



Myth and Reality: Jewish Influence on US Middle East Policy

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In working for a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, we constantly bump into the fact that the powerful party is the state of one of history's most oppressed groups. Some get frustrated by always having to

address anti-Semitism while working toward a just resolution to the plight of the Palestinians. But we're kidding ourselves if we believe for a moment that anti-Semitism is not an integral part of the problem. It is that history which creates the fear and anger that drive many Israeli policies. And if we fail to recognize the legitimate fear that history has instilled in the Jewish people, we fail before we start.

When dealing with the question of US support for Israel's occupation, this awareness is especially critical. One of the classic anti-Semitic myths is that of Jews manipulating governments and other seats of power behind the scenes. That pretty closely describes the work of a lobby, and there is a powerful one, with a Jewish face, working to push particular policies regarding Israel. We need to understand that lobby, what its effect is, and what its nature is. That means asking, directly and fairly, is this a "Jewish lobby", and does this lobby truly have the power to be a tail wagging the dog of American Middle East policy?

Who is "The Lobby"?

There is a real need to be clear about who "the Lobby" is. It is sometimes called "The Jewish lobby", which is inaccurate and misleading, and foments just the sort of conspiracy theorizing we must avoid. It implies that a population of 5.2 million Americans dictates a very crucial area of foreign policy to a nation of over 296 million.

The face and voice of the lobby is Jewish, because Jews are the most sympathetic and most passionate about this cause. But the votes that the lobby can deliver are not Jewish votes. Christian Zionist groups, numbering some 20 million strong, having their biggest strengths in areas where there are few or no Jews, and also voting at high rates, give the lobby its voting power. This is why many of the most radical bills in Congress are brought by members from Bible Belt states with virtually no Jews in them.

These two groups can mobilize votes and sympathy. They can mobilize some significant money as well, but nothing like what major corporations can raise. Corporations, which have enormous lobbying networks and many ways of funneling perfectly legal contributions to favored candidates, and who are involved in the sale of military and hi-tech equipment, derive huge benefits from the ongoing state

of hostility in the region. Massive tax dollars flow to American corporations from aid to many countries in the Middle East, of which the annual aid to Israel is only one part. Israel receives by far the most aid, and 75% of all the aid must be spent with American corporations. Many Middle Eastern countries spend considerable money over and above the subsidies they receive from the US on American weapons and military technology.

Jews in the Forefront

Just as we must not lose sight of the fact that Jewish "shadow control" is an old canard of anti-Semitism, we must also recognize that asking why American policy takes the form it does is a legitimate question. The fact that AIPAC, the ADL, B'nai Brith, the Conference of Presidents and other Jewish organizations work hard to convey to politicians and others that Jews have a large amount of power cannot be ignored. Jews' actual political power, while considerable relative to our numbers, is easily dwarfed by more powerful sectors of American society, such as Christian groups and large corporations.

Jews contribute a great deal of money to campaigns, but it is overwhelmingly given to Democrats and a great portion of it comes from wealthy Jews who historically have shown little attachment to Israel, but great attachment to the liberal-leaning ideals of the Democrats. Jewish contributions have never been based solely on Israel, and are less so now than they have been in the past.

AIPAC clearly played a pivotal role in its early days in the defeat of Illinois Representative Paul Findley and Senator Chuck Percy. However, claims of their influence on subsequent defeats of other members of Congress such as Pete McCloskey, Earl Hilliard and Cynthia McKinney, as well as other public officials such as Adlai Stevenson and George Ball are much more dubious. It is the reputation that matters politically, and AIPAC certainly has that. But their actual ability to determine the fate of particular candidates has been greatly exaggerated,

not least by AIPAC's supporters and activists.

Jews play a major role in American politics. Jews vote, give to campaigns and, as a group, are as active as anyone in the American political scene. But it is a huge mistake, and rooted in anti-Semitic mythology, to believe that Israel is more of a focus than many domestic issues for someone simply because they are Jewish. Nor is it true that all major Jewish contributors hold the same line on Israel, or even make Israel a priority. But the leading lobbyists for Israel are Jewish, a relatively small number of Jews activate much of the grass roots, and Jews are the ones who deal first and foremost with the media, with politicians and with public appearances. This allows supporters of Israel's policies to blur the line between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism.

Further, when it comes to Congress, the biggest reason AIPAC is so successful is that there is no serious opposition. Elected officials see no political capital to be gained by voting against the wishes of the many constituents they hear from favoring unconditional support of Israeli policies. It's not that they don't believe that other voters would agree with them if they voted against the wishes of the pro-occupation lobby; it's that they see no evidence that they would gain votes and support, while they are getting a message that voting against AIPAC's wishes will cost votes and support.

But while Congress controls the purse strings, actual policy is not formed in Congress. Foreign policy is generally the purview of the Executive branch. Israel has cemented a "special relationship" with the US that has meant enormous foreign aid, unprecedented diplomatic protection and an American blind eye to many Israeli actions. This is rooted in policy formation, not in Congress.

Why then does Israel seem to get so much of what it wants from the US?

Polls consistently indicate that Americans, including Jewish Americans, support Israel,

but do not agree with many Israeli actions and do not believe the US should be as biased toward Israel as it is. The clearly dictatorial styles of governments in Egypt, Syria, Iraq under Saddam and Saudi Arabia, to name a few, contrast for Americans with Israel's more developed democratic institutions. Israel in many ways looks like a European country. And for most Americans, the idea of a Jewish Israel is a familiar and comfortable one. In the post-Holocaust world, Israel has had decades of sympathy. Arab-Americans were, until recently, a small and largely invisible community. All this creates an atmosphere where many Americans, including decision-makers, have long been disposed toward Israel.

