

# THE ISRAEL LOBBIES: A SURVEY OF THE PRO-ISRAEL COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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*Abstract:* The influence of the pro-Israel lobby in US foreign policymaking toward the Middle East has been a subject of great interest and fierce controversy in recent years. Yet, despite being the object of a massive amount of critical scrutiny, the pro-Israel lobby remains poorly understood. All too often it is depicted as a highly organized, cohesive political actor pursuing an agenda in line with, and even determined by, Israel's right-wing Likud party. By undertaking a detailed empirical survey of the pro-Israel community in the United States, this article shows that such a view is grossly inaccurate. The pro-Israel community is neither monolithic nor a unitary actor. It is fragmented into a number of different groups, many of which disagree sharply over their understanding of Israel's real interests. In lobbying the US government for what they believe is in Israel's interests, therefore, the pro-Israel community rarely, if ever, speaks with a single voice.

*Keywords:* AIPAC, American Jewish community, Israel advocacy, Israel lobby Jewish organizations, pro-Israel lobby

Current discussions of US-Israeli relations, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Middle East politics more generally rarely take place without some mention of the pro-Israel lobby in the United States. The so-called Israel lobby is frequently blamed for supporting and encouraging Israeli aggression against the Palestinians and Lebanese, for America's unwillingness to pressure or even criticize Israel, and even for the US 2003 invasion of Iraq and more recent threats against Iran. There is even a cottage industry on the Internet devoted to uncovering and reporting on the many machinations and misdeeds of the Israel lobby.

Denunciations of the nefarious influence of the pro-Israel lobby are by no means a new thing. "The lobby" has long been blamed by supporters of the Palestinians in the United States and elsewhere for what they perceive as America's pro-Israel "bias," and for its consequent failure to hold Israel accountable for its aggressive military actions and human rights violations, and to pressure it to make the necessary concessions to the Palestinians for the sake of peace.<sup>1</sup> For many years, how-

ever, this argument remained on the margins of American political debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To express it was to identify oneself as “anti-Israel” and position oneself on the far left or far right of the political spectrum.

Today, that is no longer the case. This view has migrated into mainstream opinion. Indeed, it has almost become the conventional wisdom in liberal society in the United States, and certainly in Western Europe. It has gained new force with the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the resurgence of Israeli-Palestinian violence in 2000, and it has gained greater respectability as it has found some very prominent advocates, most notably former president Jimmy Carter and professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. President Carter’s book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*<sup>2</sup> and Mearsheimer and Walt’s book *The Israel Lobby*<sup>3</sup> both quickly became best-sellers and sparked heated controversies. They were hailed by some as courageous voices willing to challenge the vaunted power of the pro-Israel lobby,<sup>4</sup> while others dismissed them as simplistic and misguided at best, bigoted at worst.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, the pro-Israel lobby has, for better or for worse, become the subject of great interest, much of it highly critical.<sup>6</sup> The recent debate that has taken place over the role of the pro-Israel lobby in American foreign policymaking—sparked in particular by Mearsheimer and Walt’s critique—has focused almost exclusively on the question of the lobby’s power. Is it really as powerful as its critics suggest? Does it have a “stranglehold” on Congress?<sup>7</sup> What influence does it exert over the executive branch? These questions have animated the debate and have given rise to two broad camps—those who regard the pro-Israel lobby as immensely powerful, able to exercise a decisive impact on America’s Middle East policy, especially concerning Israel and the Palestinians; and those who minimize the significance of the lobby and see American policy as driven much more by national interests, public opinion, and possibly cultural factors as well (like shared values with Israel and a sense of cultural commonality).

I will not take sides in this debate here, except to note that—as is so often the case with such debates—both sides are guilty of over-simplification and some exaggeration. Domestic politics, including the activism of pro-Israel advocacy groups, certainly has some bearing on American policymaking. No administration is entirely immune from it, and members of Congress are particularly susceptible to it. Indeed, if pro-Israel lobbying was irrelevant to the formation of US policymaking toward Israel and the Middle East, pro-Israel lobby groups would have no reason to exist and would probably have disappeared long ago. The continued vitality of such groups offers clear evidence of their utility. They do not control American foreign policy, but they can make some difference at the margins. Ultimately, the power of pro-Israel lobby groups is context-dependent and issue-dependent.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to assess the political influence of the pro-Israel lobby. This has already been done in countless articles.<sup>8</sup> Rather than examine the lobby’s power, this article examines what the pro-Israel lobby really is. It

disaggregates the lobby and looks at the myriad of pro-Israel groups that compose it. If one problem with the debate that has taken place over the pro-Israel lobby has been the tendency of both sides to overstate their cases and present the debate in either-or terms (i.e., either the lobby is all-powerful or it is insignificant), another problem has been the failure to really examine what the pro-Israel lobby actually is. Despite the massive amounts of critical scrutiny that the pro-Israel lobby has received in recent years, there has been remarkably little attention paid to examining its actual composition.

All too often, the pro-Israel lobby is depicted in the media as a highly organized, cohesive political actor pursuing an agenda in line with, and even determined by, Israel's right-wing Likud party.<sup>9</sup> This article will show that such a view is grossly inaccurate. The pro-Israel lobby is neither monolithic nor a unitary actor. It is fragmented, internally divided by disagreements over what is in Israel's best interests and what is the proper role that American Jews should play in supporting Israel.<sup>10</sup> The diversity of opinion within the pro-Israel community in the United States concerning these basic questions contradicts the widespread perception of the pro-Israel lobby as a right-wing monolith. By surveying the pro-Israel community in the United States, this article seeks to provide a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the pro-Israel lobby than that reflected in much of the vitriolic public debate over it that has taken place in recent years. A better grasp of the makeup of the pro-Israel community in the United States is important not only because it can help inform the ongoing debate over its activities, but also because it can affect how policy-makers in the United States and Israel relate to pro-Israel groups.

## **Defining the Pro-Israel Lobby**

What is the pro-Israel lobby? What organizations comprise it, and what views do they have? In the midst of all the controversy over the pro-Israel lobby's activities, these basic questions frequently go unanswered. Neither its detractors nor its defenders bother to really look at the makeup of the pro-Israel lobby in the United States. Indeed, the term pro-Israel lobby is generally used without any elaboration or definition. Very often, the term is used in conjunction with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) so that the two entities become essentially indistinguishable, even identical. Although AIPAC stands out as the most prominent pro-Israel lobby group in the United States—and even bills itself as “America's pro-Israel lobby”—it is only one of many. AIPAC does not enjoy a monopoly on pro-Israel advocacy. Unlike some other domestic American lobbies defined by a single organization, the field of pro-Israel advocacy is a crowded one with groups promoting different agendas and perspectives. To equate the pro-Israel lobby with AIPAC is, therefore, inaccurate and misleading.

