

How the pro-Israel lobby in Britain benefits from a generous London tycoon

Rajeev Syal

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Britain's most active pro-Israeli lobbying organisation - which flies journalists to Israel on fact-finding trips and organises access to senior government figures - has received nearly £1.4m in two years from a billionaire donor whose father made a fortune manufacturing arms in Israel.

The British Israel Communication and Research Centre, known as Bicom, has been one of the most active organisations behind the scenes in the UK during the present Gaza offensive, organising briefings and interview opportunities with senior Israeli spokesmen.

Its biggest funder is Poju Zabłudowicz, a London-based tycoon, who has underwritten its campaigning since 2007. The disclosure comes amid an intense struggle in Britain between lobbying organisations working for both sides in the conflict. Foreign affairs specialists say that the injection of funds has ensured that Bicom has become one of the most persistent and slickest media operations in the battle for influence over opinion formers.

Company accounts show that Zabłudowicz, whose fortune was founded on the success of his father's arms company, donated £937,995 to Bicom in 2007, around half its total income, and £341,694 in 2006.

Bicom, which claims to be an independent organisation devoted to seeking a more supportive environment for Israel, is at the forefront of the campaign to win over the British media. Foreign reporters are bombarded with press releases and invitations to interview senior Israeli ministers and advisors at top London restaurants. Set up in 2001, it has regularly flown journalists to Tel Aviv .

Despite its prominence, Bicom has declined to discuss its operations. But insiders claim that the company is based in plush offices just off London's Oxford Street and employs more than 20 people.

While the CEO is Lorna Fitzsimons, the former Labour MP for Rochdale, those close to the organisation say that Zabłudowicz, the chairman, controls it. "He and his associates are very important in defining the direction of the organisation," said one former employee.

Zabłudowicz, 55, was born in Helsinki, Finland, and now lives on The Bishops Avenue, known as Millionaires' Row, in Hampstead, north London. He is the 31st richest man in Britain with a £2bn fortune, according to the Sunday Times Rich List.

His father, Shlomo, an Auschwitz survivor, built up the Israeli arms company Soltam in the 50s after working closely with Shimon Peres, who was then the director general of the Israeli defence ministry.

After Shlomo's death in 1994, his son took over the business and most of the defence interests were sold. The family business is now controlled through the Tamares Group, which is based in Liechtenstein, with huge property portfolios in Israel and Las Vegas. Some journalists believe that the resources behind Bicom have contributed to an improved image of Israel in the British media over the past seven years. One foreign reporter said: "The scale of their activity is amazing. They fire off press releases several

times a day, and have access to those at the very top of the Israeli government. You cannot compare then to the pro-Palestinian groups' media operations, which are frankly amateurish."

One fellow director of Bicom dismissed claims that Zabludowicz is the main driving force behind Bicom. David Menton said that he is one of around 120 donors who have given to the organisation. "As an organisation, Bicom is fortunate to benefit from the generosity of in excess of 100 donors, of which one of its pioneers is Poju Zabludowicz," he said.

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