But decision makers work within the framework of what they perceive as the "national interest." US geo-strategic interest in a strong Israel has been considerable for a long time. The idea that after WWII the US or any other major power would allow independent Arab governments to emerge and control their own oil resources is simply not credible.

Throughout the years of the Cold War, Israel was an indispensable ally for the US. It served, after 1967, as what former Secretary of State and NATO forces commander Alexander Haig called "... the largest American aircraft carrier in the world." It stood with the US in supporting Apartheid South Africa; was the ally the US turned to when it needed help facilitating the Iran-Contra deal; provided enormous support to US intelligence in covert operations, particularly in Central America; and continued to stand fast as a fundamental defense against Arab nationalism, protecting friendly regimes as it did in Jordan in 1970.

Like many of the decisions of the superpowers in those years, whether or not this was the right course for US interests is debatable. There were many misadventures during the Cold War, and often these were not just tactical errors, but the natural result of ill-conceived policies and political theories (dominoes, anyone?) Still, a wide spectrum of opinion in the Cold War years saw Israel as a key, if not THE key US asset. This did not stop all internal (rarely

public) debate over how to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict. But the starting point was always that Israel was a key ally and asset.

The end of the Cold War coincided, in essence, with the beginning of the Oslo Process. In this new era, the national interest argument is much less clear. Overt Israeli action on behalf of US interests is less viable. Still, much that made many American planners fawn over Israel during the Cold War remains true. Israel provides unqualified support for the occupation of Iraq. It saves American corporations billions every year in research and development by acting as a testing ground for American weapons and other technology, as well as by facilitating sales of American-made weapons all around the world. But above all, Israel remains a Western outpost in the Middle East, one run by people of European descent who are not Muslim. There is just no danger that Israel will ever go the way of that once-"loyal" country, Iran, as Turkey, for example, someday could.

The Palestinians continue to offer little to US geo-political interests. There is no way of knowing what a future that includes Palestinian self-determination would hold. The idea that popular hostility toward the US would virtually disappear in such a future is dubious; without Palestine, many other issues, including US support for some of the worst dictatorships in the region for decades, would still be there. The main concern remains—ensuring that Arab resources are primarily used to benefit Western powers, not the Arab people.

The Neocons

This era has also seen the rise of the neoconservatives and their institutions. While Jews are certainly prominent among the neocons, the perception that neocon and Jew are synonymous is an extreme exaggeration. Again, when it comes to Israel and the Middle East more generally, Jews are the face, in order to capitalize on people's sympathy for a history of anti-Semitism. But prominent neocons (if we define neocon by their views and policies rather than whether or not they are Jewish or whether or not they were once leftists)

include Richard Armitage, Bill Bennett, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, James Woolsey, Robert Bork, Lewis Libby, Lynne Cheney, Newt Gingrich and Ed Meese.

When it comes to Mideast policy, neocons have gotten a strong foothold at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, though they do not dominate it. But on this issue, WINEP does work with neocon institutions as well as more mainstream ones. WINEP has great influence on policy formation and maintains the intellectual foundation of a policy that is based on Israel being the key to US influence in the region.

Current support for Israeli policies is the result of an entrenched foreign policy, and an aversion to taking a risk on a new one. This combines with the comfort level of decision-makers with fellow Caucasians, keeping a sort of "white male network" in place. But the basic themes remain the same—the goal is Western control of Arab oil. Israel is a unique ally in that it stands by the US no matter what, and faces little domestic opposition when it does so, unlike England for example. It provides deterrence; it provides testing for new American technology and facilitates weapons and hi-tech sales all over the world; and it is neither an unstable dictatorship like Saudi Arabia, nor could it ever have a government that would turn against its benefactor.

American policy depends on the popularity of Israel in the US. The "almighty lobby" still needs to devote huge resources to PR to maintain that. Its power, as formidable as it is, is largely based in public perception of its strength and the absence of serious opposition. Its effects are mostly felt in the stifling of debate on the question of Israel, among the intellectual elites, in Congress and in the mainstream media. Policy continues to be decided by a perception of US interests, and the mainstream of that perception continues to see Israel as the key to US influence in the Middle East. Jews can be found on both sides of that debate.

The myth of the powerful lobby intimidates

and disempowers many people. But the idea that policy is decided in halls of inscrutable power is equally disempowering. The fact is there is a way for us to change American policy. We, as supporters of a just peace have largely abdicated this ground, and we need to reclaim it. We need to mobilize ourselves and our neighbors. Speak to Congresspeople, even the ones who seem overtly hostile to us. Write to newspapers, meet with their editors. We need to let representatives know we will vote for them only if they approach the Middle East fairly. We need to rally our neighbors and put our money where our ideals are. We need to articulate a reasoned, balanced and coherent alternative to current policy. We need to prove that we are as motivated for justice and peace as our adversaries are for what they believe in. If we can't do that, we don't deserve to win. Similarly, if we can't plead our case as one that is in favor of the rights of all the people of the region, as one that acknowledges and honors the history of anti-Semitism that has brought about the support for the deplorable occupation and dehumanization of the Palestinians, then we also don't deserve to win.

I have seen much of this movement over the years. It is clear to me that we can mount the case we need to mount, one where Israelis and Palestinians are treated as equals, as people with much tragedy in their historical consciousness. But we haven't done it yet. Now is the time to start.

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