Equally problematic is equating the pro-Israel lobby with Israeli governments as if the lobby were completely beholden to it and following its orders.<sup>11</sup> This too is inaccurate and misleading because it ignores the fact that pro-Israel groups are independent actors whose views can differ, sometimes significantly, from that of Israeli governments, and that the former can take actions that may be opposed by the latter. During the early years of the Oslo peace process, for example, the Rabin government complained that some pro-Israel organizations in the United States were acting against its policies and attempting to undermine the peace process.<sup>12</sup> In November 2007, a number of right-wing Jewish groups in the United States publicly insisted before and after the US-sponsored Annapolis summit meeting between Israel's Olmert government and the Palestinian Authority that Jerusalem must remain Israel's undivided capital, opposing Prime Minister Olmert's willingness to make territorial concessions on Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>

Even when the term pro-Israel lobby is defined, it may be employed in a careless and slippery manner. In their book, Mearsheimer and Walt define it as "a convenient shorthand term for the loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction."<sup>14</sup> They elaborate on the definition by stating: "To be part of the lobby ... one has to actively work to move American foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. For an organization, this pursuit must be an important part of its mission and consume a substantial percentage of its resources and agenda. For an individual, this means devoting some portion of one's professional or personal life (or in some cases, substantial amounts of money) to influencing U.S. Middle East policy."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, unlike many of their admirers, Mearsheimer and Walt are careful to note that: "The lobby is not a single, unified movement with a central leadership, however, and individuals and groups that make up this broad coalition sometimes disagree on specific issues."<sup>16</sup> They reiterate this point later when they write that "it would be clearly wrong to think of the lobby as a single-minded monolith."<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to the claims of some of their most strident detractors, Mearsheimer and Walt do not treat the Israel lobby as some kind of right-wing cabal.<sup>18</sup> The problem, rather, is that their description of the pro-Israel lobby is too broad and elastic. According to them, the Israel lobby is not only composed of formal lobbying organizations (most notably AIPAC), but also think tanks (such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs), and numerous individual American Jews, Christian evangelicals, and neo-conservatives. Especially problematic is the inclusion within the Israel lobby of neo-conservative policymakers, pundits, and thinkers. Neoconservatives, both Jewish and gentile, are not simply lobbyists for Israel. Although they may indeed be pro-Israel in their sympathies, their foremost concern is with the United States—its interests, values, and global role.

It is necessary to define the pro-Israel lobby in the United States more narrowly to refer solely to an assortment of formal organizations that try to influence American policy toward Israel in a direction that they believe is in Israel's interests.<sup>19</sup> The members of these groups are mostly American Jews, but there is also now a large number of evangelical Christian Zionists involved in pro-Israel activities<sup>20</sup>—which is why the term pro-Israel lobby should be used rather than Jewish lobby.<sup>21</sup> The pro-Israel lobby is defined by its political agenda, not by religion or ethnicity. The pro-Israel lobby, then, is composed of groups who actively lobby the US government on issues concerning Israel. These groups do not necessarily represent the views of American Jews, Israelis, or whatever Israeli government is in power, although some may try to do so with varying degrees of success; and though they all define themselves as pro-Israel, they can have widely different interpretations of what this actually means in practice.

### **A Fractious Community**

Pro-Israel groups seldom agree among themselves, let alone act in unison. Although they try to promote Israel's interests, they differ greatly in their views on what Israel's interests actually are. Some groups oppose Israel's continued occupation of territories gained in the 1967 War; others staunchly support Israel's control over these territories—for security, historical, or religious reasons (or a combination of them). Some support the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; others are adamantly opposed to this. Some fiercely resist any American pressure on Israel; others oppose unconditional American support for Israeli policies and favor a more even-handed US role in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. The designation “pro-Israel,” therefore, tells us very little about the specific policies for which different organizations actually lobby.

What unites pro-Israel groups is not their stance on specific policies, but their attitude toward the State of Israel. An unwavering commitment to the survival of Israel as a Jewish state is, fundamentally, what distinguishes pro-Israel groups from other organizations involved in lobbying the US government on Middle East issues.<sup>22</sup> Every pro-Israel group is motivated by a bedrock concern for securing Israel's existence as a Jewish state (the fact that they want Israel to exist as a Jewish state is what differentiates pro-Israel groups from non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist groups that are outside the pro-Israel tent).<sup>23</sup>

Where pro-Israel groups part ways is in their understanding of how best to ensure Israeli security. There is no consensus among pro-Israel groups over what is necessary for Israel's security. This lack of consensus reflects the broader disagreement among American Jews over how to safeguard Israel's security; a disagreement

that has developed since the first Lebanon war (1982) and especially since the first Palestinian Intifada (1987–91).<sup>24</sup> At the center of this disagreement has been the issue of the Palestinian territories controlled by Israel since the 1967 War. The debate over Israel's security requirements has created deep divisions within the pro-Israel community in the United States. Indeed, as a result of these divisions the pro-Israel lobby is in reality not a single lobby at all, but is in fact composed of different lobbies, each of which advocates different policies for Israel and for the United States vis-à-vis Israel. As Dan Fleshler, a longtime pro-Israel activist, writes: "There is more than one lobby within the organized, self-styled, pro-Israel American Jewish community because there are substantial differences of opinion about what Israel needs from the United States."<sup>25</sup>

The pro-Israel community is really made up of three different lobbies (see figure 1). These can best be described as a centrist lobby, a left-wing lobby, and a right-wing lobby. The centrist lobby is composed of many of the most established and well-known Jewish organizations—AIPAC,<sup>26</sup> the American Jewish Commit-

