

How Much Influence Does The Israel Lobby Have On U.S. Foreign Policy?

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ABSTRACT

Organizations lobbying for Israel, such as AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, are often attributed with outsized influence, while others claim that stressing the influence of these groups risks spreading antisemitic tropes. However, moving aside from the political and moral questions of lobbying for Israel, how much do these groups influence policy formulation? In this literature review, we will look at how authors have treated this issue and the limitations and advantages of their approaches. AIPAC and other groups have had a notable influence on the amount of aid and its quality sent to Israel. However, it has had far less of an impact on the formulation of policy toward the peace process. But that is not to say it has had none at all. One of the ways the Israel Lobby does influence the peace process is by creating a political cost to bringing the issue up, which leads to fatigue from policy-makers. However, when a notable US national interest is at stake, that is not enough to scuttle important diplomatic achievements.

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1. Introduction and Objectives

There is a lot of speculation on how AIPAC and other organizations of that kind influence policy. But a lot of that is uninformed and partisan. In some instances, these analyses even flirt with antisemitism. There is a lot of emotionally charged analysis of the influence of lobbying groups such as the NRA or the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance. However, it can be hard to measure how much influence they actually have. This literature review will outline the impact of the Israel lobby on US foreign policy. This will be a pragmatic rather than emotional analysis, examining policy outputs rather than rhetoric or appeals to emotion.

Nomenclature

AIPAC - The American Israel Public Affairs Committee is arguably the most influential pro-Israel lobbying group. Founded in 1963, it focuses primarily on influencing the legislative branches of the US government.

The Conference of the Presidents - The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations was founded in 1956 to solidify a united voice for the American Jewish community in influencing the White House to follow a policy more beneficial to Israel. The Conference of the Presidents has traditionally lobbied the executive branch, while AIPAC focused on Congress.

J Street - A liberal pro-Israeli advocacy group created as an alternative to AIPAC, which the founders of J Street believed lobbies for right-wing policies that are harmful to Israel. The organization was founded in 2007.

Lobby Groups - A lobby is a non-governmental organization, a group of people with a clear purpose who band together as an official organization to influence government policy.

The Peace Process - A name given to the various attempts to mediate between Israel and various Arab actors, including the Palestinians, to reach peace agreements regarding the issues separating the parties and feeding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

ZOA - The Zionist Organization of America is a lobbying group with a right-wing orientation, espousing the belief that Israel should expand settlements and annex the West Bank.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed here is a simple literature review focusing on the practical policy outputs of the best-known works on the Israel lobby. Examining these works will help extrapolate the assumptions regarding how influential the Israeli lobby is. These descriptions will be compared with a cursory analysis of the empirical evidence to assess the validity of these claims. That will help us analyze the most common mistakes and misconceptions regarding the Israel lobby and help to rectify them by comparing these assumptions with empirical reality.

The papers were selected based on three main criteria. First, they were published by major academic publishers, which should indicate a thorough amount of peer review. That is particularly important since there is a lot of wild speculation and unfounded opinion on this topic. That is equally true for those who claim the Israel lobby has undue influence and those who disagree. Second, they were the more important ones that have had an influence on the discourse

since there is quite a bit of research on this question. They were based on strong evidence and not on unsubstantiated arguments. These three criteria have helped separate the wheat from the chaff

3. Results

The literature on the “Israel lobby” has some conceptual problems that make measuring its influence difficult. The “lobby” has, at times, been defined very widely to include all potential defenders of Israel in the United States. The most important book on the topic, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, by Mearsheimer and Walt, defines the lobby as a “loose coalition of organizations and individuals that actively work to move US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction” (7). Others are more specific. Dov Waxman has a more helpful definition, looking at the Israel lobby as a collection of “formal organizations that try to influence American policy toward Israel in a direction that they believe is in Israel’s interests” (9).

There are many arguments within the relevant body of literature. But let’s start with where there is agreement. Every book or article I have seen on the topic accepts the premise that Israel and the United States are exceptionally close. That closeness is expressed in the uniquely emotional language that American leaders use to discuss Israel and the security commitment to the existence of the Jewish state. It can also be seen in the high amounts of aid, especially of the military variety, provided to Israel by the United States. Usually, the amount reaches close to 4 billion dollars a year, but during the current war, it has reached about 18 billion dollars. That is more direct military aid than it has provided any of its other allies. Since the founding of the State of Israel, the US has provided Israel with 310\$ million (4).

The discourse about the Israel lobby becomes contentious in analyzing why that is. The work in the Israel lobby can be divided into two groups. Those who believe that domestic drivers, and particularly the work of groups like AIPAC, are the primary drivers in creating a close “special relationship” between Israel and the United States. Mearsheimer and Walt explain that the lobbying efforts are the main reason for this closeness. They believe the US would follow its dispassionate national interest more closely without it. That would lead them to side with the Palestinians more often, in a manner that would help the United States gain more influence among other actors in the Middle East (7).

Critics of this approach, such as Jonathan Rynhold and Dov Waxman, agree that the Israel lobby greatly influences policy. However, they do not believe that the work of the Israel lobby is central to fostering the closeness between Israel and the United States. Instead, they think that the strong sympathy the American public and its powerful officials have towards Israel is cultural and is also related to the strategic benefits of the partnership. Therefore, from their perspective, the role of pro-Israeli groups in the United States is to deepen existing sympathies and steer them in specific directions (8).

