

And the winner is ... the Israel lobby

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Global Research, June 09, 2008
Asian Times 9 June 2008

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They're all here – and they're all ready to party. The three United States presidential candidates – John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Madam House speaker Nancy Pelosi. Most US senators and virtually half of the US Congress. Vice President Dick Cheney's wife, Lynne. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. And a host of Jewish and non-Jewish political and academic heavy-hitters among the 7,000 participants.



Such star power wattage, a Washington version of the Oscars, is the stock in trade of AIPAC – the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the crucial player in what is generally known as the Israel lobby and which holds its annual Policy Conference this week in Washington at which most of the heavyweights will deliver lectures.

Few books in recent years have been as explosive or controversial as *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, written by Stephen Walt from Harvard University and John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago, published in 2007. In it, professors Walt and Mearsheimer argued the case of the Israeli lobby not as “a cabal or conspiracy that ‘controls’ US foreign policy”, but as an extremely powerful interest group made up of Jews and non-Jews, a “loose coalition of individuals and organizations tirelessly working to move US foreign policy in Israel’s direction”.

Walt and Mearsheimer also made the key point that “anyone who criticizes Israeli actions or says that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over US Middle East policy stands a good chance of being labeled an anti-Semite”. Anyone for that matter who “says that there is an Israeli lobby” also runs the risk of being charged with anti-Semitism.

All the candidates in the House say yeah Republican presidential candidate McCain is

opening this year's AIPAC jamboree; Clinton and Obama are closing it on Wednesday. Walt and Mearsheimer's verdict on the dangerous liaisons between presidential candidates and AIPAC remains unimpeachable: "None of the candidates is likely to criticize Israel in any significant way or suggest that the US ought to pursue a more evenhanded policy in the region. And those who do will probably fall by the wayside."

Take what Clinton said in February at an AIPAC meeting in New York: "Israel is a beacon of what's right in a neighborhood overshadowed by the wrongs of radicalism, extremism, despotism and terrorism." A year before, Clinton was in favor of sitting and talking to Iran's leadership.

And take what Obama said in March at an AIPAC meeting in Chicago; no reference at all to Palestinian "suffering", as he had done on the campaign trail in March 2007. Obama also made it clear he would do nothing to alter the US-Israeli relationship.

No wonder AIPAC is considered by most members of the US Congress as more powerful than the National Rifle Association or the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations.

AIPAC has explicit Zionist roots. The founder, "Si" Kenen, was head of the American Zionist Council in 1951. The body was reorganized as a US lobby – the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs – in 1953-4, and then renamed AIPAC in 1959. Under Tom Dine, in the 1970s, it was turned into a mass organization with more than 150 employees and a budget of up to US\$60 million today. Dine was later ousted because he was considered not hawkish enough.

The top leadership – mostly former AIPAC presidents – is always more hawkish on the Middle East than most Jewish Americans. AIPAC only dropped its opposition to a Palestinian state – without endorsing it – when Ehud Barak became Israeli prime minister in 1999.

AIPAC keeps a very close relationship with an array of influential think-tanks, like the American Enterprise Institute, the Center for Security Policy, the Hudson Institute, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, the Middle East Forum, the The Project for the New American Century (PNAC) and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Sprinkled neo-cons in these think-tanks can be regarded as a microcosm of the larger Israel lobby – Jews and non-Jews (It's important to remember that Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, David Wurmser and five other neo-cons drafted the infamous "A Clean Break" document to Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996 – the ultimate road map for hardcore regime change all over the Middle East.)

The house that AIPAC built in the US Congress is a rough beast indeed. Former president Bill Clinton defined it as "stunningly effective". Former speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich called it "the most effective general-interest group across the entire planet". The New York Times as "the most important organization affecting America's relationship with Israel". Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, before his involvement in a corruption scandal, said. "Thank God we have AIPAC, the greatest supporter and friend we have in the whole world."

AIPAC maintains a virtual stranglehold over the US Congress. Critics of the Israel lobby other than Walt and Mearsheimer also contend that AIPAC essentially prevents any possibility of open debate on US policy towards Israel. Compare it with a 2004 report by the Pentagon's

Defense Science Board, according to which “Muslims do not hate our freedom, but rather they hate our policies”.

AIPAC should not be crossed. It rewards those who support its agenda, and punishes those who don't. In the end, it's all about money – specifically campaign contributions. From 2000 to 2004, according to the Washington Post, AIPAC honchos contributed an average of \$72,000 each to campaigns and political committees. For pro-AIPAC politicians, money simply pours from all over the US.

