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**THE IMPACT OF THE JEWISH LOBBY ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY  
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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**INTRODUCTION**

For the last half century, America has played a key role in efforts to bring a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The state system in the Middle East has consolidated itself and the United States is dissuading any attempts at the revision of the Middle East subsystem, as the US's policy of dual containment toward Iraq and Iran demonstrates.

While American engagement in Middle East peacemaking efforts can be perceived as a positive development, the role of domestic constraints in American foreign policymaking have the potential to distort the even-handed approach that is expected of the United States if it is to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute. One such policy is the US Congress' constant attempt to transfer the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

This article analyses the impact of the internal dynamics of American politics on American foreign policy in the Middle East. More specifically, the role of the Jewish lobby in American foreign policy toward Arab-Israeli negotiations is investigated through focusing on a series of US government policy formulations. In this regard, a brief conceptual introduction of interest groups in the American body politic will be followed by case studies —such as the sale of AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia or the pressure on Congressman Paul Findley— to prove or disprove the power of the Jewish lobby in American politics at large. The respective impacts of the President and the Jewish lobby on policymaking toward Middle Eastern affairs will be explicated.

From this study it will be evident that the power of the Jewish lobby in America, while real, is substantially exaggerated. While the Jewish lobby has some influence over the policymakers, when the President perceives a particular policy of major significance (what we call 'salience'), then he will overrule the lobby and implement the policy he prefers. It will be demonstrated that security issues have a higher priority for the president than economic policies. Hence, it follows that politics has primacy over economics.

**INTEREST GROUPS IN AMERICA**

Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that the political culture of the United States induced the establishment of associations "to promote the public safety, commerce, industry, morality and religion". James Madison before him argued that the duty of the government was to reconcile the divergent interests of interest groups.<sup>1</sup> An interest group is defined as "any group that, on the basis of

one or more shared attitudes, makes certain claims upon other groups in the society for the establishment, maintenance, or enhancement of forms of behaviour that are implied by the shared attitudes".<sup>2</sup>

Interest groups lobby the government to open a "communication process" and present technical information to congressmen. In fact, it was argued that the pressure group had no power to punish a legislator.<sup>3</sup> These analyses stemmed from the low-level of success and sophistication among the lobbyists of the 1950s. However, the rapid increase in the lobbyists' strength in the 1980s was a function of greater specialisation and the lobbies' readiness to support political campaigns financially. America's strongest labour union, AFL-CIO for instance, contributed significant sums to friendly congressmen. Big corporations similarly made important contributions to the legislators.<sup>4</sup>

Typical interest groups such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), National Rifle Association (NRA), and the American Medical Association (AMA) and others such as big companies began competing with each other and established political action committees (PACs) to influence their friends financially. ITT and other large corporations were more influential than the labour unions since they made larger contributions through PACs and employed better lobbyists. With this technique, they were able to have more impact on the legislators' orientations since campaign reform legislation had outlawed large contributions to political parties thereby diminishing the parties' organisational capabilities in many parts of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The lobbyists' success emanates from their mobilising of constituents, providing information to the public and consequently changing public opinion to their favour. In this endeavour, while money is important, it is not the only factor shaping policy. Needless to say, interest groups do not control public policy but have a significant contribution in the formulation of some parts of it.<sup>6</sup>

#### AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICYMAKING AND THE POWER OF THE JEWISH LOBBY

The major actors in Middle East policymaking are the President together with his national security and minority affairs advisers; the State Department with the secretary of state at its head, the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs under an assistant secretary of state, Bureau of International Organisations and the Policy Planning Staff; the Department of Defence together with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the International Security Agency; the Intelligence community with the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency playing key roles; the Congress; the Press, interest groups (both pro-Israeli and the oil companies supplementing the pro-Arab organisations) and lastly public opinion.<sup>7</sup> Policymaking can be a function of calculations by rational decision-makers working for the national interest, the result of competition between governmental agencies or the influence of domestic constraints on foreign policy decisions.<sup>8</sup>

One interest group cannot have total influence over American foreign policy in the Middle East; it can increase the saliency of the issue and engage public opinion as well as focus on Congress, the President and the State Department. It can thus constrain the policies but not initiate or dictate new policies. Since public opinion is to a large degree pro-Israel, the Jewish lobby or ethnic interest group can define the boundaries of policy. In other words, the lobby can have an influence on the details of a policy but cannot guarantee its success or failure. Neither the Jewish lobby nor the oil lobby has a significant influence on foreign policy decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