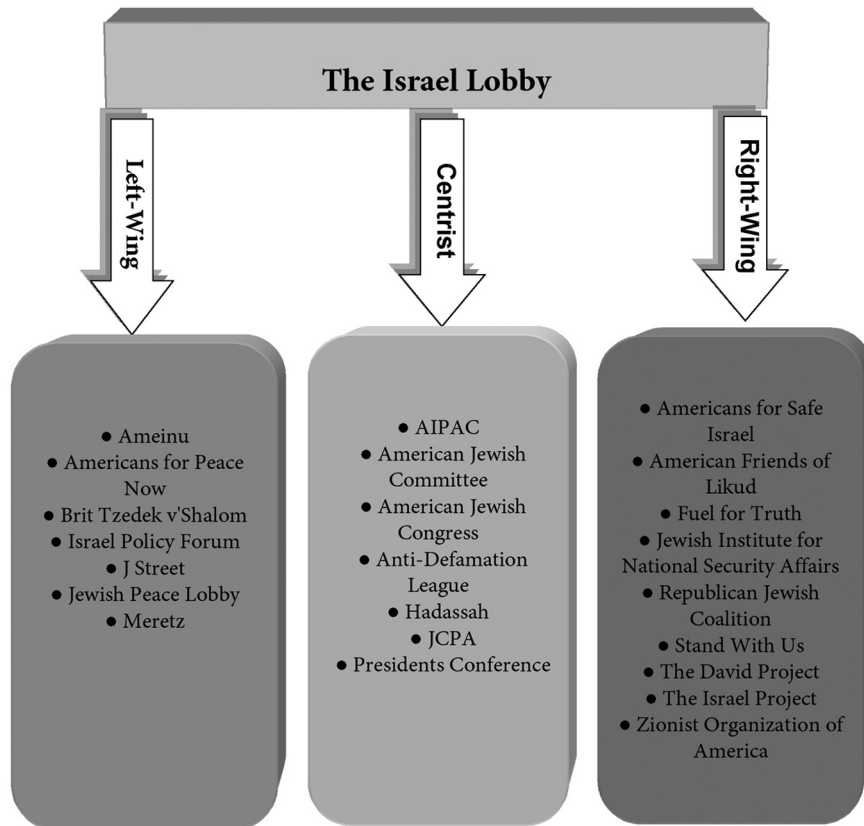


Figure 1.

tee (AJC),<sup>27</sup> the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress),<sup>28</sup> the Anti-Defamation League (ADL),<sup>29</sup> Hadassah,<sup>30</sup> the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA),<sup>31</sup> and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.<sup>32</sup> Although these groups have somewhat different missions and agendas, when it comes to pro-Israel advocacy they all try to represent mainstream American Jewish opinion.<sup>33</sup> The centrist lobby is fundamentally oriented toward what may be termed “consensus politics.”<sup>34</sup> Consensus politics is based on the conviction that the best way to be influential is to present a united front before Congress and the White House. Hence, it seeks to represent the consensus of the American Jewish community (more precisely, the organized American Jewish community),<sup>35</sup> when such a consensus exists. When there are differences of opinion, it attempts to resolve these differences internally, behind closed doors, then in public support a common position. As a result of this political orientation, the centrist lobby tries to avoid taking clear, strong stances on controversial and polarizing issues.

Hence, although groups in the centrist lobby support the principle of territorial compromise and favor a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they do not loudly and energetically promote the establishment of a Palestinian state, nor actively and openly oppose Israel’s occupation of the West Bank. In fact, they tend to defend the expansion of Israeli settlements there. In the past, the centrist lobby supported the Oslo peace process and Israel’s 2005 disengagement from Gaza, but in both cases, its support was widely regarded as unenthusiastic, if not wary.<sup>36</sup> The centrist lobby is more concerned with addressing the threats to Israel’s security than in promoting peace processes that will necessarily involve Israeli concessions. Writing about groups in the centrist lobby, Dan Fleshler notes: “Their organizational cultures are most comfortable when they can take forceful stances against Israel’s ‘enemies’—e.g., Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and far-left critics of Israel. They tend to be less comfortable about enthusiastically supporting peace initiatives that require a certain amount of trust in Arab intentions or bold territorial compromises.”<sup>37</sup>

For the centrist lobby, being pro-Israel generally means supporting the Israeli government of the day. Whatever the political makeup of the government in Israel, the centrist lobby tries to promote the policies of that government. But the nature of this support may vary, from half-hearted to full-throated. Although the centrist lobby will never publicly criticize or challenge the policy positions of the Israeli government, it will not necessarily lend its full support. What matters to the centrist lobby more than anything else is ensuring American support for Israel. The informal alliance between the United States and Israel is considered to be the cornerstone of Israeli security. Hence, maintaining this alliance is the central mission of the centrist lobby, which means that the centrist lobby opposes any kind of American pressure on Israel. Moreover, the centrist lobby is generally hostile to public criticism of Israel in the United States or elsewhere. In recent years, the cen-

trist lobby has become increasingly concerned with combating what it perceives to be a global campaign spearheaded by Arab and anti-Zionist groups on the left to delegitimize Israel.<sup>38</sup>

The single biggest difference between the centrist lobby and the left-wing and right-wing lobbies is that the latter two are much more willing to challenge and oppose the policies of Israeli governments. Both left-wing and right-wing lobbies have strong views that they forcefully advocate, even if they may be at odds with Israeli government policy or the consensus of the organized American Jewish community. The left-wing and right-wing lobbies are thus based on ideological politics, rather than the consensus politics of the centrist lobby. It is more important to them to express their beliefs and opinions, than echo the views of Israeli governments or the prevailing American Jewish consensus. Fundamentally, they believe they are entitled to “save Israel from itself,” and are not willing to muzzle themselves for the sake of Jewish unity.

The left-wing lobby is made up of “dovish” groups including Ameinu,<sup>39</sup> Americans for Peace Now,<sup>40</sup> Brit Tzedek v’Shalom,<sup>41</sup> Israel Policy Forum,<sup>42</sup> J Street, and Meretz USA.<sup>43</sup> They favor diplomacy, engagement, negotiations, and concessions over the use of diplomatic isolation and/or military force. The left-wing lobby opposes Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, favors a division of Jerusalem, and strongly supports the establishment of a Palestinian state. They want the United States to take a lead role in bringing this about, even if this means pressuring Israel. Strong US-Israeli relations are, therefore, of secondary importance to the left-wing lobby. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and Israeli-Arab peace more generally, is their chief concern.

