

Can American Jews unplug the Israel lobby?

As Bush's unbalanced Mideast policies careen from disaster to disaster, people who don't toe the AIPAC line are beginning to speak out.

By Gary Kamiya

Mar. 20, 2007 | Last week, a familiar Washington ritual took place: Leading American politicians from both parties lined up at the annual policy conference of the [American Israel Public Affairs Committee](#) to vie with each other over who could [pledge the most undying fealty to Israel](#).

As usual, much of Congress showed up -- half of the members of the U.S. Senate and more than half of the House, including figures like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, along with Vice President Dick Cheney.

It was a typical AIPAC parallel-universe extravaganza, marred only by partisan rifts that have begun to appear over Iraq. (Even some of the AIPAC crowd, who overwhelmingly [supported the war](#) at the outset, have begun to realize that it has been a disaster for both the United States and Israel.) Cheney got a standing ovation, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said via a video link that [winning the war in Iraq was important for Israel](#), Nancy Pelosi was booed for criticizing the war, a [fire-breathing Christian dispensationalist](#) who believes that war on Iran will bring about the Rapture and the Second Coming was rapturously greeted, and Barack Obama took heat for having the audacity to mention the suffering of the Palestinians.

But AIPAC showed its true power -- and its continuing ability to steer American Mideast policy in a disastrous direction -- when a group of conservative and pro-Israel Democrats [succeeded in removing language](#) from a military appropriations bill that would have required Bush to get congressional approval before using military force against Iran.

The pro-Israel lobby's victory on the Iran bill is almost unbelievable. Even after the nation repudiated the Iraq war decisively in the 2006 midterms, even after it has become clear that the Bush administration's Middle East policy is severely unbalanced toward Israel and has damaged America's standing in the world, Congress still cannot bring itself to stand up to the AIPAC line.

The fact that AIPAC, which is ranked as the second-most powerful lobby in the country (trailing only AARP, but ahead of the NRA) virtually dictates U.S. policy in the Mideast has long been one of those surreal facts of Washington life that politicians discuss only when they get near retirement -- if then. In 2004, Sen. Ernest "Fritz" Hollings had the bad taste to [reveal this inconvenient truth](#) when he said, "You can't have an Israel policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here." Michael Massing, who has done exemplary reporting on AIPAC for the New York Review of Books, [quoted a congressional staffer](#) as saying, "We can count on well over half the House -- 250 to 300 members -- to do reflexively whatever AIPAC wants." In unguarded moments, even top AIPAC figures have confirmed such claims. The New Yorker's Jeffrey Goldberg [quoted Steven Rosen](#), AIPAC's former foreign-policy director who is now awaiting trial on charges of passing top-secret Pentagon information to Israel, as saying, "You see this napkin? In twenty-four hours, we could have the signatures of seventy senators on this napkin."

Until 9/11 and the Iraq war, this state of affairs was of little concern to anyone except those passionately interested in the Middle East -- a small group that has never included more than a tiny minority of Americans, Jews or non-Jews. If the pro-Israel lobby wielded enormous power over America's Mideast policies, so what? America's Mideast policies were always reliably pro-Israel anyway, for a variety of reasons, including many that had nothing to do with lobbying by American Jews. And the stakes didn't seem that big.

But in the wake of 9/11 and the Iraq war, that all changed dramatically. 9/11, and the Bush administration's response to it, made it inescapably clear that America's Mideast policies affect everyone in the country: They are literally a matter of life and death. The Bush administration's [neoconservative Mideast policy](#) is essentially indistinguishable from AIPAC's. And so it is no longer possible to ignore it -- even though it is a notoriously touchy and divisive subject.

The touchiest aspect of all is the role played by pro-Israel neoconservatives in laying the groundwork for the Iraq war. Much of the media has been loath to go near this, for obvious and in some ways honorable reasons: It feels a little like "blame the Jews." But that taboo has faded as it has become clearer that "the Jews" are not the ones being blamed for helping pave the way to war, but a group of powerful neoconservatives, some but not all of them Jewish, who subscribe to the hard-right views of Israel's Likud Party. This group no more represents "the Jews" than the Shining Path represents "the Peruvians."

Logic and forthrightness has traditionally taken a back seat to timorous self-censorship when it comes to discussing these matters. But in addition to the war debate, several other watershed events have helped erode the taboo against discussing the power of the Israel lobby. The most important were the publications of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's ["The Israel Lobby,"](#)

and Jimmy Carter's "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid." The overwrought reaction to Mearsheimer and Walt's piece,

ironically, only supported its thesis. Similarly, the [opprobrium heaped on Carter](#) only succeeded in making it clear how little room there is for open discussion of these issues in America.

For all these reasons, a powerful spotlight has been turned on the pro-Israel lobby. And there are signs that increasing numbers of Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, are willing to openly question whether it is in America's national interest for AIPAC, whose positions are well to the right of those held by most American Jews, to wield such disproportionate power over America's Mideast policies.

