

Friends of Israel: Are American Jews Turning against AIPAC

The lobbying group AIPAC has consistently fought the Obama Administration on policy. Is it now losing influence?

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For AIPAC, it is crucial to appeal across the political spectrum. But Israel has become an increasingly divisive issue with the public.

On July 23rd, officials of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—the powerful lobbying group known as AIPAC—gathered in a conference room at the Capitol for a closed meeting with a dozen Democratic senators. The agenda of the meeting, which was attended by other Jewish leaders as well, was the war in the Gaza Strip. In the century-long conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the previous two weeks had been particularly harrowing. In Israeli towns and cities, families heard sirens warning of incoming rockets and raced to shelters. In Gaza, there were scenes of utter devastation, with hundreds of Palestinian children dead from bombing and mortar fire.

The Israeli government claimed that it had taken extraordinary measures to minimize civilian casualties, but the United Nations was launching an inquiry into possible war crimes.

Even before the fighting escalated, the United States, Israel's closest ally, had made little secret of its frustration with the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "How will it have peace if it is unwilling to delineate a border, end the occupation, and allow for Palestinian sovereignty, security, and dignity?" Philip Gordon, the White House coordinator for the Middle East, said in early July. "It cannot maintain military control of another people indefinitely. Doing so is not only wrong but a recipe for resentment and recurring instability."

Although the Administration repeatedly reaffirmed its support for Israel, it was clearly uncomfortable with the scale of Israel's aggression. AIPAC did not share this unease; it endorsed a Senate resolution in support of Israel's "right to defend its citizens," which had seventy-nine co-sponsors and passed without a word of dissent.

AIPAC is prideful about its influence. Its promotional literature points out that a reception during its annual policy conference, in Washington, "will be attended by more members of Congress than almost any other event, except for a joint session of Congress or a State of the Union address." A former AIPAC executive, Steven Rosen, was fond of telling people that he could take out a napkin at any Senate hangout and get signatures of support for one issue or another from scores of senators.

AIPAC has more than a hundred thousand members, a network of seventeen regional

offices, and a vast pool of donors. The lobby does not raise funds directly. Its members do, and the amount of money they channel to political candidates is difficult to track. But everybody in Congress recognizes its influence in elections, and the effect is evident. In 2011, when the Palestinians announced that they would petition the U.N. for statehood, AIPAC helped persuade four hundred and forty-six members of Congress to co-sponsor resolutions opposing the idea.

During the Gaza conflict, AIPAC has made a priority of sending a message of bipartisan congressional support for all of Israel's actions. Pro-Israel resolutions passed by unanimous consent carry weight, but not nearly so much as military funding. During the fighting, Israel has relied on the Iron Dome system, a U.S.-funded missile defense that has largely neutralized Hamas's rockets. Although the U.S. was scheduled to deliver \$351 million for the system starting in October, AIPAC wanted more money right away. On July 22nd, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel had sent a letter to Harry Reid, the Senate Majority Leader, seeking an immediate payment of \$225 million.

In the conference room, the senators sat on one side of a long table, the Jewish leaders on the other. Robert Cohen, the president of AIPAC, justified Israel's assault, agreeing with Netanyahu that Hamas was ultimately responsible for the deaths of its own citizens. At one point, Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, asked about conservative trends in Israel, a participant recalled. "He said that he supports Israel, but he's concerned that Israel is headed toward a one-state solution—and that would be so damaging and dangerous for everyone involved."

Charles Schumer, the senior Democrat from New York, interrupted. Turning to address the room, he said, "It troubles me when I hear people equate Israel and Hamas. That's wrong, that's terrible!" Kaine protested, "That's not what I meant!" Cohen simply repeated that Hamas was to blame for everything that was happening.

The Senate, preparing for its August recess, hastened to vote on the Iron Dome funding. At first, the appropriation was bundled into an emergency bill that also included money to address the underage refugees flooding across the Mexican border. But, with only a few days left before the break began, that bill got mired in a partisan fight. Reid tried to package Iron Dome with money for fighting wildfires, and then offered it by itself; both efforts failed, stopped largely by budget hawks. "If you can't get it done the night before recess, you bemoan the fact that you couldn't get it done, and everybody goes home," a congressional staffer said. Instead, Mitch McConnell, of Kentucky, the Republican leader, decided to stay over, even if it meant missing an event at home. The next morning, with the halls of the Senate all but empty, an unusual session was convened so that McConnell and Reid could try again to pass the bill; Tim Kaine was also there, along with the Republicans John McCain and Lindsey Graham.

"There were five senators present and literally no one else!" the staffer said.
"They reintroduced it and passed it. This was one of the more amazing feats, for AIPAC."

In a press conference, Graham, who has been a major recipient of campaign contributions connected to AIPAC, pointed out that the funding for Iron Dome was intended as a gesture of solidarity with Israel. "Not only are we going to give you more missiles—we're going to be a better friend," Graham said.

“We’re going to fight for you in the international court of public opinion. We’re going to fight for you in the United Nations.”

The influence of AIPAC, like that of the lobbies for firearms, banking, defense, and energy interests, has long been a feature of politics in Washington, particularly on Capitol Hill. But that influence, like the community that AIPAC intends to represent, is not static. For decades, AIPAC has thrived on bipartisanship, exerting its influence on congressional Democrats and Republicans alike. But Israel’s government, now dominated by a coalition of right-wing parties led by Likud, has made compromise far less likely than it was a generation ago. Prime Minister Netanyahu, the leader of Likud and an unabashed partisan of the Republican view of the world, took office at about the same time as President Obama, and the two have clashed frequently over the expansion of Israeli settlements and the contours of a potential peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Although both men repeatedly speak of the unshakable bond between the U.S. and Israel, their relationship has been fraught from the start. In 2012, Netanyahu made little secret of the fact that he hoped Mitt Romney would win the election. Time and again—over issues ranging from Iran to the Palestinians—AIPAC has sided strongly with Netanyahu against Obama.