Every member of the US Congress receives AIPAC's bi-weekly newsletter, the Near East Report. Walt and Mearsheimer stress that Congressmen and their staff “usually turn to AIPAC when they need info; AIPAC is called upon to draft speeches, work on legislation, advise on tactics, research, collect co-sponsors and marshal votes”.

Hillary Clinton has learned long ago she should not cross AIPAC. Clinton used to support a Palestinian state in 1998. She even embraced Suha Arafat, Yasser's wife, in 1999. After much scolding, she suddenly became a vigorous defender of Israel, and years later wholeheartedly supported the 2006 Israeli war against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Clinton may have gotten the bulk of Jewish American donations for her 2008 presidential campaign.

Rice also learned about facts on the ground. She tried to restart the eternally moribund “peace process” when visiting the Middle East in March 2007. Before the trip, she got an AIPAC letter signed by no less than 79 US senators telling her not to talk to the new Palestinian unity government until it “recognized Israel, renounced terror and agreed to abide by Palestinian-Israeli agreements”.

AIPAC and Iraq It has become relatively fashionable for some members of the Israeli lobby to deny any involvement in the build-up towards the war on Iraq. But few remember what AIPAC executive director Howard Kohr told the New York Sun in January 2003: “Quietly lobbying Congress to approve the use of force in Iraq was one of AIPAC's successes over the past year.”

And in a New Yorker profile of Steven Rosen, AIPAC's policy director during the run-up to the war on Iraq, it was stated that “AIPAC lobbied Congress in favor of the Iraqi war”.

Compare it with a 2007 Gallup study based on 13 different polls, according to which 77% of American Jews were opposed to the Iraq war, compared to 52% of Americans.

Walt and Mearsheimer contend “the war was due in large part to the lobby's influence, and especially its neo-con wing. The lobby is not always representative of the larger community for which it often claims to speak.”

AIPAC and Iran Now it is Iran time. Walt and Mearsheimer contend “the lobby is fighting to prevent the US from reversing course and seeking a rapprochement with Tehran. They continue to promote an increasingly confrontational and counterproductive policy instead”. Not much different from the embattled Olmert, who told Germany's Focus magazine in April 2007 that “it would take 10 days ... and 1,000 Tomahawk cruise missiles” to set back Iran's nuclear program.

A measure of Walt and Mearsheimer's power to rattle reputations is that the Zionist establishment had to bring out all its big guns to refute their argument, again and again.

Walt and Mearsheimer are no ideologues. They are realpolitik practitioners – very much at ease in the top circles of US foreign policy establishment. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of their book is that they argued four points that the establishment never mentions in public. Essentially these are:

The US has already won its major wars in the Middle East, against Arab secular nationalism and against communism, and does not need Israel quite as much.

Israel is now so much more powerful than all Arab nations combined that it can take care of itself.

The unconditional support for Israel, regardless of its outrageous deeds, does harm US interests, destabilizes pro-US regimes like Hosni Mubarak's Egypt and King Abdullah's Jordan, and plays into the hands of Salafi-jihadi radicals.

Fighting Israel's wars on its behalf is the surefire way to lead to the collapse of US power in the Middle East.

Walt and Mearsheimer also seem not to accept that oil, and rivalry with Russia and China, have also played a crucial part in why the US went to war in Iraq and may attack Iran in the near future. Anyway only insiders as themselves – with unassailable establishment credentials – could have started, at the highest levels of public debate, a serious discussion of extreme pro-Zionism in the public and political life of the US.

Meanwhile, the power of the lobby seems unassailable. In March 2007, the US Congress was trying to attach a provision to a Pentagon spending bill that would have required President George W Bush to get congressional approval before attacking Iran. AIPAC was strongly against it – because it viewed the legislation as taking the military option “off the table”. The provision was killed. Congressman Dennis Kucinich said this was due to AIPAC.

AIPAC made a lot of waves in 2002, when the theme of the annual meeting was “America and Israel standing against terror”. Everyone bashed Arafat, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and Syria at the same time – just as in PNAC's letter to Bush in April 2002 claiming that Israel was also fighting an “axis of evil” alongside the US.

During AIPAC's jamboree in 2004, Bush received 23 standing ovations defending his Iraq policy. Last year, the star was Cheney, making the case for the troop “surge” in Iraq. Pelosi was dutifully present. But it was pastor John Hagee, whose endorsement McCain recently refused, who really made a killing – even though Hagee maintains that “anti-Semitism is the result of the Jews' rebellion against God”.

On Iran, Hagee definitely set the tone: “It is 1938; Iran is Germany and [President Mahmud] Ahmadinejad is the new [Adolf] Hitler. We must stop Iran's nuclear threat and stand boldly with Israel.” He received multiple standing ovations. McCain may be sure to get the same treatment this year – and he'll certainly have no trouble remaining on message.

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