

# JEWISH INSIDER

## Where is Peter Thiel on Our Issues?

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In the early fall of 2021, Peter Thiel, the billionaire tech investor and GOP megadonor, was holding court in a private dining room at a San Francisco hotel. The occasion was an exclusive dinner reception for a group of young conservative activists, and soon enough, their conversation turned to a speculative game of geopolitical matchmaking.

Gathered around the dinner table, the attendees had been wondering if they could identify a real-world “promised land” where the tenets associated with an emerging movement known as national conservatism, which promotes a confrontational style of right-wing populism now gaining traction in the Republican Party, might find the best chance of flourishing, according to a person who was present for the discussion.

Thiel, who is sympathetic to the movement, weighed in with a series of quick judgments as his dinner guests put forth a few possible destinations ranging from Europe to the Middle East and beyond. When the search eventually landed on Israel, which is recognized as a fountainhead of national conservative sentiment, Thiel was dismissive and “blew it off,” recalled the attendee, who spoke with *Jewish Insider* on the condition of anonymity to describe the private exchange. The country, Thiel reasoned, was just too precariously situated.

In some ways, the emphasis on self-preservation was fitting for an eccentric Silicon Valley mogul so consumed with his own mortality that he has quixotically vowed to “fight” death. Born in Germany more than two decades after the destruction wrought by World War II, Thiel, who is now based in Los Angeles, holds at least three passports and helped found a libertarian nonprofit that

aspires to build floating cities in international waters. He has long been fixated, it seems, on outsmarting the apocalypse.

It would not be surprising, then, if Thiel had expressed reservations over the prospect of relocating to a small Middle Eastern country in a region of hostile enemies openly seeking its destruction. Despite a personal sensitivity to security concerns in the region, however, Thiel's candid assessment of Israel raised some broader questions over Middle East policy that he has not addressed publicly, even as his views on a range of issues have become increasingly relevant following an election in which the venture capitalist invested more heavily than ever before.

He did so while backing a handful of like-minded federal candidates who, by varying degrees, embraced somewhat outré approaches to international engagement that embody a sharp break from the traditional Republican foreign policy order — which Thiel seems particularly eager to disrupt.

A spokesperson for Thiel did not respond to requests for comment from JI.

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During the midterms, Thiel's significant financial contributions placed him among the top political spenders of the cycle. Within GOP circles, the donations speculation that he was positioning himself to become a successor to Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire Republican kingmaker whose death, in 2021, left a major void in conservative fundraising. But the analogy overlooked at least one crucial distinguishing factor.

While Adelson was perhaps best known for his fervent commitment to Jewish and pro-Israel causes, Thiel, 55, is viewed as an isolationist and has shown little interest in the Middle East, except on the few occasions when he has publicly voiced criticism of American military engagement across the region. “I’ve never heard him say anything about Israel,” said one conservative foreign policy leader who has conversed with Thiel about a diversity of subjects. “And Thiel is someone who likes to speak his mind.”

Even if his money did most of the talking, Thiel's political investments were apparently driven, in part, by an aggressively contrarian worldview that represents a pronounced departure from the neoconservative wing of the GOP, which he had reportedly endeavored to weaken.

Last year, Thiel initiated a high-stakes venture to push the Republican Party rightward, backing two Senate prospects, J.D. Vance and Blake Masters, who are among the most high-profile avatars of national conservatism in American politics. Thiel, who contributed more than \$30 million between them, helped propel each candidate to competitive general elections with accompanying endorsements from former President Donald Trump.

The experiment ultimately yielded mixed results: Vance, the author of a popular memoir about his hardscrabble Rust Belt upbringing, claimed victory in Ohio earlier this month, while Masters, a Thiel protégé in Arizona, went down in defeat.

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Though the project fell short, there is little doubt that Thiel's funding succeeded, at least partially, in muscling a fractured GOP even further away from the mainstream. In the Senate, where Republican leadership is now reckoning with an unexpectedly poor performance in the midterms, Vance is poised to assume office this January alongside a newly elected Republican from Missouri, Eric Schmitt, who also benefited from Thiel's financial largesse, albeit to a lesser extent.