AIPAC’s spokesman, Marshall Wittmann, said that the lobby had no loyalty to any political party, in Israel or in the U.S., and that to suggest otherwise was a “malicious mischaracterization.” Instead, he said, “we are a bipartisan organization of Americans who exercise our constitutional right to lobby the government.” For AIPAC, whose stated mission is to improve relations between the U.S. and Israel, it is crucial to appeal across the political spectrum. In recent years, though, Israel has become an increasingly divisive issue among the American public. Support for Israel among Republicans is at seventy-three per cent, and at forty-four per cent among Democrats, according to a poll conducted in July by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; the divide is even greater between liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans.

This difference represents a schism among American Jews—AIPAC’s vital core. For decades, the Jewish community was generally united in its support for Israel. Today, a growing number of American Jews, though still devoted to Israel, struggle with the lack of progress toward peace with the Palestinians. Many feel that AIPAC does not speak for them. The Pew Center’s survey found that only thirty-eight per cent of American Jews believe that the Israeli government is sincerely pursuing peace; forty-four per cent believe that the construction of new settlements damages Israel’s national security.

In a Gallup poll in late July, only a quarter of Americans under the age of thirty thought that Israel’s actions in Gaza were justified. As Rabbi Jill Jacobs, the executive director of the left-leaning T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, told me, “Many people I know in their twenties and thirties say, I have a perfectly good Jewish life here—why do I need to worry about this country in the Middle East where they’re not representing who I am as a Jew? I’m not proud of what’s happening there. I’m certainly not going to send money. ”

This is precisely the kind of ambivalence that AIPAC adherents describe as destructive. And yet even Israeli politicians recognize that AIPAC faces a shifting landscape of opinion. Shimon Peres, who served as Prime Minister and, most recently, as President, says, “My impression is that AIPAC is weaker among the younger people. It has a solid majority of people of a certain age, but it’s not the same among younger people.”

For AIPAC, the tension with the Obama Administration over Gaza comes amid a long series of conflicts. Perhaps the most significant of these is over the question of Iran's obtaining a nuclear weapon. Last October, Iran and the consortium of world powers known as P5+1—Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States—met in Geneva to begin talks. For two decades, AIPAC has been warning that if Iran acquired nuclear arms it would pose an existential threat to Israel, which has had a nuclear capacity since the late sixties.

Netanyahu has insisted that the United States—or Israel alone, if necessary—must be prepared to take military action against Iran. The Obama Administration, too, has said that a nuclear Iran is unthinkable and that “all options”—including military options—“are on the table.” But Netanyahu fears that Obama is prepared to settle for too little in the negotiations, and, when they began, he launched an uninhibited campaign of public diplomacy against them. In early November, after meeting in Jerusalem with Secretary of State John Kerry, he proclaimed a tentative proposal “a very, very bad deal. It is the deal of the century for Iran.” A photo op for the two men was abruptly cancelled, and Kerry returned to Switzerland.

Later that month, Ron Dermer, the Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., met with a bipartisan group of two dozen congressmen in the offices of John Boehner, the House Speaker. Dermer, who comes from a political family in Miami, worked in the nineties for the Republican consultant Frank Luntz as he shaped Newt Gingrich's Contract with America campaign. A few years later, Dermer emigrated to Israel, where he worked as a political consultant and wrote columns for the Jerusalem Post, a conservative daily, in which he referred to Jews who denounced the occupation as “self-haters.” When Netanyahu took office in 2009, he brought in Dermer as a top adviser, and the two became virtually inseparable. “Whenever we met with Bibi in the last several years, Dermer was there,” a former congressional aide said. “He was like Bibi's Mini-Me.” In Boehner's offices, a senior Democrat recalled, “Dermer was very critical of the proposed Iran nuclear agreement. He talked about how Reagan would never have done anything like this.” Finally, one of the other politicians in the room had to advise him, “Don't talk about what Reagan would do. He's not very popular with Democrats.”

The great incentive that the P5+1 could offer Iran was to reduce the sanctions that have crippled its economy. As the talks proceeded, though, Israel's supporters in Congress were talking about legislation that would instead toughen the sanctions. Dermer didn't say specifically that he favored such a law—representatives of foreign governments customarily do not advocate for specific U.S. legislation—but it was clear that that was what he and the Israeli leadership wanted. A former congressional staff member who attended the meeting said, “The implicit critique was the naïveté of the President.”

Obama's aides were alarmed by the possibility that AIPAC might endorse new sanctions legislation. They invited Howard Kohr, the group's chief executive officer, and officials from other prominent Jewish organizations to briefings at the White House. Members of the Administration's negotiating team, together with State Department officials, walked them through the issues. “We said, ‘We know you guys are going to take a tough line on these negotiations, but stay inside the tent and work with us,’ ” a senior Administration official recalled. “We told them directly that a sanctions bill would blow up the negotiations—the Iranians would walk away from the table. They said, ‘This bill is to strengthen your hand in diplomacy.’ We kept saying, ‘It doesn't strengthen our hand in diplomacy. Why do you know better than we do what strengthens our hand? Nobody involved in the diplomacy thinks that.’ ”

In late November, the negotiators announced an interim Joint Plan of Action. For a period of six months, Iran and the six world powers would work toward a comprehensive solution; in the meantime, Iran would limit its nuclear energy program in exchange for initial relief from sanctions. Netanyahu blasted the agreement, calling it a “historic mistake,” and, within a few days, the leadership of AIPAC committed itself to fighting for new sanctions. A senior Democrat close to AIPAC described to me the intimate interplay between Netanyahu’s circle and the lobby. “There are people in AIPAC who believe that it should be an arm of the Likud, an arm of the Republican Party,” he said. Wittmann, the lobby’s spokesman, disputed this, saying, “AIPAC does not take any orders or direction from any foreign principal, in Israel or elsewhere.”