The disagreements on the role of the Israel lobby also translate to different conceptions of their role in the peace process. To Mearsheimer and Walt, the US mediation has failed consistently because it has taken a very pro-Israeli approach that has alienated the Palestinians and enabled Israeli expansionist tendencies (7). In this, they agree with noted scholar Rashid Khalidi, who has accused the American government of often acting as “Israel’s lawyer.” To their mind, the lobbying has helped shape a policy that enables Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the continued expansion of settlements (3).

Meanwhile, Rynhold and Waxman believe that the influence of the Israel lobby is best expressed in issues like the supply of arms. That is an issue behind which there is broad consensus, even among many officials who are more critical of Israel. Indeed, all of the Israel lobby organizations, from the most liberal to the most conservative, agree on that issue, and that provides it with the leverage and the ability to speak (more or less) with one voice (8).

They claim that the lobby’s influence is far more limited on issues such as the peace process and settlement policy. That is because organizations like the AIPAC, J Street, and the ZOA are so divided on them. However, the peace process is at the heart of the national interest in the Middle East and is, therefore, more challenging to influence. Furthermore, the executive runs negotiations, particularly the President, Secretary of State, and National Security Advisor. These positions are far more challenging to lobby than members of Congress who run for re-election and require funding (8). Therefore, the influence of the Israel Lobby is most pronounced in Congress, where AIPAC alone spent \$42,798,107 just in the last election cycle (6).

4. Discussion

The United States has had an active role in trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict since the early 1970s. It has made significant efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the late 1980s. However, it has consistently preferred to back the Israeli position over the Palestinian one on most issues. Even when it, at times, has been more critical of Israeli actions, such as on settlement expansion, it has not pressured Israel as vigorously or effectively as it could have. That is the source of the belief that the Israel lobby has had a decisive influence on the peace process.

There is no question that, at times, the Israel lobby has promoted goals that are antithetical to Palestinian interests. However, when the US has been heavily involved in the peace process, these pressure groups have often hesitated to go to the mat for the Israeli negotiation position. The reason for that is that most American Jews do not support the expansion of settlements or the annexation of the West Bank. In a 2024 poll, 69% of American Jews said that Israel should be willing to dismantle some or all of the settlements for peace. Meanwhile, the vast majority also support a two-state solution. With American Jews as the primary constituency of the Israel lobby, it becomes difficult for these organizations to lobby against peaceful solutions and in favor of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories (5).

This dynamic is the reason that attempts by the Israel lobby to intervene in the peace process have generally failed. For example, in 1991, the H.W. Bush administration tried to limit loan guarantees for Israel if they used the money to expand settlements. The attempts by AIPAC to get Senators to oppose the President failed. Thomas Friedman wrote in the *New York Times*, “The Bush Administration had trounced Israel and its Congressional supporters” (2).

During the severe advance in the peace process, the Oslo Process of the 1990s, the Israel lobby organizations largely sat on the sidelines. One of the main reasons for that is that the government in Jerusalem, led by Yitzhak Rabin, was willing to engage and make progress. There was nothing against which AIPAC could push back. Even in 1996, when Benjamin Netanyahu, who was less enthusiastic about the peace process, was elected, not much changed. He was pressured into making withdrawals in the Wye Agreement and the Hebron Protocols. AIPAC largely stood aside (1).

Since Oslo’s failure, there have been some half-hearted attempts to return to peace negotiations, but they have yet to be serious. That is partly because the Palestinian leadership has split between two movements, Hamas and Fatah. It also relates to Netanyahu’s return as the longest-serving Prime Minister in

Israeli history. He has shown little interest in reviving the peace process. US administrations have not moved the negotiations forward much since then. But that is more because of conditions on the ground than the Israel lobby. However, the resistance of AIPAC and other groups to pressure Israel to make concessions certainly has not helped.

5. Conclusion

The Israel lobby is a very effective lobbying group. It significantly affects the amount of aid the US provides to Israel. However, its influence on the peace process has been far more limited. That is because the main constituency involved, the American Jewish community, generally supports a two-state solution and opposes the expansion of settlements. Therefore, the organizations that make up the Israel lobby have difficulty lobbying on the issue, especially since AIPAC, J Street, and the ZOA differ greatly on these issues.

In addition, lobbying the executive branch is notably challenging. Congress only touches on these issues peripherally, and even then, it often prefers to avoid going head-to-head with the administration on matters of the national interest.

The true reason there has been no progress in peace between Israelis and Palestinians is the inability and unwillingness of local actors to make progress. When the actors are willing to talk and make concessions, there is little for the Israel lobby to oppose. They will not tell Israel not to make concessions when it is willing to do so for its reasons.

6. Implications and Future Research

In pandemic preparedness, AlphaFold's ability to rapidly predict viral protein structures should be combined with real-time genomic surveillance to enable faster identification of vaccine and antiviral targets. Expanding this capability to model evolving viral mutations could further enhance its utility in combating infectious diseases.

For personalized medicine, integrating AlphaFold predictions with genomic data could help identify disease-causing structural variants and guide the design of patient-specific therapies. This approach could revolutionize treatments for conditions linked to protein misfolding or mutations, such as cancer and neurodegenerative diseases.

Future iterations of AlphaFold should focus on modeling protein-protein complexes, RNA interactions, and dynamic conformational changes to broaden its applicability to large molecular machines like ribosomes and chromatin remodelers. These advancements will extend its impact across the healthcare.

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