Both Vance and Schmitt were endorsed by a Thiel-backed incumbent, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), who hopes to establish a rowdy coalition of nationalist Republicans who will challenge GOP orthodoxies on a range of issues, notably in the foreign policy realm. The triumvirate is aligned, for instance, in opposing continued military assistance to Ukraine, which is not a widely accepted position within the party.

Thanks in part to Thiel, the schism is likely to accelerate brewing divisions between establishment hawks such as Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), the minority leader, and a rising vanguard of far-

right conservatives such as Vance, an Iraq War veteran who has voiced skepticism of most international aid while advocating for a non-interventionist foreign policy approach that ostensibly prioritizes domestic interests over costly investments abroad.

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The change has also highlighted a separate and more subtle tension between opposing national conservative factions differing over the extent to which American aid should be allocated, if at all, to dependable allies, among other things.

To the extent that Thiel himself has articulated a coherent approach to foreign policy — and, his detractors argue, it is open to debate — he has mostly raised alarms over economic competition with China, while condemning U.S. interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries as foolhardy experiments in American liberal expansionism.

“Instead of going to Mars, we have invaded the Middle East,” Thiel said from the stage of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland six years ago, amid his emergence as a vociferous early Trump supporter. “It’s time to end the era of stupid wars and rebuild our county.”

Such views are widely shared among national conservatives, according to David Brog, the president of the Edmund Burke Foundation, a newly created public affairs institute devoted to advancing the movement in the U.S. and elsewhere.

In a recent interview with JI, Brog, a pro-Israel activist who also serves as the executive director of the Maccabee Task Force (an Adelson-funded group fighting antisemitism on college campuses), emphasized that national conservatives “all agree” the U.S. “has been far too quick to send our troops abroad to fight for the freedom and security of others.” He said the movement advocates for “an approach that judges all foreign involvement by one and only one criteria: direct U.S. national interest.”

Still, he noted that there are two different camps within the broader movement. The first camp, to which Brog belongs, recognizes what he described as “multiple foreign threats” and seeks to

address them by supporting allies that “defend themselves by themselves and in the process secure U.S. interests abroad.” He pointed to Israel, India, Japan and South Korea as “frontline allies” the U.S. should be helping. “We dare not withdraw from the world,” Brog cautioned. “But I want to see our frontline allies take the lead in confronting shared enemies.”

Those who claim membership in the second camp, Brog explained, are more focused on China while downplaying other threats such as Iran and Russia. “I admire their clarity on China,” he said diplomatically. “We need to be focusing on the Chinese threat above all. But while we do so, we can’t ignore the Middle East or Europe.”

It is unclear if Thiel fits into either camp, even as some of his recent public speeches suggest he is likely more aligned with the second, as are the candidates he backed. Still, it can be difficult to discern where exactly Thiel stands on any one issue, not least because his foreign policy views have evolved dramatically over the past couple of decades.

During the Bush administration, for instance, Thiel was even supportive of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, according to Max Chafkin’s recent biography, *The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley’s Pursuit of Power*. “In fact, he was obviously profiting from it,” said Chafkin, a columnist for *Bloomberg Businessweek*, referring to Palantir Technologies, the software company Thiel co-founded in 2003 that contracts with the U.S. government. “Palantir,” he said, “grew out of the excitement within the Defense Department to do a better job of prosecuting wars in the Middle East.”

“When you start looking for total intellectual coherence with Thiel,” Chafkin suggested, “you’re not going to find it.”

Joshua Tait, a historian of American conservatism, echoed that view. “I think there are elements that can lead us to question Thiel’s commitment to nationalism or challenging the foreign policy establishment,” he said in an email exchange with *JJ*.

Thiel, who once identified almost exclusively with libertarian thinking, has recently positioned himself as a fellow traveler within the national conservative movement, giving abstruse

and occasionally incendiary speeches at annual conferences hosted by the Edmund Burke Foundation and signing his name to a starkly worded statement of national conservative principles.

The document, which was published this summer, promoted strict isolationism as a bulwark against “universalist ideologies” threatening “to impose a homogenizing, locality-destroying imperium over the entire globe,” among other things.