In stark contrast the right-wing lobby—which includes Americans for a Safe Israel,<sup>44</sup> American Friends of Likud,<sup>45</sup> Fuel for Truth,<sup>46</sup> The Institute for Public Affairs,<sup>47</sup> The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs,<sup>48</sup> Stand With Us,<sup>49</sup> The David Project,<sup>50</sup> The Israel Project,<sup>51</sup> and the Zionist Organization of America<sup>52</sup>—in stark contrast, is very hawkish, skeptical of the value of diplomacy and negotiations, suspicious of engagement, and opposed to Israeli concessions to its enemies. It embraces the use of military force, and believes that it should be applied ruthlessly and devastatingly when necessary. Above all, it supports Israel’s control of the West Bank (i.e., Greater Israel), and opposes a division of Jerusalem and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The right-wing lobby tends to regard the Palestinians not as potential partners for peace, but as implacable foes of Israel. As such, according to the right-wing lobby, Israeli-Palestinian peace is simply not possible for the foreseeable future. For them, the greatest challenge Israel faces is from the forces of radical Islamism, represented by Hamas, Hezbollah, and, above all, Iran, whose regime the right-wing lobby often depicts as bent on Israel’s destruction.

Because the pro-Israel community in the United States is a highly fractious one, pro-Israel advocacy groups frequently oppose each other. Though there are times

when groups in the left-wing and right-wing lobbies can find enough common ground with groups in the centrist lobby to enable them to work together; the former two, given their radically different political orientations and views, do not co-operate with each other. Hence, more often than not, American policy-makers hear from many different voices, each of which claims to be pro-Israel and to represent the views of American Jews. Contrary to the popular belief that the pro-Israel lobby speaks (or shouts) with one loud voice to politicians who ignore it at their political peril, the reality is that there is a cacophony of voices coming from the pro-Israel community, although some generally command more attention from politicians than others.

### **Can the Center Hold?**

The different groups in the Israel lobbies are by no means equal. They vary greatly in size (membership and staff), finances, and political influence. Some are merely one-man shows,<sup>53</sup> many others are “shoestring” low-budget operations run out of a single office and reliant on volunteers.<sup>54</sup> Only a few are well-staffed, with fancy offices, and large sums of money at their disposal. AIPAC is the biggest, wealthiest, and most influential.<sup>55</sup> It has 8 offices around the country, and 300 employees, half of whom work in its large Washington headquarters. AIPAC’s staff is highly professional and experienced, and it also has a large national grass-roots network of dedicated unpaid activists. It boasts 100,000 dues-paying members, and a huge \$140 million endowment.<sup>56</sup> This allowed it to spend almost \$2.5 million on lobbying in 2008, much more than any other pro-Israel organization (see figure 2).<sup>57</sup> Every year, AIPAC displays its financial and political muscle at its policy conference in Washington, a massive event that draws thousands of activists (6,500 people attended its policy conference in May 2009), and over half the members of Congress to its gala dinner.

AIPAC is undoubtedly the behemoth among pro-Israel groups. Other groups in the centrist lobby are also affluent and influential—most notably the AJC and ADL.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the centrist lobby as a whole commands much more resources, support, and political attention than the left-wing and right-wing lobbies (see figure 3). The centrist lobby has always dominated pro-Israel advocacy in the United States. This dominance reflected the overwhelming desire of American Jewry for unity and solidarity, as well as a widespread unease among American Jews with publicly questioning the decisions of Israeli governments and the choices of Israeli voters. As one scholar of American Jewry observed: “On matters defined as security-related, American Jews, who do not bear the direct consequences of such life and death decisions, are reluctant to second-guess democratically elected Israeli governments. In addition, many Jews expressed concern that Israel’s detractors

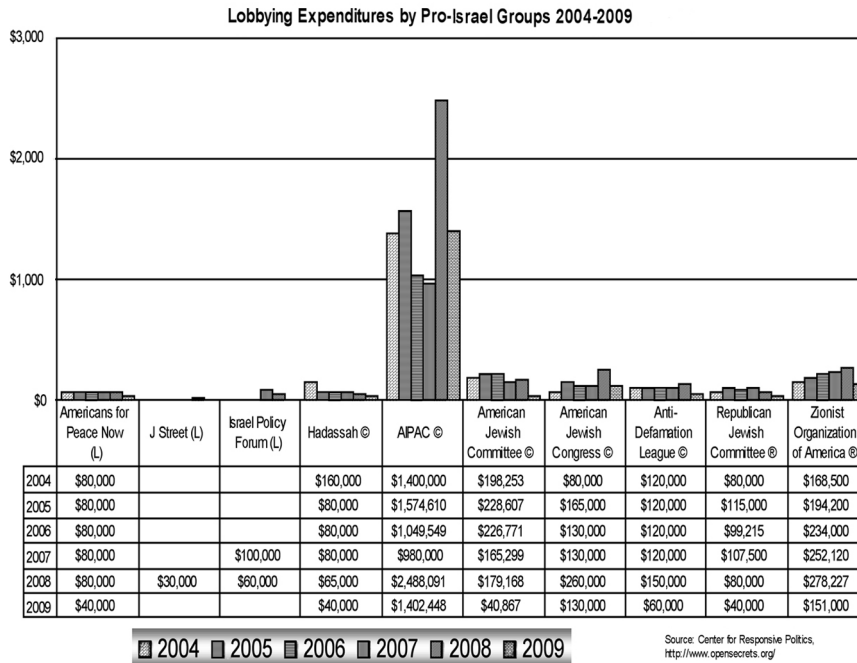
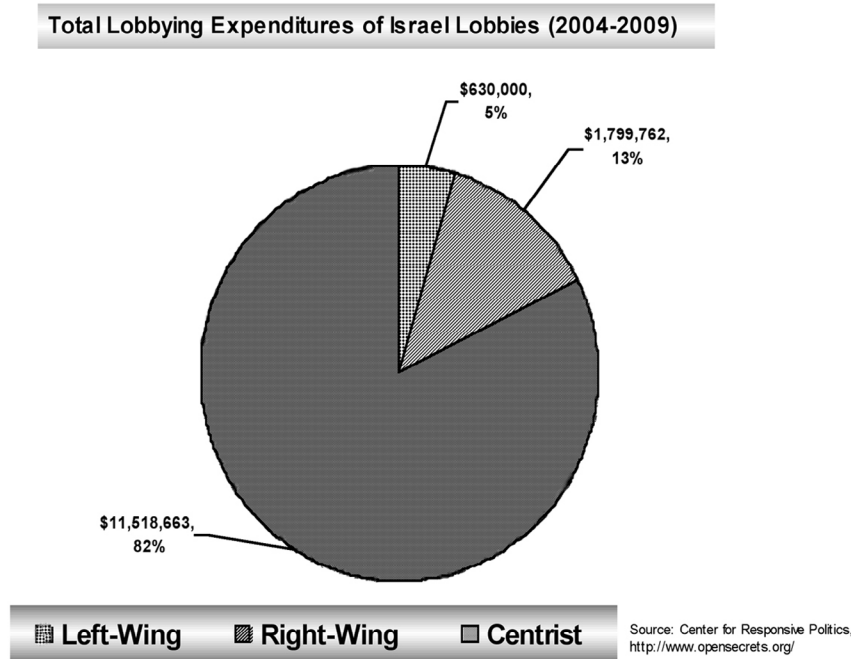