Keeping this framework in mind, we can proceed to the sources of Jewish power in the United States and its impact on major government decisions. It is one thing to say that Jews are influential in American politics and another to claim that Jews control America, a claim made by former congressman Pete McCloskey, who argued that the Jewish lobby “distorts” American foreign policy, “terrorises” Congress and prevents an even-handed policy in the Middle East. Former Illinois Congressman Paul Findley believes that the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) controls Congress’s Middle East policy and South Dakota Senator James Abourezk argues that United States Middle East policy has become a “captive of its client state”, that “the Israeli lobby shapes United States Middle East policy”<sup>10</sup>

AIPAC targeted these representatives and they lost their congressional seats. Thomas Dine, executive director of AIPAC, took credit for this situation as well as the 1984 defeat of Senator Charles Percy of Illinois, Roger Jepson of Iowa and Walter Huddleston of Kentucky. All had voted for the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia. Paul Findley believes his defeat in 1982 was not a result of the Lobby’s efforts but rather the economic difficulties in his district. Nonetheless, AIPAC tried to magnify its power by claiming that it was instrumental in Congressman Findley’s and other congressmen’s defeats.<sup>11</sup>

There is almost a consensus on the sources of Jewish power in the United States. There are approximately six million Jews in the US, i.e. around three percent of the US population.<sup>12</sup> Yet, they exert a disproportionate influence on the policy process. This is a function of numerous factors; a high rate of financial contribution to political campaigns, concentration on key states that could determine the result of elections, high turnout in elections, a high level of institutionalisation with 500 synagogues and 300 national organisations.<sup>13</sup> To demonstrate the importance of financial contributions, it would be in order to mention that in 1977, 70 out of 125 members of the Democratic National Financial Council were Jewish. Population wise, 81 percent of Jews are concentrated in nine states. In New York they form nine percent of the population and 18 percent of the electorate; in New Jersey 5.5 percent of the population and 9.9 percent of the electorate; in Florida 4.7 percent of the population and 8.2 percent of the voters; in Massachusetts 4.5 percent of the populace and 8.3 percent of the voters; in Maryland 4.3 percent of the population and 8.1 percent of the electorate; in Connecticut three percent of the population and 6.2 percent of the voters; in California three percent of the population and 5.8 percent of the electorate; in Pennsylvania 2.7 percent of the population and 4.9 percent of the voters; and in Illinois 2.3 percent of the population and 3.9 percent of the voters.<sup>14</sup>

It should be evident that being concentrated in a few key states as well as showing greater participation than other ethnic groups in elections significantly increases the power of the Jewish community in America.

Fifty to 60 percent of Jews always vote for the Democratic Party and around 10 percent vote for the Republicans. There is a 30 percent swing vote, which the politicians always try to pull in their favour.<sup>15</sup>

Other factors in Jewish power are the rise in the number of Jews running for public office and single-issue voting, testing friendliness to Israel as a, if not the, major criterion for voting for a particular candidate.<sup>16</sup>

Public opinion has been overwhelmingly pro-Israel in America: 52 percent pro-Israel, seven percent pro-Arab in 1974-1975 with 63 percent supporting Jerusalem being the capital of Israel. The lowest point was reached in 1982 with the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp massacres of Palestinians, when support for Israel dropped to 32 percent and rose for Arabs to 28 percent. However, in January 1983 the ratio was 49 to 12 in favour of Israel.<sup>17</sup> The image Arabs held in public opinion was warlike, backward, greedy and arrogant whereas Israelis were seen as peaceful, honest, intelligent, like Americans, brave and exploited. Moreover, the attentive public and opinion leaders —politicians, bureaucrats, academicians, journalists and businessmen, etc.— were more pro-Israeli than the general public.<sup>18</sup> It should also be added that there were strong partisans of Israel in groupings such as the AFL and the Christian Evangelicals. The latter saw in the establishment of Israel the realisation of biblical prophecy. Evangelists Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson, both of Virginia, were among the ardent supporters of Israel, Fallwell being awarded the Jabotinsky prize by Menachem Begin. Evangelical-Jewish relations however were predicated only on support for Israel while on domestic issues, Jews, who are mostly liberal, were on opposing sides to the archconservative fundamentalists.<sup>19</sup>