For the Israeli leadership and many of its advocates, the Iran negotiations presented an especially vexing problem of political triangulation. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran’s previous President, had been a kind of ideal adversary, attracting widespread outrage by questioning whether the Holocaust had taken place and by challenging Israel’s right to exist. Danny Ayalon, a former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., once described Ahmadinejad’s hateful rhetoric to me as “the gift that keeps on giving.” But Iran’s new President, Hassan Rouhani, was carefully presenting himself as a relative moderate. Netanyahu would have none of it, calling Rouhani “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“I come from a hundred years in the future to warn you that nothing really changes in the next hundred years.”

AIPAC worked to mobilize its friends in Congress. Mark Kirk, a Republican senator from Illinois and a major beneficiary of AIPAC-related funding, began pressing to pass a new sanctions bill. “He was saying, ‘We’re in negotiations with a wolf in sheep’s clothing!’ ” a former Senate aide recalled. The bill, co-sponsored by Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat, was drafted with considerable input from AIPAC. This was the first time in decades that the lobby had challenged the sitting U.S. President so overtly.

The Obama Administration was furious. “It’s one thing to disagree on some aspect of the peace process, on things that are tough for Israel to do,” the senior Administration official told me. “But this is American foreign policy that they were seeking to essentially derail. There was no other logic to it than ending the negotiations, and the gravity of that was shocking.”

AIPAC was incorporated in 1963, fifteen years after the State of Israel came into being. Its leader, Isaiah (Si) Kenen, had been a lobbyist for American Zionist organizations and an employee of Israel’s Office of Information at the United Nations. In that job, Kenen had been obligated to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which had stringent disclosure requirements about financial expenditures and communications with the U.S. government. The journalist M. J. Rosenberg, who volunteered at AIPAC in 1973 and is now a critic of it, recalled Kenen’s saying that the foreign-agent model was too restrictive. AIPAC would lobby Congress for aid to Israel, but its members would be Americans, taking orders from an American board of directors. Rosenberg told me that Kenen was “an old-fashioned liberal” who liked to say, “AIPAC has no enemies, only friends and potential friends.” When asked which politicians he hoped to elect, he said, “We play with the hand that is dealt us.” Congress must lead, he said, and “our job is to help it lead.”

Kenen retired in 1974, and by the late eighties AIPAC’s board had come to be dominated by a group of wealthy Jewish businessmen known as the Gang of Four: Mayer (Bubba) Mitchell,

Edward Levy, Jr., Robert Asher, and Larry Weinberg. Weinberg was a Democrat who gradually moved to the right. The others were Republicans. In 1980, AIPAC hired Thomas Dine, a former diplomat and congressional staffer, as its executive director. Dine set out to develop a nationwide network that would enable AIPAC to influence every member of Congress. This was a daunting challenge. Jews made up less than three per cent of the American population, concentrated in nine states, and they voted overwhelmingly Democratic. How could AIPAC, with such a small base, become a political force in both parties and in every state?

Dine launched a grass-roots campaign, sending young staff members around the country to search for Jews in states where there were few. In Lubbock, Texas, for instance, they found nine who were willing to meet—a tiny group who cared deeply about Israel but never thought that they could play a political role. The lobby created four hundred and thirty-five “congressional caucuses,” groups of activists who would meet with their member of Congress to talk about the pro-Israel agenda.

Dine decided that “if you wanted to have influence you had to be a fund-raiser.” Despite its name, AIPAC is not a political-action committee, and therefore cannot contribute to campaigns. But in the eighties, as campaign-finance laws changed and PACs proliferated, AIPAC helped form pro-Israel PACs. By the end of the decade, there were dozens. Most had generic-sounding names, like Heartland Political Action Committee, and they formed a loose constellation around AIPAC. Though there was no formal relationship, in many cases the leader was an AIPAC member, and as the PACs raised funds they looked to the broader organization for direction.

Members’ contributions were often bundled. “AIPAC will select some dentist in Boise, say, to be the bundler,” a former longtime AIPAC member said. “They tell people in New York and other cities to send their five-thousand-dollar checks to him. But AIPAC has to teach people discipline—because all those people who are giving five thousand dollars would ordinarily want recognition. The purpose is to make the dentist into a big shot—he’s the one who has all this money to give to the congressman’s campaign.” AIPAC representatives tried to match each member of Congress with a contact who shared the congressman’s interests. If a member of Congress rode a Harley-Davidson, AIPAC found a contact who did, too. The goal was to develop people who could get a member of Congress on the phone at a moment’s notice.

That persistence and persuasion paid off. Howard Berman, a former congressman from California, recalled that Bubba Mitchell became friends with Sonny Callahan, a fellow-resident of Mobile, Alabama, when Callahan ran for Congress in 1984. Eventually, Callahan became chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations. “Sonny had always been against foreign aid,” Berman said. “Then he voted for it!”

Republicans knew that they would never get more than a minority of the Jewish electorate, but AIPAC members convinced them that voting the right way would lead to campaign contributions. It was a winning argument. In 1984, Mitch McConnell narrowly beat AIPAC supporters’ preferred candidate, the incumbent Democrat Walter Huddleston. Afterward, McConnell met with two AIPAC officials and said to them, “Let me be very clear. What do I need to do to make sure that the next time around I get the community support?” AIPAC members let Republicans know that, if they supported AIPAC positions, the lobby would view

them as “friendly incumbents,” and would not abandon them for a Democratic challenger. The Connecticut Republican senator Lowell Weicker voted consistently with AIPAC; in 1988, he was challenged by the Democrat Joe Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew. Lieberman won, but Weicker got the majority of funding from Jewish donors.