Figure 2.

might use criticism of specific policies to bolster their anti-Israel efforts.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, though the vast majority of American Jews have always supported Israel, especially after the 1967 War, this support was and is largely an expression of their Jewish identity, rather than ideologically driven. As such, most American Jews naturally gravitate to non-ideological centrist pro-Israel organizations.

Although the centrist lobby remains the most powerful of the three Israel lobbies and continues to vastly outspend its rivals on the left and the right (see figure 3), it is no longer hegemonic. Instead, it is increasingly challenged by both the left-wing and right-wing lobbies. Over the last decade or so, this challenge came mostly from the right, from groups like the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) who stridently opposed the Oslo peace process and were outspoken in condemning any territorial compromise with the Palestinians. The collapse of the peace process and the outbreak of the second Intifada appeared to confirm their dire warnings about the dangers of Israeli concessions to the Palestinians, enabling it to increase its support among American Jewry.<sup>60</sup> American Jewish public opinion shifted slightly to the right in reaction to the wave of Palestinian suicide bombings and other violence of the second Intifada. Underlying this rightward shift in opinion was also a growing domestic concern with Islamist extremism, especially after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, which led many American Jews to believe that Israel



**Figure 3.**

and the United States appeared to face a common enemy, whether it was al-Qaeda, Hamas, or even the PLO.<sup>61</sup>

Other domestic developments within the United States also helped bolster the right-wing lobby. In particular, evangelical Christians (who number about 75 million people in the US) became increasingly mobilized in support of Israel under the leadership of very prominent and vocal political organizers, preachers, televangelists, and radio talk-show hosts such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Gary Bauer, James C. Dobson, Ralph Reed, and John Hagee.<sup>62</sup> Though regarded with wariness and suspicion by some American Jews, this infusion of Christian evangelical energy, money, and electoral votes was welcomed by the right-wing lobby (as well as by AIPAC in the center).<sup>63</sup> Thus, a de facto alliance emerged between conservative evangelical Christians and the Jewish right-wing pro-Israel lobby, both of whom were determined to prevent any Israeli territorial withdrawals. Finally, the political dominance of the Republican Party in the United States from 2001 to 2009 (the tenure of President George W. Bush) gave an additional boost to the right-wing lobby since it could reasonably lay claim to having powerful friends in the Bush administration.<sup>64</sup>

Now the challenge to the centrist lobby is coming primarily from the left-wing lobby. Fueling this challenge has been a backlash within the American Jewish com-

munity against an apparent tilt to the right within the pro-Israel community. The support by centrist and right-wing pro-Israel groups for some of the policies of the Bush administration in its “War on Terror,” especially the Iraq war (deeply unpopular among American Jews), together with the perceived suppression of debate within the organized Jewish community over Israel’s actions toward the Palestinians, led to a growing feeling of dissatisfaction on the left of the American Jewish community. As a result, left-wing and liberal Jews began speaking out and organizing in greater numbers.<sup>65</sup> The clearest manifestation of this new activism on the left was the formation and rapid rise of J Street, the self-described “pro-peace, pro-Israel movement.” Just eighteen months after its establishment in 2008, J Street was able to hold its first national conference in Washington, DC, drawing more than 1,500 supporters from across the country, featuring a keynote speech by the US national security adviser James L. Jones, and a gala dinner attended by forty-four members of Congress.

In the buzz of media attention that J Street has received, speculation has focused on whether this new upstart group could displace the mighty AIPAC in the field of Israel advocacy.<sup>66</sup> Numerous commentators enthused about an AIPAC versus J Street “showdown.”<sup>67</sup> But this showdown is more media hype than a real contest. For one thing, Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street’s executive director, has been careful to avoid being drawn into a public dispute with AIPAC, regularly praising the latter’s work and stressing that his organization does not seek to challenge it.<sup>68</sup> AIPAC, in its turn, has refrained from publicly attacking J Street.<sup>69</sup> More important, J Street cannot hope to rival AIPAC, at least not for some time. Although J Street is very tech-savvy and has used the Netroots Internet revolution in politics (pioneered by MoveOn.org and Barack Obama’s presidential campaign) to raise significant amounts of money online from many small contributions,<sup>70</sup> it is still financially dwarfed by AIPAC (AIPAC’s operating budget in 2008 was \$60 million,<sup>71</sup> whereas J Street’s budget in 2009 was \$1.5 million<sup>72</sup>). Despite having its own political action committee (PAC) which contributed almost \$391,751 to congressional candidates (99 percent of them Democrats) in the 2008 election,<sup>73</sup> J Street is in no position to really threaten AIPAC’s influence in Congress. This was clearly demonstrated in May 2009 when J Street and AIPAC sought congressional signatures for alternative letters to the Obama administration—AIPAC’s letter received 329 signatures to J Street’s 87.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, though J Street is no match for AIPAC on Capitol Hill, it can weaken AIPAC’s influence by demonstrating that AIPAC does not speak for all American Jews. AIPAC’s formidable power rests not only on its size, money, and political connections, but also on a perception in the corridors of power in Washington that it speaks for American Jewry. If J Street undermines this perception, it will lessen AIPAC’s power in the long run.