Support for Israel was not confined to protestant evangelicals only. A Catholic priest, Robert Drinan, argued that it was the religious and political duty of American Christians to contribute to Israel's security.<sup>20</sup>

The Lobby contributes to the existence of a special relationship between America and Israel, comparable only to the one between the United States and Great Britain, emanating from common Judeo-Christian roots, democracy, pioneering spirit and strategic interests.<sup>21</sup>

The AIPAC is the most influential and one of the best-organised lobbies in Washington. Its precursors are the American Zionist Emergency Council, established as the Zionist Organisation of America's lobby in Washington in 1943, which changed its name to the American Zionist Council as Louis Lipsky assumed its presidency. The name was changed again in 1953 to the American Zionist Council of Public Affairs (AZCPA) and finally the AIPAC in 1959.<sup>22</sup> It was Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' demand to talk to a single Jewish organisation that precipitated the establishment of the AIPAC.<sup>23</sup> I.L. Kenen, AIPAC's first executive director, claims that they established the organisation to counter the propaganda and the power of the "petro-diplomatic complex", which included oilmen, diplomats, missionaries and CIA agents. James Forrestal, Secretary of Defence, and the Arabists at the State Department were an important part of this complex.<sup>24</sup>

Kenen was head of AIPAC from 1951-1974. The Executive Directors that came after him were Morris Amitay, 1974-1980, Tom Dine, 1980-1993,<sup>25</sup> Neal Sher, 1993-1996, and Howard Kohr in 1996.<sup>26</sup> With Amitay assuming power, a more activist lobbying effort was taken and this became even more so with Dine, who boasted about increased aid to Israel and defeat of congressmen not friendly to Israel. In fact, the AIPAC's leverage was increasing as there was a marked increase in the tendency of middle class Americans to get involved in politics and of Congress to become more responsive to special interests. An ethnic interest group can be compared with single-interest groups such as those focusing on the environment or abortion. While AIPAC was accused of dual loyalty at the expense of the American national interest, it is possible to say that lobbying is part of American democratic practice and political tradition.<sup>27</sup>

For an ethnic lobby to be successful, the general public needs to share its concerns and the government should have parallel orientations. Also, the locus of decision should preferably be the legislative rather than the executive branch and the issue at stake should be of major concern to the

lobby. There should be a unity of purpose, cohesiveness, financial resources and an active constituency (factors that the Arab lobby lacks) and the lobby should have a clear strategy and understanding of the techniques of lobbying. Possessing most if not all these factors, AIPAC successfully lobbied the Congress to lobby the Executive.<sup>28</sup>

Providing economic aid to Israel was a major consideration in AIPAC's establishment. Furthermore, it published the Near East Report to provide information<sup>29</sup> to the policymakers from a pro-Israeli point of view.

It would be in order to analyse some of the policy decisions in which the AIPAC in particular and the Jewish lobby in general tried to influence Congress. Economic and military aid to Israel were paramount among these decisions.

In 1962, during the Kennedy administration, in what became the first major military sale, the US sold Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel. The transfer of 200 Patton tanks and some Skyhawk planes followed in 1966. By 1968, however the sale of Phantom jets became a major issue in American politics. The AIPAC as well as the American Jewish Committee, with the AFL (which is traditionally friendly to Israel) were all pressuring the government to go ahead with the sale. Both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party endorsed the sale, as well as the presidential candidates. However, these domestic pressures did not in the end lead President Lyndon Johnson to approve the sale; France's reluctance to supply arms to Israel and the Soviet Union's unwillingness to co-operate with the US to limit arms to the Middle East encouraged the president to sell Israel the Phantoms. Furthermore, the public was supportive of such a decision.<sup>30</sup>

Despite reluctance of the bureaucracy (State and Defence departments) and some members of Congress, such as William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the President saw the sale of Phantoms to Israel in strategic terms and decided in its favour.<sup>31</sup>

In the war of attrition, the arrival of Skyhawks and Phantoms throughout 1969 improved Israel's air force both quantitatively and qualitatively,<sup>32</sup> and this symbolised the beginning of ever-increasing quantities of American military aid.