In the early days, Howard Berman said, “AIPAC was knocking on an unlocked door.” Most Americans have been favorably disposed toward Israel since its founding, and no other lobby spoke for them on a national scale. Unlike other lobbies—such as the N.R.A., which is opposed by various anti-gun groups—AIPAC did not face a significant and well-funded countervailing force. It also had the resources to finance an expensive and emotionally charged form of persuasion. Dine estimated that in the eighties and nineties contributions from AIPAC members often constituted roughly ten to fifteen per cent of a typical congressional campaign budget. AIPAC provided lavish trips to Israel for legislators and other opinion-makers.

Nevertheless, the lobby did not endorse or rank candidates. “We made the decision to be one step removed,” Dine said. “Orrin Hatch once said, ‘Dine, your genius is to play an invisible bass drum, and the Jews hear it when you play it.’ ” In 1982, after an Illinois congressman named Paul Findley described himself as “Yasir Arafat’s best friend in Congress,” AIPAC members encouraged Dick Durbin, a political unknown, to run against him. Robert Asher, a Chicago businessman, sent out scores of letters to his friends, along with Durbin’s position paper on Israel, asking them to send checks. Durbin won, and he is now the Senate Majority Whip. (Findley later wrote a book that made extravagant claims about the power of the Israel lobby.) In 1984, AIPAC affiliates decided that Senator Charles Percy, an Illinois Republican, was unfriendly to Israel. In the next election, Paul Simon, a liberal Democrat, won Percy’s seat. Dine said at the time, “Jews in America, from coast to coast, gathered to oust Percy. And American politicians—those who hold public positions now, and those who aspire—got the message.”

As AIPAC grew, its leaders began to conceive of their mission as something more than winning support and aid for Israel. The Gang of Four, a former AIPAC official noted, “created an interesting mantra that they honestly believed: that, if AIPAC had existed prior to the Second World War, America would have stopped Hitler. It’s a great motivator, and a great fund-raiser—but I think it’s also AIPAC’s greatest weakness. Because if you convince yourself that, if only you had been around, six million Jews would not have been killed, then you sort of lose sight of the fact that the U.S. has its own foreign policy, and, while it is extremely friendly to Israel, it will only go so far.”

In the fall of 1991, President George H. W. Bush decided to delay ten billion dollars in loan guarantees to Israel, largely because of the continuing expansion of settlements. In response, AIPAC sent activists to Capitol Hill. The lobby was confident. Its officials had told Yitzhak Shamir, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, that Bush did not have the political desire to take on AIPAC, according to a memoir by former Secretary of State James Baker. But Bush proved willing to fight. The former AIPAC official recalled that Bubba Mitchell was summoned to the White House for a meeting: “When he came back to the AIPAC boardroom, an hour after the meeting, he was still shaking—because the President of the United States yelled at him!” Soon afterward, Bush remarked that he was “one lonely little guy” fighting “something like a thousand lobbyists.”

The Senate lined up behind him, and voted to postpone consideration of the loan guarantees. For AIPAC, this marked the beginning of a difficult period. The next June, Israeli

voters ousted Shamir and his Likud Party and voted in Labor, headed by Yitzhak Rabin. After a career of military campaigns and cautious politics, Rabin began a transformation, offering to scale back settlement activity. In response, Bush asked Congress to approve the loan guarantees. Afterward, Rabin admonished the leaders of AIPAC, telling them that they had done more harm than good by waging battles “that were lost in advance.” Daniel Kurtzer, then the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, told me, “Rabin was furious with AIPAC. He felt they were allied with Likud and would undermine him in what he was trying to do.”

In September, 1993, Rabin and Arafat signed the Oslo Accords, which were aimed at building a formal peace process with the Palestine Liberation Organization. AIPAC officially endorsed the agreement, and still does. But many members were uncomfortable with it, according to Keith Weissman, a former analyst for the lobby. “AIPAC couldn’t act like they were rejecting what the government of Israel did, but the outcry in the organization about Oslo was so great that they found ways to sabotage it,” he said. (In 2005, Weissman was indicted, along with Steven Rosen, for conspiring to pass national-defense information to a reporter and an Israeli government agent, and AIPAC fired them. The charges were ultimately dropped.) As part of the agreement, the U.S. was to make funds available to the Palestinians, Weissman said. “The Israelis wanted the money to go to Arafat, for what they called ‘walking-around money.’ But AIPAC supported a bill in Congress to make sure that the money was never given directly to Arafat and his people, and to monitor closely what was done with it. And, because I knew Arabic, they had me following all of Arafat’s speeches. Was he saying one thing here, and another thing there? Our department became P.L.O. compliance-watchers. The idea was to cripple Oslo.”

In 1995, AIPAC encouraged Newt Gingrich, the new Speaker of the House, to support bipartisan legislation to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This put Rabin in a political corner. On one hand, he knew that such a move would infuriate the Arab world and endanger the Oslo process. On the other, as Yossi Beilin, then an official in the Labor government, pointed out, “You are the Prime Minister of Israel and you are telling American Jews, ‘Don’t ask for recognition of Jerusalem as our capital? Nobody can do that!’” At a dinner with AIPAC leaders, Rabin told them that he did not support the bill; they continued to promote it nonetheless. In October, the bill passed in Congress, by an overwhelming majority. President Bill Clinton invoked a national-security waiver to prevent its enactment, and so has every President since.