Whether or not J Street succeeds in countering AIPAC, its ascent is evidence of a reinvigorated, more confident, and more cohesive left-wing lobby. It also under-

scores the changing political dynamics within the American Jewish community. In an earlier era the left-wing Jewish organization Breira (“Alternative” in Hebrew) was founded in response to the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Like J Street, Breira claimed to support Israel but was strongly critical of its policies, and it too called for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories and a comprehensive peace based on Israeli territorial concessions. Breira attracted a lot of publicity in its day, but the group’s activists were ostracized and denounced as traitors by most Jewish professional and communal leaders. The organization was forced to disband shortly after its first and only national conference in 1977.<sup>75</sup> Although J Street has also been strongly condemned by some groups and individuals within the organized Jewish community,<sup>76</sup> and shunned by the Israeli government,<sup>77</sup> it is highly unlikely to share Breira’s fate.<sup>78</sup> Whereas publicly criticizing Israel was almost a taboo within the Jewish community in Breira’s day, today such criticism is increasingly common, and comes from the right as well as from the left. Fewer American Jews, especially younger ones, have a deferential attitude toward Israel’s government, and more feel entitled and empowered to speak out for what they believe. As J Street’s Jeremy Ben Ami declared: “You don’t have to be noncritical. You don’t have to adopt the party line. It’s not, ‘Israel, right or wrong.’”<sup>79</sup>

As American Jewish supporters of Israel become more assertive and less willing to toe the party line, the centrist lobby will face an uphill struggle to maintain a consensus concerning Israel among American Jews, and could well find its popular support among Jews slipping. Furthermore, if the right-wing and left-wing lobbies strengthen at the expense of the center, the result will be a growing polarization within the pro-Israel community. Far from being a source of unity, Israel will become an increasingly divisive subject among American Jews.

## Conclusion

This article has defined and disaggregated the pro-Israel lobby in the United States. In doing so, it has tried to offer a more accurate image of the Israel lobby than that conveyed in the overheated debate about the lobby and its influence on American foreign policy. The article has presented the pro-Israel lobby not as a single entity, but as a conglomeration of three different and competing lobbies that often work at odds with each other. In other words, the pro-Israel lobby in the United States is not a cohesive political actor at all, and should not therefore be discussed as one. Instead, we should recognize the divisions within the pro-Israel community—divisions that are likely to deepen over time—and thus pay more attention to the shifting balance of power between the centrist lobby and its left-wing and right-wing rivals. The future of American pro-Israel advocacy will be shaped by this internal competition between the three camps within the pro-Israel community.

Although it is certainly hazardous to predict which camp is likely to rise or fall, it is safe to say that the dominance of the centrist lobby is more contested than ever before. For the time being it remains much more powerful than the left-wing and right-wing lobbies, but this power may well diminish over time due to political, cultural, and demographic trends within American Jewry. In the near term, however, AIPAC is still very much a force to be reckoned with, especially on Capitol Hill. But this does not mean that American policy-makers will necessarily follow its wishes. To the extent that they are aware that AIPAC does not represent all of American Jewry, and that there are significant differences of opinion between American Jews with regards to Israel, American politicians will be less concerned with incurring AIPAC's wrath.

This awareness is already apparent in the Obama administration's early dealings with the American Jewish community. For example, when Barack Obama's transition team met in December 2008 with Jewish groups to discuss a range of domestic and international issues they invited leaders from twenty-nine Jewish organizations, including a much wider spectrum of Jewish groups than those with which the George W. Bush administration used to meet (among them were AIPAC, ZOA, the Israel Project, JINSA, Israel Policy Forum, Americans for Peace Now, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, and J Street).<sup>80</sup> In doing so, the new administration openly acknowledged the diversity that exists within the pro-Israel community. An even more explicit acknowledgment of this came from then vice-presidential nominee Joseph Biden speaking to Jewish groups just a month before the 2008 election, when he bluntly stated that AIPAC "doesn't speak for the entire Jewish community or for the State of Israel," and went on to assert that: "No one in AIPAC or any other organization can question my support of Israel."<sup>81</sup>

In contrast to the Obama administration, the Netanyahu government in Israel has so far appeared much less willing to embrace the pluralism of the pro-Israel community in the United States—as demonstrated by its ambassador to the United States Michael Oren's refusal to accept J Street's invitation to attend its conference.<sup>82</sup> Although the center-right Netanyahu government's distaste for left-wing Jewish groups like J Street is not hard to understand, ultimately this attitude only serves to create greater distance between Israeli governments and their American Jewish critics. A more tolerant attitude would not only foster better relations between Israeli governments and many pro-Israel American Jewish groups, but might also strengthen Israel-Diaspora ties more broadly.

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## Notes

1. See, for instance, Chomsky (1983).
2. Carter (2006).
3. Mearsheimer and Walt (2007). Condensed versions of their argument earlier appeared in the *London Review of Books* and on the Web site of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government; see Mearsheimer and Walt (2006a, b).
4. Cole (2006); Cornwell (2006).
5. See, for example, Guttman (2006); "Of Israel, Harvard and David Duke," (2006); Borger, (2006); Cohen, (2006).
6. Massing (2006).
7. For this claim see Mearsheimer and Walt (2006b: 17–20).
8. Waxman (2006, 2007). See also, Goldberg (2006); Hitchens, (2006); Massad (2006); Gergen (2006); Boot (2006).
9. Charles W. Freeman, for instance, who was nominated by the Obama administration in March 2009 to be the chairman of the US National Intelligence Council but withdrew his nomination after he came under intense criticism, blamed the "Likud lobby" for derailing his nomination. See his interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN on 15 March 2009, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0903/15/fzgps.01.html>.
10. This article focuses on American Jewish pro-Israel advocacy. Although Christian pro-Israel advocacy groups (most notably, Christians United for Israel) have gained a large number of supporters and become increasingly well organized and vocal in recent years, American Jewish organizations continue to dominate the field of pro-Israel advocacy and remain the focus of most public and media attention.
11. An example of this can be found in an op-ed in the *Guardian* that claimed: "Within the US Israel exploits a willing circle of Likudist advocacy groups and thinktanks—such as the Washington Institute for Near East Peace, the Israel Project, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs as well as Aipac

itself—that are closely scripted and co-ordinate their political message with Israeli diplomats. While some of these groups deny such a close affiliation, there is proof of scripting and amplification of the Israeli government’s agenda. And of course there may be cases in which the organisations know the needs of their patron so well that they need no prompting” (Silverstein 2009).