As a group, American Jews continue to be staunchly liberal. A new poll shows that 77 percent of American Jews now think that the Iraq war was a mistake, compared with 52 percent of all Americans. (Jewish support for the war has collapsed: A poll taken a month before the war showed that 56 percent of Jews supported it, somewhat below the national average at that time.) Eighty-seven percent of Jews voted Democratic in 2006. And although data here is murkier, [polls also show](#) that most American Jews hold views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that are to the left of AIPAC's.

What all this adds up to is that for liberal or moderate American Jews who don't support Bush's war in Iraq or his "war on terror" and who are willing to look at Israel warts and all, the fact that AIPAC has anointed itself as the de facto spokesmen for American Jews is becoming more and more unacceptable. And increasing numbers of them are beginning to speak out.

One of the most trenchant commentators is Philip Weiss, a regular contributor to the Nation. Weiss' blog, [MondoWeiss](#), offers informed and passionate discussions of what he calls "delicate and controversial matters surrounding American Jewish identity and Israel." He routinely skewers attempts by mainstream Jewish organizations and pundits to lay down the law on what is acceptable discourse. This means being willing to look at off-limits subjects like ["dual loyalty."](#) When the American Jewish Committee, a powerful advocacy group that shares AIPAC'S line, issued a [reactionary response](#) to the Mearsheimer-Walt piece and the Carter book, accusing Jewish intellectuals who didn't toe the party line on Israel of being "self-haters," Weiss pointed out that the heavy-handed attempt had backfired -- instead of silencing dissenting voices, the AJC piece revealed for all to see the "anti-intellectual, vicious, omerta practices of the Jewish leadership."

Other widely read writers who have been outspoken on formerly taboo subjects include Matthew Yglesias of the American Prospect and Glenn Greenwald of Salon. Both Greenwald and [Yglesias](#), for example, punctured a classic attempt by the Jewish establishment to smear Gen. Wesley Clark, who, saying that he feared that Bush might be preparing to attack Iran, added, "The Jewish community is divided but there is so much pressure being channeled from the New York money people to the office seekers." Clark was immediately -- and predictably -- accused of being anti-Semitic for referring to "the New York money people" and implying they wanted war with Iran. But as both Yglesias and [Greenwald pointed out](#), everything Clark said was demonstrably true. Adding insult to injury, Greenwald proved it was true by citing such right-wing, pro-Israel media sources as the New York Sun and the New York Post.

Of course, a few blogs, articles and organizations do not necessarily a movement make -- certainly not one capable of standing up to a deep-pocketed powerhouse like AIPAC. But there are other signs that the hegemony of AIPAC and its ilk is weakening. Last year liberal Jewish groups like Americans for Peace Now, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Peace and the Israel Policy Forum succeeded in handing AIPAC a legislative defeat, persuading Congress to gut a harsh AIPAC-supported bill that would have cut off all aid to the Palestinian people. These groups still have only a fraction of AIPAC's clout and money. But as Gregory Levey [noted in Salon](#), there has been talk of a new lobby, possibly bankrolled by billionaire George Soros, which would compete with AIPAC. If such a group comes into existence -- and it's much too soon to say that it will -- the entire playing field would be changed.

How long AIPAC will hold sway depends on how long it can convince politicians that it speaks for American Jews. It doesn't, but only American Jews can prove that. American politicians are not going to stop paying homage to AIPAC until there's an alternative -- and only Jews can provide it. Are liberal Jews really beginning to turn speak out against AIPAC? And if not, why not?

To try to get some answers, I called M.J. Rosenberg, the director of policy analysis for the [Israel Policy Forum](#), a Washington-based liberal counterpart to AIPAC that advocates muscular U.S. support for a two-state solution in Palestine. Rosenberg worked for AIPAC between 1982 and 1986, leaving when he became disenchanted with the group's hard-line response to the Oslo peace process.

I asked Rosenberg how AIPAC has been able to maintain its power.

"Although they [AIPAC] don't represent anything like a majority of American Jews, they may represent a majority of those who are most interested in Israel," Rosenberg said. "American Jews who care about Israel and other things are more likely to be supporters of the IPF kind of approach. I think Jews who care only about Israel are closer to the AIPAC position. In our politics today, single-issue voters and donors tend to have clout out of all proportion to their numbers. That's nothing new. My father used to tell me that in the 1930s when you had any kind of a meeting of liberals, the Communists always prevailed because they were the most single-minded -- everybody else would go home. Things go to extremes. And that would apply to the right-to-life movement and the gun movement as well. We always claim we're the majority -- we are, but we have a soft majority. And they've got a hard minority."

Why weren't more American Jews with moderate views on the Middle East stepping forward to challenge AIPAC and its

hawkish policies? I asked Rosenberg. Was it because they were afraid of being morally blackmailed -- facing the predictable accusations of being self-hating Jews, disloyal to Israel, collaborati onist "kapos," and so on?

