jewish members of Congress, on issues very important to the pro-Israel community," said Nachum Segal, host of the New York-based radio program, *Jewish Moments in the Morning*, better known as *JM in the AM*, that has been on air for three decades. (He's also Rabbi Nate Segal's brother.) "If you want to speak to

the Jewish world, if you want to reach out to the Jewish community, it's a stop on that route," Segal said of the show.

Paul came on last year, after visiting Israel, and then again this spring shortly after he had introduced the Stand With Israel Act. Paul took the opportunity to tell the Jewish audience, "Your money is being sent to the Palestinian Authority and has been for quite a while."

Paul has sought to amplify his pro-Israel message through the organs of the conservative right, penning op-eds about Israel in the *National Review*, for instance. In them, Paul has adopted the rhetoric of hawkish hardliners, even if he's pushing more dovish policies like curtailing foreign aid. "Some say my position is too hard-line, too strong," he wrote in one such piece. "To them I say, how many more children must die before it is acceptable to cut off the flow of money to terrorists?"

Klein, the president of the Zionist Organization of America, said Paul has delivered a similar message to his organization's members during Washington lobbying trips the last two years. "He's a political person and he knows his crowd and he says the things we're happy to hear," Klein said. "He doesn't say the things we'd not be happy to hear, such as his looking askance at foreign aid [in general]."

Klein noted that Paul's muscular defense of Israel with his Stand With Israel Act actually dovetails with a noninterventionist worldview. "Of course, it goes right along with his being against foreign aid anyway," he said. "It's actually an easy one for him." Notably, the leading pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, has come out against Paul's legislation, arguing it's not in Israel's best interests.

The hawks that have long dominated the GOP foreign-policy establishment have plenty of reasons to remain skeptical. Paul's international perspective, however he frames it, remains to the left of traditional Republicanism. It was only weeks into his Senate term in 2011 that Paul reinforced some anti-Israel preconceptions when he released a fiscal blueprint that erased the entire foreign aid budget, including to Israel. Then Paul went on national TV and called the money "welfare." "Should we be giving free money or welfare to a wealthy nation? I don't think so," Paul said.

Brooks of the RJC has welcomed Paul's shift, both in tone and substance. "It demonstrates that the senator is not sort of rigid when it comes to some of these issues but rather is very open and receptive," Brooks said. "Clearly, on some issues the senator has evolved. I see it as evolving. I use that word very specifically." His base cheered his bravery (one headline from the libertarian Cato Institute: "Rand Paul is Right About Israel"); Paul has been trying to walk back the comment ever since. Now, he still publicly says he's for cutting aid to all nations—but he tries to soften the blow by emphasizing Israel would be last on the list. Meanwhile, Klein said, "When I met with him privately, he said if it was clear that Israel would not get foreign aid because of his vote, he would vote for foreign aid."

Others call it pandering.

"He started off by saying what he thought about foreign aid and shifted to saying what he thought would help him get elected president," said Ben Friedman, the Cato fellow who wrote the 2011 article praising Paul. "I doubt that he's under the illusion that he can win over the part of the Republican Party that has always been most vociferous and supportive of Israel but he probably thinks he can neutralize them."

Friedman said Paul has the freedom to be flexible because his libertarian base has nowhere else to go in 2016. "Maybe some of them will sit on their hands instead of being out there and supporting him," he said. "But for the most part he has that constituency locked up when it comes to being elected president."

Paul's defense of his positions can at times take on an exasperated tone. "Let me repeat that, since no one seems to be listening closely," he wrote in a *Washington Post* piece that sought to clarify he did not support a policy of nuclear containment with Iran. (In September 2012, Paul was the lone "no" vote in a 90-1 tally against a resolution that said U.S. policy was to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.) Much of the exasperation comes from what he believes are misconceptions about his father. As Paul complained to *The New York Times* earlier this year, "They start out with a mischaracterization of his point of view, bastardize it, make it worse."

Some of Paul's allies blame a GOP national-security apparatus that is determined to derail Paul. "There are folks who want to, for their own political purposes, characterize Rand in a certain way," Stafford said. "We're not going to let them do that."

Factor, who is helping Paul raise money, said, "The problem is that, in the Republican Party and the conservative movement, conservatives would rather burn and kill who they think are heretics from other wings of the party than unite and fight the infidels that are trying to burn down our country," referring to Democrats.

In an interview earlier this year, Paul himself emphasized that his foreign-policy worldview is still evolving. He only received a seat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early 2013 and, he noted, he is still expanding his team of advisers, naming Dimitri Simes, president of the Center for the National Interest, Lorne Craner, a former Bush administration official, and Richard Burt, a former ambassador, as newer additions.

"I was a physician in Bowling Green without a foreign-policy really," Paul said of his career four years ago. "As far as developing ideas on foreign policy, I would say most of those people are all new since we've come to Washington."

As former Senator Norm Coleman, an RJC board member and influential Jewish political figure who has been courted by Paul, said, "He's doing a very good job clearing up the perception that he's not his dad."

"The point is, Rand is reaching out. In the end, he may not be my guy for president. He and I may simply be in different places [on foreign policy]," said Coleman. "But I have the greatest

respect for his intellectual integrity, for the willingness to listen, for the outreach he's making. That's what you want to see in a leader."