In 1999, Ehud Barak, also of the Labor Party, became Prime Minister, and, as Rabin had, he grew friendly with Clinton. “AIPAC flourishes when there is tension between Israel and the U.S., because then they have a role to play,” Gadi Baltiansky, who was Barak’s press spokesman, told me. “But the relations between Rabin and Clinton, and then Barak and Clinton, were so good that AIPAC was not needed. Barak gave them courtesy meetings. He just didn’t see them as real players.” Still, the lobby maintained its sway in Congress. In 2000, Barak sent Beilin, who was then the Justice Minister, to obtain money that Clinton had promised Israel but never released. Beilin went to see Sandy Berger, Clinton’s national-security adviser. “He said this money is tied to two hundred and twenty-five million dollars in assistance to Egypt,” Beilin recalled. “We cannot disburse the money to Israel unless we do to Egypt, so we need to convince Congress to support the whole package. I said, ‘I am speaking on behalf of my Prime Minister. We want Egypt to get the money.’ He said, ‘Yossi, this is really wonderful. Do you know somebody in AIPAC?’ ”

Beilin was astonished: “It was kind of Kafka—the U.S. national-security adviser is asking the

Minister of Justice in Israel whether he knows somebody at AIPAC!" He went to see Howard Kohr, the AIPAC C.E.O., a onetime employee of the Republican Jewish Coalition whom a former U.S. government official described to me as "a comfortable Likudnik." Kohr told Beilin that it was impossible to allow Egypt to get the money. "You may think it was wrong for Israel to vote for Barak as Prime Minister—fine," Beilin recalled saying. "But do you really believe that you represent Israel more than all of us?" By the end of Barak's term, in 2001, the money had not been released, to Israel or to Egypt. "They always want to punish the Arabs," Beilin concluded. "They are a very rightist organization, which doesn't represent the majority of Jews in America, who are so Democratic and liberal. They want to protect Israel from itself—especially when moderate people are Israel's leaders."

In the spring of 2008, AIPAC moved from cramped quarters on Capitol Hill to a gleaming new seven-story building on H Street, downtown. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Howard Kohr introduced Sheldon Adelson, a casino magnate who had been a generous donor to AIPAC since the nineties, and who had helped underwrite congressional trips to Israel (paying only for Republican members). On this bright spring day, according to someone who was in the audience, Adelson recalled that Kohr had telephoned him, asking him to have lunch. Adelson remembered wondering, How much is this lunch going to cost me? Well, he went on, it cost him ten million dollars: the building was the result. He later told his wife that Kohr should have asked him for fifty million.

Netanyahu became Prime Minister the following year. AIPAC officials had been close to him since the eighties, when he worked at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and stuck with him when, in 1990, he was banned from the State Department for saying that U.S. policy was built "on a foundation of distortion and lies." As Prime Minister, Netanyahu had a difficult relationship with Bill Clinton, largely because Clinton found him unwilling to stop the expansion of settlements and to meaningfully advance the peace process—a sharp contrast with the approach of Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995. Then as now, Netanyahu displayed a vivid sense of his own historical importance, as well as flashes of disdain for the American President. After their first meeting, Clinton sent a message to another Israeli, wryly complaining that he had emerged uncertain who, exactly, was the President of a superpower.

But, even if Netanyahu had trouble with the executive branch, AIPAC could help deliver the support of Congress, and a friendly Congress could take away the President's strongest negotiating chip—the multibillion-dollar packages of military aid that go to Israel each year. The same dynamic was repeated during Barack Obama's first term. Israeli conservatives were wary, sensing that Obama, in their terms, was a leftist, sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. They took note when, during the 2008 campaign, Obama said, "I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel that you're opposed to Israel, that you're anti-Israel, and that can't be the measure of our friendship with Israel."

At Obama's first meeting with Netanyahu, in May, 2009, Dermer came along, and found himself unable to observe the well-established protocol that one does not interrupt the President. As Obama spoke, Dermer's hand shot up: "Excuse me, Mr. President, I beg to differ!" Obama demanded a full settlement freeze, as a means of convincing the Palestinians that Netanyahu was not merely stalling the Americans. Netanyahu was incensed, and AIPAC rallied members of Congress to protest. At an AIPAC conference, Dermer declared that Netanyahu would chart his own course with the Palestinians: "The days of continuing down the same path of weakness and capitulation and concessions,

hoping—hoping—that somehow the Palestinians would respond in kind, are over.” Applause swept the room.

In a speech at Bar-Ilan University, in June, 2009, Netanyahu seemed to endorse a two-state solution, if in rather guarded terms. Leaders of the settler movement and even many of Netanyahu’s Likud allies were furious at this seemingly historic shift for the Party, though, with time, many of them interpreted the speech as a tactical sop to the United States. No less significant, perhaps, Netanyahu introduced a condition that could make a final resolution impossible—the demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state. “It was a stroke of political brilliance,” the former Senate aide, who had worked closely with Dermer, told me. “He managed to take the two-state issue off the table and put it back on the Palestinians.”

In March, 2010, while Vice-President Joe Biden was visiting Israel, the Netanyahu government announced that it was building sixteen hundred new housing units for Jews in Ramat Shlomo, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Biden said that the move “undermines the trust we need right now.” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Netanyahu to upbraid him. But, while Obama and his team viewed the move as a political insult and yet another blow to a potential two-state solution, AIPAC went into defensive mode, sending an e-mail to its members saying that the Administration’s criticisms of Israel were “a matter of serious concern.” Soon afterward, a letter circulated in the House calling on the Obama Administration to “reinforce” the relationship. Three hundred and twenty-seven House members signed it. A couple of months later, when the U.S. tried to extend a partial moratorium on construction in settlements in the West Bank, AIPAC fought against the extension. Obama eventually yielded.

In May, 2011, Obama gave a speech about the Arab Spring, and, hoping to break the stalemate in the peace talks, he said, “The borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps.” The 1967 borders, with some adjustments, had long been recognized as the foundation for a peace agreement, but Obama was the first President to utter the words so explicitly. The next day, Netanyahu arrived in Washington and rebuked him in the Oval Office, saying, “We can’t go back to those indefensible lines.”