"I think the number of people in that group is relatively small," Rosenberg said. "I think the much larger number are people who are absolutely indifferent. And therefore they're not susceptible to moral blackmail because they will never hear what AIPAC or the IPF or any of the Israel organizations say. I don't know what percentage it is, but my guess is that no more than 40 percent of American Jews think about Israel in any way, shape or form. Most of them live their lives, like most people do. So we're fighting over people who think about it at all, and as I said the single-issue ones tend to be more with AIPAC for now. We're trying to get the rest. But I do think that as time goes on, with more and more young people, that moral blackmail thing doesn't work anymore."

Rosenberg said that long-term demographic trends were working against AIPAC and its fear tactics. The AIPAC leadership, which he described as a "true believer [on Israel] crowd with money," is "a much older crowd," he said. "Their children and grandchildren don't have those views. As we get further from World War II, it's harder to scare young people into support for Israel. They will support Israel if they believe in Israel and if Israel appeals to them. But those scare tactics, 'write checks because there's going to be another Holocaust' -- that's doesn't work with the under-60 crowd. The people who demonstrated against the Vietnam war in the '60s, they're just not going to buy into the 'Hitler is coming' stuff. They're just too smart for that. I've got kids in their 20s -- the idea of telling them that America could be a dangerous place for them? They would laugh in my face. That's ridiculous."

Rosenberg also pointed out that "Israel's popularity with American Jews has gone down since 1977, when Begin became prime minister. The way Israel was sold, the Leon Uris Israel, was the Israel of the kibbutz, this socialist paradise. And that's totally changed now. A lot of the glow is really gone, which makes me sad, because I'm very involved with Israel and I care a lot about Israel."

Rosenberg said that one of the best things American Jews can do to educate themselves about Israel is to read the Israeli press, which routinely prints pieces far more harshly critical of Israel than anything found in the American media. "If people who don't follow the situation closely started to read the Israeli press, started to read [Haaretz](#), they'd realize how much debate there is there, and how many people feel terribly about what's happened to the Palestinians, and how many people are determined to break out of this situation," Rosenberg said. "And they'd realize that Israelis in general feel that the rhetoric of American Jewish organizations is about as outdated as the last century. It says nothing to Israelis. They laugh at that kind of rhetoric. If American Jews saw what the debate is like there, that would make Israel more popular. The more knowledge, the better. American Jews would see that the kind of liberal humanitarian views they have on issues here are perfectly legitimate in Israel, and perfectly common in Israel, even though in the mainstream American Jewish organizations they're considered off-center."

Rosenberg compared American Jews' evolving attitudes to Israel to the achievements of the civil rights movement. "Look, 25 years ago you couldn't even talk about the Palestinians. I mean, Golda Meir said there was no such thing as a Palestinian. Now there's not a single major Jewish organization except the far-right organizations that does not give at least nominal support to the two-state solution. So it's moving. It's kind of like the civil rights movement in this country. It's not perfect, but you see the change. I would say that 90 percent of American Jews understand that there's going to be a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. That's what most Israelis know is going to be the future. So that's something."

Liberal American Jews are in a difficult situation, with powerful and understandable emotional crosscurrents pulling them both ways. If they are liberal, antiwar, anti-Bush Democrats, willing to look critically at Israel, you'd think they might be willing to speak out against AIPAC. But why should they? Like most other Americans, most Jews are probably sick of Israel's endless conflict with the Palestinians, don't know much about it, and aren't that interested in learning more. Everyone knows that holding strong opinions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a surefire ticket to painful arguments -- in this case, possibly within one's own family. Much easier just to let AIPAC be in charge of speaking for Jews on Israel and be done with it.

American Jews may not be as susceptible as they once were to the old fear-and-guilt approach, as Rosenberg suggests, but for many Israel remains something of an untouchable subject. They may not support it 100 percent, maybe not even 50 percent, but they're still not ready to do anything to undercut a group like AIPAC that does. For some, this is simply a reflection of a more or less ardent Zionism. For others, the reasons can be subtler. For Jews who have little attachment to their religion or their cultural traditions, supporting Israel -- which for many, unfortunately, means actively or passively supporting AIPAC's position on Israel -- may be a way of demonstrating that they haven't completely abandoned their heritage. The internalized second-class status of being in the diaspora, too, may play a role: "Who am I in New York City to say anything against a guy in the West Bank facing suicide bombers?" As Haaretz's diplomatic correspondent and my longtime Salon colleague Aluf Benn once told me, "For American Jews, Israel is a cause. We Israelis don't see it that way."

We find ourselves in a very strange situation. America's Mideast policies are in thrall to a powerful Washington lobby that is only able to hold power because it has not been challenged by the people it presumes to speak for. But if enough American Jews were to stand up and say "not in my name," they could have a decisive impact on America's disastrous Mideast policies.

