

# Has AIPAC Grown More Conservative?

Since the mid '80s, AIPAC's critics have charged that it is too conservative for the largely liberal U.S. Jewish community and for Israel's Labor governments.

In the eyes of AIPAC's leaders, the lobby stands squarely in the middle of the American Jewish consensus and is representative of all Israeli governments. Says AIPAC spokesperson Josh Block, "AIPAC is a bipartisan organization that represents the vast majority of pro-Israel Americans who believe in strengthening America's policy in the Middle East and nurturing our relationship with Israel. While there are always critics sniping from the margins who wish to push AIPAC's agenda either to the left or the right, AIPAC remains bipartisan and represents the centrist consensus view of an overwhelming number of Americans who support the U.S.-Israel relationship."

Not everyone agrees. "With few exceptions, in the past two decades AIPAC leadership has come from the more right-wing sector of the American Diaspora and thus is more inclined to reflect Likud-like policies of the various Israeli governments," says Ofira Seliktar, author of *Divided We Stand*, a book analyzing the American Jewish community's relations with Israel. "It is clear that the Jewish community is liberal, but those who identify with Israel on a deeper level and become activists in organizations like AIPAC are either nationalists or Orthodox," says Seliktar, a visiting professor at Tel Aviv University's National Security Program.

An annual poll conducted by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) found a consistent tendency of American Jews to describe themselves as liberals (by a 2-1 margin) and to identify with dovish views on Israel (Palestinian state, dismantling of settlements).

According to Marshal Breger, a law professor at Washington's Catholic University who was Ronald Reagan's liaison to the Jewish community, the main reason that AIPAC pursues a more hawkish agenda is that it attracts single-issue Jewish activists. "It is obvious that those who join AIPAC are focused on Israel's security as their prime interest in politics," says Breger, "whereas most of the Jewish community has a variety of other political issues to focus on."

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations—an umbrella organization of 52 large American Jewish groups—believes that AIPAC is just where it should be. "AIPAC is a body that represents all views in the community and that is why every organization is represented on the executive committee. If it wouldn't work this way it would lose its effectiveness," he says. "There are always those who claim it is not representing Israel, but AIPAC does not have its own political agenda."

Formally, the body in charge of setting AIPAC policy is its executive committee, which meets several times a year and puts out an annual policy statement that serves as the lobby's guide to action. The executive committee is composed of representatives of all the organizations represented in the Conference of Presidents plus many other activists. In practice, most of the committee's members are AIPAC appointees and only a quarter are representatives of the various groups in the American Jewish community, so the ability of those groups to influence AIPAC policy is seriously constrained.

"From my experience, the executive committee is almost pro-forma

and doesn't have much clout," says David Twersky of the American Jewish Congress, which has a seat on the committee. "In reality there are movers and shakers who make the decisions." Morton Klein of the Zionist Organization of America, one of the few heads of organizations who actually comes to executive committee meetings, agrees that the meetings are usually ineffective. "When you try to put something in the policy statement that the AIPAC leadership does not want in, they will attack the proposal and the person who presents it and make it lose the vote," he says.

The real power, many observers say, is in the hands of AIPAC board members—40 to 50 of the biggest donors and former presidents who have a say on nominations for senior positions and decide which issues to pursue with Congress and the administration.

Some board members are more involved in the daily decision-making than others. Among the more active are former presidents Larry Weinberg from California, Ed Levi from Detroit, Robert Asher from Chicago and Mayer Mitchell from Alabama. In the late '80s they were referred to as the "Gang of Four" and played a major role in moving the organization closer to the conservative side of the political spectrum.

Weinberg, who was president in the early '80s, is the classic AIPAC board member: Mainstream in domestic politics but a hard-liner when it

comes to anything that has to do with Israel's security. A multi-millionaire real estate magnate from Beverly Hills and the former owner of the Portland Trail Blazers basketball team, he spends a great amount of his time and money promoting a pro-Israel agenda. Although a Democrat who has donated sizable sums to Democratic candidates, Weinberg is seen as the most important figure in shifting AIPAC toward the Republicans, thanks to his ties with officials in the Reagan administration.

The board is always attentive to changing political winds in Washington as well as in Jerusalem, appointing a liberal Democrat like Tom Dine to serve as executive director during the Carter era while at the same time hiring the conservative Steve Rosen as research director. After Yitzhak Rabin came to power in '92 and clashed with AIPAC's leadership, the board chose moderate Democrat Steve Grossman to lead the group.

A former AIPAC official known for his conservative views explains that the lobby's complex policy-making process makes it sometimes seem more conservative than it really is. According to the former official, three major factors have shaped AIPAC policy.

First, it is natural for AIPAC to lean toward Likud since Israel has been led by Likud governments for most of the last three decades. The second factor is that AIPAC is consensus-based. This means that its leadership must spend much time and effort to convince its members and supporters to change their views, while in Israel, policy shifts require a mere 51 percent majority in the Knesset. Third is AIPAC's need to remain effective by keeping up with changes in American politics. The lobby must communicate not only with Democrats, who are the Jewish community's natural partners, but also with Republicans.

"It's not only AIPAC that lobbies Congress," says the former official. "Congress also lobbies AIPAC. It is a two-way street. AIPAC cannot adopt a policy that is contrary to what Congress wants."—*Nathan Guttman*

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