12. AIPAC, for instance, lobbied the US Congress to pass a bill requiring the United States to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, despite the behind-the-scenes objections from the Rabin government.
13. Eden (2007).
14. Mearsheimer and Walt (2007: 112).
15. *Ibid.*, 114.
16. *Ibid.*, 112.
17. *Ibid.*, 114.
18. For this criticism of Mearsheimer and Walt see Foxman (2007: 41–91).
19. This definition excludes individuals, typically very wealthy and well-connected, who personally engage in pro-Israel advocacy without any formal organizational support. For example, S. Daniel Abraham, the founder of the Slim Fast foods company, has used his personal wealth and connections to promote Arab-Israeli peace efforts, at times playing host to meetings between Israeli and Arab leaders. Another example is Irving Moscowitz, the American bingo magnate, who sends millions of dollars a year to Israeli settler groups. Moscowitz has funded the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and bought land for development in key Arab areas around Jerusalem. He also helped to finance the controversial opening of a tunnel under the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in 1996. (See Dorf [1997]; Serrill [1997]).
20. On Christian Zionism in the United States see Merkley (2009: 108–122).
21. The term Jewish lobby is inaccurate and misleading, because the lobby includes non-Jews like the Christian Zionists and because it does not necessarily reflect the views of American Jews.
22. Whether Israel must be a democratic state in addition to a Jewish state is less certain for some extreme right-wing pro-Israel groups.
23. Jewish Voices for Peace, for instance, is outside the pro-Israel community in the United States. Although it shares some common opinions with left-wing pro-Israel groups, the fact that it does not officially support Israel’s existence as a Jewish state and many of its members are anti-Zionist means that it is shunned by the pro-Israel left. Other smaller left-wing Jewish groups are also widely considered to be “beyond the pale”—most notably, Jews Against the Occupation.
24. On the dissolution of the Jewish community’s consensus concerning Israel see Rosenthal (2001); and Seliktar (2002).
25. Fleshler (2009: 9).

26. AIPAC is often depicted in the media as a hawkish right-wing organization. This popular image, however, is largely erroneous (it is true that some of the group's leadership and major donors have been supporters of Israel's Likud party). Although AIPAC has frequently supported the policies of Likud governments in Israel, it does so less out of strong ideological convictions than because of its policy of backing all Israeli governments (albeit some more energetically and enthusiastically than others). Moreover, AIPAC has on occasion supported Israeli government initiatives that were deeply unpopular with right-wing hawks, most notably Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza. By and large, its activists are not Likudniks and Republicans, but politically centrist American Jews (mostly Democrats) who are primarily concerned for Israel's security and survival. On this point see, Fleshler (2009: 32).
27. American Jewish Committee (AJC), established in 1906, has a broad domestic and international policy agenda. In addition to its New York headquarters and Office of Government & International Affairs in Washington, DC, the AJC has twenty-nine chapters and three independent affiliates in the United States, and eight overseas offices; <http://www.ajc.org>.
28. American Jewish Congress was established in 1918. It has over 50,000 members and offices in New York, Washington, DC, and Jerusalem; <http://www.ajcongress.org>.
29. Anti-Defamation League (ADL) was founded in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all." It has twenty-six national offices in the United States; <http://www.adl.org>.
30. Hadassah (the Women's Zionist Organization of America), established in 1912, is the largest women's and Zionist membership organization in the United States with over 300,000 members and supporters; <http://www.hadassah.org>.
31. Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) is an umbrella organization of local Jewish community relations councils and some national organizations. It is a consensus-based organization that is focused on a wide range of domestic and international issues; <http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org>.
32. Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (Presidents Conference), founded in 1954, is an umbrella organization comprising fifty-one national Jewish organizations. It only makes statements when there is a consensus among its diverse member organizations (this consensus is difficult to achieve given the fact that Americans for Peace Now and the Zionist Organization of America are both members). The fact that the members of the Conference are organizations gives the single professional leader of the organization (currently, Malcolm Hoenlein) a lot of visibility and power; <http://www.conferenceofpresidents.org>.
33. AIPAC, for example, has portrayed itself as the centrist voice of the American Jewish community under assault from extremes on both ends of the political

- spectrum. In May 2009, for instance, its press department distributed a newspaper article with the headline “Sitting between Bibi and Obama, AIPAC Criticized by Left and Right” (Besser 2009a).
34. Raffel(2002: 120).
  35. Many American Jews are not involved in the organized Jewish community. According to the 2001 National Jewish Population, 44 percent of American Jews are “unaffiliated”; that is, they don’t belong to a synagogue, Jewish Community Center, or any other Jewish organization (United Jewish Communities 2003).
  36. On AIPAC’s reluctant support for the Oslo peace process, Neil Sher, the executive director of AIPAC from 1994 to 1996 stated that “getting AIPAC to support Oslo, and what the Israeli government wanted to do, was like pulling teeth” (quoted in Fleshler [2009: 66]). On centrist groups’ lukewarm support for the disengagement from Gaza see Rosner (2005); Barkat (2005).
  37. Fleshler (2009: 64).
  38. For example, centrist groups, especially the AJC and the ADL, were at the forefront of a campaign to get countries to boycott the 2009 United Nations World Conference Against Racism, known as the “Durban Review Conference,” because they feared that it would be a platform for condemning Israel, as was the case at the 2001 conference. See Keinon (2008); Lubliner (2009).
  39. Ameinu is a grass-roots organization established in 2004 as the successor to the Labor Zionist Alliance. It is closely associated with Israel’s Labor movement. Ameinu has one office in New York; and chapters in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Washington, DC, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Philadelphia; <http://www.ameinu.net>.
  40. Americans for Peace Now (APN) was founded in 1981 to support the activities of the Israeli peace movement *Shalom Achshav* (Peace Now). APN has two regional offices (in New York and Los Angeles) and is headquartered in Washington, DC. It has roughly 30,000 active supporters—people who receive mail and emails, respond to action alerts, and/or support the group financially; <http://peacenow.org>.
  41. Brit Tzedek v’Shalom (the Alliance for Peace and Justice) was founded in 2002 and is the largest grass-roots Jewish organization in the United States, with close to 50,000 members organized in forty-one chapters in over thirty states. It also has a rabbinical cabinet made up of more than 1,000 rabbis. In October 2009, it announced that it would merge with J Street; <http://www.btvshalom.org>.
  42. Israel Policy Forum (IPF), founded in 1993, is small and elite organization, with only eight individuals on its executive committee who mostly meet with American policy-makers and write opinion pieces for Jewish and non-Jewish newspapers;<http://www.israelpolicyforum.org>.