Thiel is also acquainted with Yoram Hazony, the Israeli-born political theorist credited with establishing an intellectual basis for national conservative thinking. In a recent email to JI, Hazony, who lives in Jerusalem and chairs the Edmund Burke Foundation, said he is “in touch” with Thiel but declined to comment further.

Meanwhile, Thiel’s apparent reservations over living in Israel, where he holds investments, have not kept him from visiting. In 2017, he met with Benjamin Netanyahu, who was then the Israeli prime minister, and spoke before an audience of tech entrepreneurs in Tel Aviv, where the PayPal co-founder and early Facebook backer praised the “startup nation” as an economic success story.

Thiel, a committed Christian, has otherwise expressed admiration for Israel as an ideological project. In an interview with the Hoover Institution two years ago, the venture capitalist claimed to view the Jewish state, along with the U.S. and the U.K., as an ideal model of national self-assertion, standing athwart what he characterized as the twin threats of “Islamic Sharia law” and “Chinese communist” surveillance.

From a foreign policy standpoint, however, Thiel’s personal appreciation for the Jewish state does not seem to have been accompanied by any public assessment of the long-standing relationship between the U.S. and Israel.

Bonnie Glick, a former Trump administration official who served as deputy administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, said that shouldn’t be unexpected. “It feels like he and a number of the candidates he backs, their foreign policy concern isn’t about Israel and

peace in the Middle East because that chapter's been written," she said of Thiel. "It's really because of the Abraham Accords, which put to bed the question of the U.S.-Israel relationship."

"Israel's position is much better than it was 20 years ago," David Azerrad, a national conservative leader who serves as an assistant professor at Hillsdale College's Van Andel Graduate School of Government in Washington, D.C., told JI. "What does Israel really need from the U.S. right now beyond the \$3 billion" in annual aid "and the occasional vote at the [U.N.] Security Council?"

This past July, Vance marked his first visit to Israel with an unexpected campaign stop in Tel Aviv, where he attended a conservative conference and pledged he "will be as strong an advocate for the U.S.-Israel relationship as anyone."

That doesn't mean his statement was a reflection of Thiel's views on Israel, claimed Ric Grenell, a former acting director of national intelligence in the Trump administration and a friend of Thiel's. He said the venture capitalist will have "zero expectations about positions" once the candidates he supported take office.

"Peter's investing in people that he likes, it's not like he invests in people that he totally has to agree with 100% of the time," Grenell told JI. "It is literally people that he knows, that he believes in, that he knows are smart people, that are outsiders. And if there's one thing that Peter believes, it's that Washington has got to have professional experts from the outside that come in and bring different perspectives."

A spokesperson for Vance did not respond to a request for comment.

"Politically, it is much more likely to me that there is genuine distance between J.D. and Peter because J.D. has not really been that close with Peter Thiel for that long, despite the shorthand," said Teddy Schleifer, a reporter for *Puck* who has written extensively about Thiel's involvement in the midterms. Whether his political contributions were a one-off or if he intends to invest again next cycle remains to be seen. In the meantime, "Thiel bought a house in Washington," Schleifer told JI, "so it's clear he wants to be involved to some extent."

If anything, Thiel appears to be playing the long game on more than a few fronts, as the reception a year ago in San Francisco suggested. Taking stock of each country raised by the group of young

conservatives at the dinner last fall, Thiel continued to give his assessments, analyzing the pros and cons of each option — including New Zealand, where he gained citizenship in 2011. While he had once described the country as a “utopia,” over dinner, he appeared to have changed his mind. It was overregulated and excessively liberal, Thiel argued, disapprovingly comparing the Pacific island nation to Marin County in California, according to the anonymous guest.

Hungary was another choice, in large part because Viktor Orbán, the country’s strongman prime minister, is revered within hard-right circles. Thiel raised characteristic concerns, however, over its proximity to an increasingly bellicose Russia.

He was more receptive, on the other hand, to the broader European Union. Thiel mentioned that he had been seeking Maltese citizenship in case national conservatism should, at some point, take root across the continent.