A veteran Israeli politician was aghast at Netanyahu’s performance. “This is the President of the United States of America, and you are the head of a client state—let’s not forget that!” he said. “AIPAC should have come to Bibi and said, ‘You don’t talk to the President the way you do! This is not done, you have to stop it!’ Instead of reflecting almost automatically everything the Israeli government is doing and pushing in that direction.”

AIPAC officially supports a two-state solution, but many of its members, and many of the speakers at its conferences, loudly oppose such an agreement. Tom Dine has said that the lobby’s tacit position is “We’ll work against it until it happens.” After Obama endorsed the 1967 borders, AIPAC members called Congress to express outrage. “They wanted the President to feel the heat from Israel’s friends on the Hill,” a former Israeli official recalled. “They were saying to the Administration, ‘You must rephrase, you must correct!’ ” When Obama appeared at an AIPAC policy conference three days later, he was conciliatory: “The parties themselves—Israelis and Palestinians—will negotiate a border that is different than the one that existed on June 4, 1967. That’s what ‘mutually agreed-upon swaps’ means.” AIPAC had e-mailed videos to attendees, urging them not to boo the President; they complied, offering occasional wan applause. The next day, Netanyahu addressed a joint session of Congress and received twenty-nine standing ovations.

Fifty years ago, before Israel became an undeclared nuclear power and its existence was under threat, any differences it had with the U.S. were usually aired in private. Today, the political dynamics in both countries—and the particulars of the relationship—have evolved. A majority of Israelis still favor the idea of a two-state solution, but the political mood has shifted markedly to the right. The reasons range from the deeply felt notion that the Palestinians were “offered the world and rejected it” to the rise of Hamas in Gaza, from the aftershock of terror attacks a decade ago to the instability throughout the Middle East. Likud has rejected relative moderates like Dan Meridor and Benny Begin; Netanyahu himself is considered a “dove” by some leaders of his coalition and members of his party. The consensus deepens that Oslo was a failure, and that, as Netanyahu says, “there is no partner for peace.” The Palestinians, for their part, argue that the settlements in the West Bank and Jewish expansion into East Jerusalem have created a “one-state reality.” They point out that members of Netanyahu’s coalition reject a two-state solution—“The land is ours!”—and endorse permanent Israeli control, or outright annexation, of the West Bank.

Netanyahu prides himself on understanding the American political climate. But his deepest relationships are with older, often wealthy members of the establishments in New York and Los Angeles, and he is less conscious of the changes in American demographics and in opinion among younger American Jews. Assaf Sharon, the research director of Molad, a progressive think tank in Jerusalem, said, “When Israelis see House members jump like springs to applaud every lame comment Bibi utters, they think he is a star in Washington. Then they are told by the local pundits that everything else is just personal friction with Obama. My sense is that the people surrounding Bibi—and the Prime Minister himself—don’t appreciate the significance of the shift.”

Yet the rhetoric of Netanyahu’s circle has never been more confident. In a recent talk, Dermer argued that Israel is a regional superpower, with much to give in its relationship with the U.S. “America’s most important ally in the twentieth century was Great Britain,” he said. “Your most important ally in the twenty-first century is going to be the State of Israel.” In a meeting with young Likud supporters last spring, which one of them transcribed online, Netanyahu boasted of defying Obama’s pressure to halt settlements; 2013 was a record year for settlement construction in the West Bank. He preferred to “stand up to international pressure by maneuvering,” he said. “What matters is that we continue to head straight toward our goal, even if one time we walk right and another time walk left.” When one of the Likudniks asked about peace talks with the Palestinians, Netanyahu is said to have replied, as the audience laughed, “About the—what?”

AIPAC’s hold on Congress has become institutionalized. Each year, a month or two before the annual policy conference, AIPAC officials tell key members what measures they want, so that their activists have something to lobby for. “Every year, we create major legislation, so they can justify their existence to their members,” the former congressional aide said. (AIPAC maintains that only members of Congress initiate legislative action.) AIPAC board meetings are held in Washington each month, and directors visit members of Congress. They generally address them by their first names, even if they haven’t met before. The intimacy is presumed, but also, at times, earned; local AIPAC staffers, in the manner of basketball recruiters, befriend some members when they are still serving on the student council. “If you have a dream about running for office, AIPAC calls you,” one House member said. Certainly, it’s a rarity when someone undertakes a campaign for the House or the Senate today without hearing from AIPAC.

In 1996, Brian Baird, a psychologist from Seattle, decided to run for Congress. Local

Democrats asked if he had thought about what he was going to say to AIPAC. “I had admired Israel since I was a kid,” Baird told me. “But I also was fairly sympathetic to peaceful resolution and the Palestinian side. These people said, ‘We respect that, but let’s talk about the issues and what you might say.’ The difficult reality is this: in order to get elected to Congress, if you’re not independently wealthy, you have to raise a lot of money. And you learn pretty quickly that, if AIPAC is on your side, you can do that. They come to you and say, ‘We’d be happy to host ten-thousand-dollar fund-raisers for you, and let us help write your annual letter, and please come to this multi-thousand-person dinner.’ ” Baird continued, “Any member of Congress knows that AIPAC is associated indirectly with significant amounts of campaign spending if you’re with them, and significant amounts against you if you’re not with them.” For Baird, AIPAC-connected money amounted to about two hundred thousand dollars in each of his races—“and that’s two hundred thousand going your way, versus the other way: a four-hundred-thousand-dollar swing.”

The contributions, as with many interest groups, come with a great deal of tactical input. “The AIPAC people do a very good job of ‘informing’ you about the issues,” Baird told me. “It literally gets down to ‘No, we don’t say it that way, we say it this way.’ Always phrased as a friendly suggestion—but it’s pretty clear you don’t want to say ‘occupied territories’! There’s a whole complex semantic code you learn. . . . After a while, you find yourself saying and repeating it as if it were fact.”