The sales to Saudi Arabia of F-15s in 1978 and AWACS in 1981 led to an open clash between the President and the Jewish lobby. AIPAC put its full weight behind the effort in the Congress to block the sale. In both cases, the President was victorious, which shows that when the President presents an issue as a matter of national security, it is highly unlikely that the Lobby can prevail over the Executive. Yet, a lobby's very challenge to the US President shows its level of confidence.

In February 1978, President Jimmy Carter announced the administration's intention to sell Saudi Arabia 60 F-15s; Egypt 50 F-5Es and 15 F-15s and Israel 75 F-16s as a package. AIPAC tried to prevent the sale but the Saudis threatened to buy planes from France and started their own lobbying effort, which included 25 lobbyists including former Defence Secretary Clark Clifford, former Senator Fulbright, and Fred Dutton. The National Association of Arab Americans lobbied Congress in favour of the sale. In May 1978, the Senate voted 54 to 44 in favour of the sale, proving that the Lobby cannot win against "a fully committed president".<sup>33</sup>

The 1981 AWACS debate was much harsher than the 1978 F-15 sale. In this incident, the AIPAC mobilised its constituency more than ever, bombarding congressmen with letters, telegrams and phone calls. The Arabs, on the other hand, had Boeing, United Technologies and Mobil on their side, the latter giving advertisements to major newspapers arguing for the Arab side's validity. Former presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter also rallied to President Reagan's side. Ford said that America could not let the Jews run American foreign policy and Reagan said it is "not the business of other nations to American foreign policy". The President met with numerous Senators to both offer inducements and make threats. The House of Representatives voted 301:111 against the sale whereas the Senate approved the sale with 52 votes for and 48 against. The President convinced the Senate that he should not be humiliated or constrained in the making of foreign policy. This event was seen by the Jewish lobby as the validation of the power of the Arab lobby and led to an increased interest in AIPAC among American Jews, contributing to its increase in power.<sup>34</sup>

While the Lobby lost these issues, it is fair to say that the sale would not have had so much, if any, opposition but for its efforts. Similarly, the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which conditioned the granting of most favoured nation status on the Soviet Union to its allowing Jews to emigrate freely, or the anti-boycott legislation against the Arab economic boycott of Israel would not have come to Congress if the Jewish lobby had not brought these issues on to the agenda.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the letter of 76 senators addressed to the President countered the reassessment of the Ford-Kissinger policy (to force Israel to negotiate with Egypt) and, to show its disapproval, Congress blocked the sale of Hawks to Jordan. In fact, there was no public support for the policy of reassessment. The US-Israel memorandum guaranteed supplies of arms to Israel and the non-recognition of the PLO until it accepted United Nations resolutions 242 and 338 and recognised Israel's right to exist.<sup>36</sup>

These examples show the significance of the Jewish lobby and its power. Yet, they also demonstrate that the President can defeat the Lobby if he perceives an issue as salient.

Israel's 1991 demand for \$10 billion over the following five years led to the prevalence of the administration as well. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, Jews in that country began to emigrate to Israel in ever growing numbers. Israel asked the United States to provide it with an additional \$10 billion on top of the \$3 billion it was getting. In April 1991, Housing Minister Ariel Sharon announced 13,000 new housing units in the occupied territories for the prospective Russian immigrants. On 6 September, President George Bush asked for a delay of the economic aid for 120 days to compel Israel to stop the settlements. The release of the loans was seen as a top priority for the AIPAC and was presented as an economic and humanitarian issue, whereas the administration argued that it was a security issue. Loans were freed after the Labour Party under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin won the elections in Israel and froze the settlements. The AIPAC's role was seriously curtailed in this incident since Congress and public opinion were not particularly supportive and American-Israeli interests were not converging. It clearly demonstrated that the AIPAC could limit but not lead policy.<sup>37</sup>

The Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 can be viewed as proving the power of the Lobby, yet the executive overruled this irresponsible policy. In Congress, the power of the Israeli lobby is always stronger than in the Executive and the passing of this act can be seen as the result of the endeavours of friends of Israel in the Congress in conjunction with AIPAC lobbying.

The Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, Public Law 104-45 passed by the 104th congress calls for the

“relocation of the United States Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem”, stressing that the city had been the capital of Israel since 1950 and was the seat of Israel’s President, Parliament and the Supreme Court. It recalled the 1990 Senate Concurrent Resolution arguing for the necessity of Jerusalem remaining undivided and the 1992 Senate Concurrent Resolution commemorating the 25th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem. In June 1993, 257 members of the House of Representatives sent to Secretary of State Warren Christopher a letter asking for the American embassy in Tel Aviv to be transferred to Jerusalem. In March 1995, 93 senators sent a letter to Christopher reiterating the same demand. Finally, the Jerusalem act declared that Jerusalem should remain undivided and be recognised as the capital of Israel. Moreover, the US embassy “should be established in Jerusalem no later than May 31, 1999”. By 8 November 1995, this became a law without the President’s signature but he used the waiver provision to delay the transfer of the Embassy.<sup>38</sup>

This piece of legislation, had it been implemented, would have been a major obstacle to the peace process since the Israelis and Palestinians have yet to negotiate and decide on the status of Jerusalem. Its implementation would have pre-empted the final status negotiations. Similarly, after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in the autumn of 2000, such a decision would have further exacerbated the situation.

More importantly, one study showed that 57 percent of the American public agreed with the decision, whereas 30 percent disagreed. While 88 percent of Americans supported the peace process, 60 percent were against an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital because many believed that the Arabs’ hidden objective was Israel’s annihilation.<sup>39</sup>

The cases studied show that the Jewish lobby’s influence on American policy in the Jackson-Vanik amendment and anti-boycott legislation was substantial. Whereas it was very limited or non-existent in the 1978 and 1981 decisions on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and during the Lebanon War and the first Intifada (1987-1993).<sup>40</sup>

## THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT

Presidential involvement is essential in the formulation and implementation of a particular policy. To demonstrate this interrelationship between policymaking and the Lobby, these observations are essential: Truman supported the Lobby 54 percent of the time, Eisenhower 55 percent, Kennedy 67 percent, Johnson 59 percent, Nixon in his first term 48 percent, in his second term together with Ford in 1973-1976 58 percent, Carter 36 percent and Reagan 54 percent. This means that most presidents since Truman supported the Lobby in its initiatives more than half of the time. When the President supports the Lobby, it wins 95 percent of its policy initiatives, whereas when the President opposes it, it still wins 27 percent of the time. In general terms, 60 percent of its initiatives are successful.<sup>41</sup>

When the locus of decision is on the Executive, the Lobby wins 11 percent of the time despite presidential opposition. When the locus of decision is on the Legislature, the Lobby wins 55 percent of the time,<sup>42</sup> undoubtedly an impressive success.

The policy content is also significant in the relative influence of the Lobby. The Lobby wins 54 percent of economic issues, 22 percent of security issues and 13 percent of political issues, despite the President. The Lobby’s success on economic issues stems from the fact that Congress decides these and its lack of success with politico-strategic affairs stems from their being decided by the executive branch.<sup>43</sup>

We now come to issue of salience for the President. When an issue is deemed of utmost importance, political and strategic issues for instance, the Lobby's influence decreases, however when the issue is not considered vital to American interests, mostly economic issues, then the Lobby's influence increases dramatically.

Steven Spiegel formulates this matter as such: if the President gives low priority to the Arab-Israeli Conflict, then Congress's and the Lobby's influence increases, whereas when the President sees the area as a major American foreign policy priority then interest group leverage decreases.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the significance of the role of the President is manifested as each newly elected president brings new advisers, hence people with different ideological orientations, assumptions and hence new rules. He actually changes the framework in which foreign policy is articulated and implemented.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The proposition that Jews control or dictate American foreign policy is false. Yet, the political weight of the Jewish community on foreign policymaking is well taken. Otherwise, events such as the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 could not be explained. After all such legislation has no direct bearing on American interests.

A strong executive severely constrains the Lobby's involvement. In Congress, the Lobby finds close allies, who often take decisions that could negatively affect the peace negotiations.

Foreign policy is designed and implemented according to the interests of the nation. Domestic constraints, while taken into consideration by the decision-makers, can be overruled if the sublime interests of the state dictate otherwise in the judgement and analysis of the statesmen. America has the resources and the prestige to contribute to the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the transformation from a conflictual to a peaceful relation between the Arabs and the Israelis, American help is needed. The United States, as a superpower, if it is responsive to and respectful of the cultures and needs of the world, and pursues a balanced policy toward all the contending parties, can contribute to peacemaking in various regions of the globe.

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