43. Meretz USA, affiliated with Israel's Meretz party, has one office in New York and 18,000 people on its mailing list; <http://www.meretzusa.org>.
44. Americans for a Safe Israel (AFSI), founded in 1971, is mainly an educational organization. The organization has chapters run by lay leaders, and published a magazine, *Outpost*; <http://www.afsi.org>.
45. American Friends of Likud has an office in New York and chapters in five US locations; <http://www.thelikud.org>.
46. Fuel for Truth has one office in New York. It has no dues-paying membership, but the organization claims that it has reached out to over 15,000 young professionals and 2,300 students; <http://www.fuelfortruth.org>.
47. Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) is the public policy arm of the Orthodox Union (its full name is the *Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America*), the largest *Orthodox* Jewish umbrella organization in the United States. It has two offices in Washington, DC, and New York; [http://www.ou.org/public\\_affairs](http://www.ou.org/public_affairs).
48. Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), founded in 1976, is a neo-conservative think tank and advocacy group. Based in Washington, DC, it claims to have 20,000 members; <http://www.jinsa.org>.
49. Stand With Us (also known as the Israel Emergency Alliance), founded in 2001, has offices and chapters in Los Angeles, New York, Denver, Michigan, Chicago, Seattle, Orange County, San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Buffalo. It has a listserv of approximately 50,000 individuals; <http://www.standwithus.com>.
50. The David Project is based in Boston and has an office in New York. It is not a membership organization, but it claims to have over 20,000 on its listserv; <http://www.davidproject.org>.
51. The Israel Project (TIP) aims to provide journalists and the general public with information about Israel and the Middle East. It also funds public opinion polls on American views of Israel. It has an office in Washington, DC, and one in Jerusalem; <http://www.theisraelproject.org>.
52. Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), founded in 1897, has chapters throughout the United States (including Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Los Angeles, Miami, Milwaukee, North Jersey, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, South Jersey, and Washington, DC); <http://www.zoa.org>. The ZOA says it has a national membership of over 30,000, but this is disputed—a 2006 article in *The Forward* claims that there are 11,700 dues-paying members (Popper 2006).
53. The Jewish Peace Lobby, founded in 1989, is basically its president Jerome Segal, who is a professor at the University of Maryland and frequently writes about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; <http://www.peacelobby.org>.
54. In 2007, for instance, the total revenue of Americans for a Safe Israel was only \$219,532; Fuel for Truth's revenue was \$254,564; and Meretz USA's was \$345,764.

55. For a discussion of AIPAC and its political influence see Massing (2006).
56. Fram (2009).
57. Because AIPAC is not a Political Action Committee (PAC) it cannot legally raise money for candidates, it does not make campaign contributions to candidates, and it does not publicly endorse candidates. A large number of AIPAC's members, however, do donate to political campaigns, and the fifty members of its national board include prominent fundraisers and donors to both political parties. From 2000 to 2004, for instance, AIPAC board members contributed an average of \$72,000 each to campaigns and political committees. In 2004, one in every five AIPAC board members was a top fundraiser for Kerry or Bush (Edsall and Moore 2004).
58. The AJC has twenty-eight offices across the United States, and eight overseas offices in Belgium, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Poland, and Switzerland. Its total revenue in 2007 was \$60 million, and in 2008 it had a total of 281 paid staff members. The ADL has twenty-six national offices in the United States, and its total revenue in 2006 was almost \$71 million.
59. Raffel (2002: 122).
60. In the 2002 annual survey of American Jewish public opinion conducted by the AJC, 82 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: "The goal of the Arabs is not the return of occupied territories but rather the destruction of Israel;" compared to 73 percent who agreed in 2001, and 69 percent who agreed in 2000 (American Jewish Committee 2000, 2001, 2002).
61. Forty-four percent of American Jewish respondents said that Yasser Arafat was Israel's Bin Laden in the AJC's annual survey of American Jewish public opinion carried in 2001 (American Jewish Committee 2001).
62. Kirkpatrick (2006). Christians United for Israel (CUFI), founded in 2006 by John Hagee, pastor of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, has become the main pro-Israel group representing Christian evangelicals. It has a large grass-roots network of supporters, with chapters in fifty states. In addition to fundraising, the group stages rallies in support of Israel throughout the country, and lobbies policy-makers in Washington, DC. On Capitol Hill, CUFI has focused on cultivating strong ties with lawmakers from the religious right, many of them representing constituencies with only small Jewish communities and who previously had little to do with pro-Israel lobbyists. CUFI aspires to become the Christian version of AIPAC. Like AIPAC, it holds an annual convention in Washington that attracts top politicians and thousands of activists.
63. *Schrag* (2005).
64. For example, John Bolton, then US ambassador to the United Nations, was the keynote speaker at the ZOA's national conference in 2005; and Douglas Feith, former under secretary of defense for policy in the Bush administration, was the keynote speaker at its 2008 conference.

65. See Weiss (2007); Kamiya (2007).
66. See, for example, Traub (2009); Broder (2009); Besser (2009b).
67. Dreyfuss (2009).
68. For instance, in an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Ben-Ami stated, “We [J Street] are not, in any way, in opposition to AIPAC. In fact, we want to work with them on much of what they do” (quoted in Blum Leibowitz 2009). Nevertheless, despite Ben-Ami’s public statements, J Street’s Web site states: “For too long, the only voices politicians and policy makers have heard on American policy toward Israel and the Middle East have been from the far right”—an oblique criticism of AIPAC; <http://www.jstreet.org/signup>.
69. AIPAC has worked quietly behind the scenes to thwart J Street initiatives, and allegedly even pressured some members of Congress to remove their names from the host committee of the gala dinner at J Street’s October 2009 national conference.
70. In its first year, J Street gathered almost 110,000 online supporters, and doubled its budget from \$1.5 million in 2009 to \$3 million in 2010.
71. Kirchick (2008).
72. Eggen (2009).
73. This amount was more than any other pro-Israel PAC in the country, leading the *Washington Post* to describe J Street’s PAC as “Washington’s leading pro-Israel PAC” (Eggen 2009). But this was still a relatively small amount compared with the total amount of pro-Israel contributions to Congressional candidates in the 2008 election (\$11.5 million, according to figures compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics; <http://www.opensecrets.org>) (Fingerhut 2008a).
74. Traub (2009).
75. On Breira, see Staub (2002: 280–308).
76. See, for example, Ben-David (2009); Leibler (2009); Weinberg (2009).
77. Krieger (2009).
78. One indication of this is the fact that the JCPA invited J Street executive director Jeremy Ben-Ami to speak at its national conference in March 2009 (Fingerhut 2009).
79. Quoted in Traub (2009)
80. Fingerhut (2008b).
81. Mozgovaya (2008).
82. Krieger (2009).

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