Soon after taking office, Baird went on a “virtually obligatory” trip to Israel: a freshman ritual in which everything—business-class flights, accommodations at the King David or the Citadel—is paid for by AIPAC’s charitable arm. The tours are carefully curated. “They do have you meet with the Palestinian leaders, in a sort of token process,” Baird said. “But then when you’re done with it they tell you everything the Palestinian leaders said that’s wrong. And, of course, the Palestinians don’t get to have dinner with you at the hotel that night.”

In early 2009, after a brief truce between Israel and Hamas collapsed in a series of mutual provocations, Israel carried out Operation Cast Lead, an incursion into Gaza in which nearly fourteen hundred Palestinians were killed, along with thirteen Israelis. Baird visited the area a few weeks later and returned several times. As he wrote in an op-ed, he saw “firsthand the devastating destruction of hospitals, schools, homes, industries, and infrastructure.” That September, the U.N. Human Rights Council issued a report, based on an inquiry led by the South African jurist Richard Goldstone, that accused Israel of a series of possible war crimes. AIPAC attacked the report, saying it was “rigged.” A month later, an AIPAC-sponsored resolution to condemn the report was introduced in the House, and three hundred and forty-four members voted in favor. “I read every single word of that report, and it comported with what I had seen and heard on the ground in Gaza,” Baird said. “When we had the vote, I said, ‘We have member after member coming to the floor to vote on a resolution they’ve never read, about a report they’ve never seen, in a place they’ve never been.’ ” Goldstone came under such pressure that threats were made to ban him from his grandson’s bar mitzvah at a Johannesburg synagogue. He eventually wrote an op-ed in which he expressed regret for his conclusions, saying, “Civilians were not intentionally targeted as a matter of policy.” Other members of the council stood by the report.

In 2010, Baird decided not to run again for the House; he is now the president of Antioch University Seattle. Few current members of Congress are as outspoken about AIPAC as Baird. Staff members fret about whether AIPAC will prevent them from getting a good consulting job when they leave government. “You just hear the name!” a Senate aide said. “You hear that they are involved and everyone’s ears perk up and their mood changes, and

they start to fall in line in a certain way.”

Baird said, “When key votes are cast, the question on the House floor, troublingly, is often not ‘What is the right thing to do for the United States of America?’ but ‘How is AIPAC going to score this?’ ” He added, “There’s such a conundrum here, of believing that you’re supporting Israel, when you’re actually backing policies that are antithetical to its highest values and, ultimately, destructive for the country.” In talks with Israeli officials, he found that his inquiries were not treated with much respect. In 2003, one of his constituents, Rachel Corrie, was killed by a bulldozer driven by an Israeli soldier, as she protested the demolition of Palestinians’ homes in Gaza. At first, he said, the officials told him, “There’s a simple explanation—here are the facts.” Or, “We will look into it.” But, when he continued to press, something else would emerge. “There is a disdain for the U.S., and a dismissal of any legitimacy of our right to question—because who are we to talk about moral values?” Baird told me. “Whether it’s that we didn’t help early enough in the Holocaust, or look at what we did to our African-Americans, or our Native Americans—whatever! And they see us, members of Congress, as basically for sale. So they want us to shut up and play the game.”

In 2007, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, two leading political scientists of the realist school, published a book called “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.” The book, a best-seller, presented a scathing portrait of AIPAC, arguing that the lobby had a nearly singular distorting influence on American foreign policy, and even that it was a central factor in the rush to war in Iraq. While the authors’ supporters praised their daring, their critics argued that they had neglected to point out any failures of the Palestinian leadership, and painted AIPAC in conspiratorial, omnipotent tones. Even Noam Chomsky, a fierce critic of Israel from the left, wrote that the authors had exaggerated the influence of AIPAC, and that other special interests, like the energy lobby, had greater influence on Middle East policy.

A broader political challenge to AIPAC came in 2009, with the founding of J Street, a “pro-Israel, pro-peace” advocacy group. Led by Jeremy Ben-Ami, a former Clinton Administration aide whose grandparents were among the first settlers in Tel Aviv, J Street was founded to appeal to American Jews who strongly support a two-state solution and who see the occupation as a threat to democracy and to Jewish values. J Street has only a tiny fraction of AIPAC’s financial power and influence on Capitol Hill, but it has tried to provide at least some campaign funding to weaken the lobby’s grip.

AIPAC and its allies have responded aggressively. This year, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations voted not to admit J Street, because, as the leader of one Orthodox alliance said to the Times, its “positions are out of the mainstream of what could be considered acceptable within the Jewish community.” Danny Ayalon, the former Israeli Ambassador, told me, “When Jewish organizations join the political campaign to delegitimize Israel, they are really undermining our security collectively. Because I do believe that, if Israel’s security is compromised, so is that of every Jew in the world.”

Many Israeli and Palestinian leaders have taken note of the rise of J Street and, without overestimating its capacities, see that it represents an increasing diversity of opinion in the American Jewish community. At the last J Street convention, in Washington, Husam Zomlot, a rising figure in Fatah, the largest faction in the P.L.O., delivered a speech about the Palestinian cause and got a standing ovation. “AIPAC is not as effective as it was,” Zomlot said. “I wouldn’t say J Street is the mainstream representative of Jewish Americans, but it is a trend that gives you some sense of where things are and what is happening. Though it has limited funding, it is the first organized Jewish group with a different agenda in Washington

since Israel was established. It's worth noticing."

Some politicians in Washington have indeed noticed, and not always to their benefit. Soon after J Street got started, it endorsed Robert Wexler, a Democratic congressman who represented a South Florida district. "Some AIPAC people told me they would not support me anymore if I went to a J Street event or took their support," Wexler recalled. "I called them and said, 'You've supported me for twelve years. You're not going to support me because somebody from J Street endorsed me?' " Wexler added, "AIPAC is still by a factor of a hundred to one the premier lobbying organization for the Jewish community. I'll never understand why they care one iota about J Street—but they have this bizarre fixation on it."

Jan Schakowsky, who has represented a liberal Chicago district since 1999, was another of J Street's first endorsees. For years, she had maintained good relations with AIPAC, whose members* gave money to her campaigns and praised her positions. She voted to condemn the Goldstone report and signed a 2010 letter urging the Administration to keep any differences with Israel private. But in her 2010 race, she was challenged by Joel Pollak, an Orthodox Jew, who argued that she was insufficiently supportive of Israel. "We were very much aware that AIPAC-associated people were fund-raising for Jan's opponent," Dylan Williams, the director of government affairs for J Street, said. A small but vocal contingent of AIPAC members were behind Pollak. But he was also backed by the Tea Party, which J Street believed might drive away other Jewish voters. The new lobby raised seventy-five thousand dollars for Schakowsky (through its PAC, whose financial contributions are publicly disclosed), and she won by a wide margin. "It was exactly the type of race we had hoped for!" Williams said. "A lot of the power of AIPAC is based on this perception, which I believe is a myth, that if you cross their line you will be targeted, and your opponent in your next race will receive all this money, and it will make a difference." Still, Schakowsky told me, the process was painful. "Getting booed in a synagogue was not a pleasure," she said. "This is not just my base—it's my family!" She added, "Increasingly, Israel has become a wedge issue, something to be used against the President by the Republicans, and it can be very unhelpful."

AIPAC is still capable of mounting a show of bipartisanship. At this year's policy conference, Steny Hoyer, the House Democratic Whip, appeared onstage with Eric Cantor, then the Republican House Majority Leader, and together they rhapsodized about the summer trip they routinely took, leading groups of mostly freshmen on an AIPAC tour of Israel. "Few things are as meaningful as watching your colleagues discover the Jewish state for the very first time," Cantor said.

Cantor and Hoyer have been steadfast supporters of AIPAC, and its members have held at least a dozen fund-raisers for them each year. But last December AIPAC's efforts to implement sanctions against Iran were so intense that even this well-tempered partnership fractured. When Congress returned from its Thanksgiving recess, legislators in the House began discussing a sanctions bill. According to the former congressional aide, Cantor told Hoyer that he wanted a bill that would kill the interim agreement with Iran. Hoyer refused, saying that he would collaborate only on a nonbinding resolution.

Cantor sent Hoyer a resolution that called for additional sanctions and sought to define in advance the contours of an agreement with Iran. "The pressure was tremendous—not just AIPAC leadership and legislative officials but various board members and other contributors, from all over the country," the former congressional aide recalled. "What was striking was how strident the message was," another aide said. " 'How could you not pass a resolution

that tells the President what the outcome of the negotiations has to be?’ ” Advocates for the sanctions portrayed Obama as feckless. “They said, ‘Iranians have been doing this for millennia. They can smell weakness. Why is the President showing weakness?’ ” a Senate aide recalled.

AIPAC was betting that the Democrats, facing midterms with an unpopular President, would break ranks, and that Obama would be unable to stop them. Its confidence was not unfounded; every time Netanyahu and AIPAC had opposed Obama, he had retreated. But Obama took up the fight with unusual vigor. He has been deeply interested in nonproliferation since his college days, and he has been searching for an opening with Iran since his Presidential campaign in 2008. As the Cantor-Hoyer resolution gathered momentum, House Democrats began holding meetings at the White House to strategize about how to oppose it.

Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the head of the Democratic National Committee, attended the meetings, at some political risk. Wasserman Schultz represents a heavily Jewish district in South Florida, and has been a reliable signature on AIPAC’s letters and resolutions; she has boasted of concurring with a hundred per cent of its positions. Now the lobby e-mailed out an “AIPAC Action Alert,” including the text of a story about the meetings in the conservative Washington Free Beacon, in which she was described as “siding with the Mullahs over the American people.” The alert asked AIPAC’s executive-council members to contact her office, ask if the story was true, and challenge her opposition to Cantor-Hoyer. Stephen Fiske, the chair of the pro-Israel Florida Congressional Committee PAC, sent a similar alert to Wasserman Schultz’s constituents, setting off a cascade of calls to her office. (Fiske told the Free Beacon that the callers included a team of young students: his son’s classmates at a Jewish day school in North Miami Beach.) Wasserman Schultz was furious. Soon afterward, she flew to Israel for the funeral of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. On the trip, she remarked to a colleague, “They’re doing this to me?”

But as the meetings continued Democrats began to build a consensus. In December, Ester Kurz, AIPAC’s director of legislative strategy, went to see Nancy Pelosi, the Minority Leader, to urge her to pass the resolution. Pelosi resisted, pointing out that many members of Hoyer’s caucus strongly opposed it. David Price, a Democrat, and Charles Dent, a Republican, had written a letter to the President, urging him to use the diplomatic opening that followed Rouhani’s election to attempt a nuclear agreement; it garnered a hundred and thirty-one signatures. Pointing to the letter, Pelosi demanded to know why AIPAC wanted this resolution, at this time.

The members of Hoyer’s caucus pressed him, and, on December 12th, just as the language of the resolution became final, he asked to set aside the effort, saying that the time was not right. His demurral—from someone who had rarely disappointed AIPAC—was a sign that the lobby might be in uncharted terrain. Two weeks after local AIPAC activists pressured Wasserman Schultz, a national board member issued a statement that called her “a good friend of Israel and a close friend of AIPAC.”

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