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No serious opposition

From



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Washington

THAT ISRAEL'S LOBBY CONTINUES to dominate Washington politics on practically all matters relating to the Mid-east, and that it does so without any serious opposition, was the subject of last week's column.

With the coming to power of the Labour government in Israel there has been a small purge of key Israeli lobby officials, true, accompanied by a noticeable movement towards greater subtlety and finesse, in accord with the "mannerisms" of Labour. In a sense this was quite inevitable after a decade of Likud assertiveness.

Still Israel's lobby in the US remains extremely important and in the drivers seat on practically all matters in which the Israelis have a major concern; it has the ability to twist and sway US government policies practically at will on most crucial issues, and to do so usually without serious opposition.

This basic and unchanged reality of Mid-east political life in Washington goes a long way to explaining how the post-Madrid Arab-Israeli negotiations have been going; and why the PLO of Yasser Arafat decided to take the deal it did in the face of the Israeli-American alliance.

Over the past decade a number of new organisations have sprung up in Washington, most with connections and financing from interests in the Arab World. This too was inevitable.

Most if not all of these new organisations have a vested interest in suggesting that the situation in Washington is other than it really is, that at least partly thanks to their efforts in recent years the power of Israel's lobby in Washington has been lessened and is being balanced.

However, to put it clearly and succinctly, the basic premises of such assertions simply lack veracity.

Israel's influence over the current American administration and the current American Congress is greater than at any previous time in history.

Over the past decade Israel and the US have not only formalised their strategic alliance, but the amounts of money, arms, and covert support that flow from the US to Israel remain quite unprecedented in American history. The Clinton White House, as well as Warren Christopher's State Department and Les Aspin's Pentagon, are quite literally riddled with persons connected in one way or another to the Israeli lobby — even more so than in the Reagan years. And even at this time of general funding cut-backs, aid and support for Israel flow in still increasing amounts.

Furthermore, what changes have been brought about over the past decade, for good or bad, have been achieved primarily by largely secret deals between some Arab countries and the various institutions of the American empire.

In short the various groups which claim to comprise a kind of "anti-Israel-lobby"

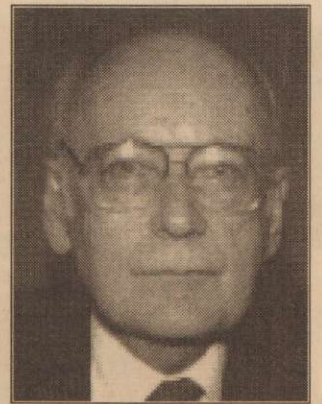


Jim Zogby



Hisham Sharabi

Israel's lobby in the US remains extremely important on practically all matters in which the Israelis have a major concern; it has the ability to twist and sway US government policies on most crucial issues without serious opposition from similar Arab groups



Richard Curtiss

lobby in Washington all remain very small, very ineffective, and in nearly all cases very self-serving. Moreover, all of these groups are kept on fairly short leashes by those who provide their backing and can pull their strings; and those allowed to head-up such groups are always people that can be kept under control. In short summary:

The Arab American Institute, headed by Jim Zogby, has hardly any grassroots following but assiduously courts the press and the power-brokers at every turn. Zogby has so badly discredited himself in recent years, however, that he has very little following from the very Arab Americans he claims to be representing. On the other hand, the AAI has emerged as a kind of mini Arab-public relations firm, and with Zogby it seems aspiring to achieve a gun-for-hire reputation. The AAI's self-promotion department is by far its most successful!

The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) has continually degenerated for some time now more and more serving an extremely limited base of upper-class supporters and looking overseas for both funding and *raison d'être*. Khalil Jahshan, the executive director of recent years, has aligned himself with Zogby and even taken him as a role-model, it appears. Indeed, many of Jahshan's former colleagues have been quite startled with both his self-aggrandising manipulations. Whatever, the NAAA has a long history of doing little while constantly patting itself on the back, of overpaying its top staff and underpaying everyone else, and of trading on its name to give the impression it has widespread support.

The Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) — precisely by shying away from tough politics and concentrating on much softer and easier issues such as anti-Arab stereotyping and letter-to-the-editor campaigns — has nevertheless in many ways grown and prospered in recent years. The ADC is certainly the only organisation in this group that has a sizable grassroots following — and that in itself is an accomplishment.

Yet what has been achieved in these

soft arenas by the ADC has been done at the price of not getting seriously involved in the tough political fighting that would have made it a player in opposing the influence and power of the Israeli lobby in Washington. So the ADC, while a success story in part, has never set its goals sufficiently high and has always avoided the basic gut political fights where they have been most needed.

There are also a number of Palestinian groups, including a couple with Professor Hisham Sharabi at the head. But none of these organisations play any significant role in Washington and certainly none of them give the Israeli lobby a moment's concern — indeed sometimes it seems if such groups didn't exist the Israeli lobby might want to create them.

Sharabi himself, well-known in Washington having taught most of his adult life at Georgetown University, has been more and more reduced in recent years to playing a kind of Palestinian "intellectual nigger" role. He's trotted out when it's useful to have someone with Palestinian credentials, related to the sidelines when serious matters are at stake. Indeed Sharabi, like most of the establishment Palestinians who are called on by the Washington media and visiting Arab personalities, has used the Palestinian cause more than the cause has benefited from his involvement. Then there are a couple of groups that both lack Arab in their name as well as an Arab American at their helm; this even though they are widely perceived to be closely linked with the Arab establishment.

The American Education Trust (AET) has achieved a following in recent years primarily because of the expansion — both in content and distribution — of its publication *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*.

Though not a professional publication, and though too often publishing a variety of unknown and insubstantial writers and always slanting its coverage in ways the Arab establishment prefers, this monthly magazine at least does provide a substantial amount of alternative information, is thoughtfully put together, and represents a good deal of hard work by editor

Richard Curtiss and a dedicated staff.

More than any other group or publication in Washington, *The Washington Report* is at least a partial counter to the far more sophisticated and diverse propaganda machine of the Israeli lobby. Even so, its readership is primarily outside of Washington and its influence remains marginal especially in Washington. Moreover, because of the very nature of the AET and its backers, the organisation is considered largely to be one of "Arabists" working with the Arab establishment in the region. And such an image goes a long way to substantially limiting the AET's credibility in Washington circles.

The same is true for the organisation known as The Council on the National Interest (CNI) which was mentioned in the previous column after holding its hardly noticed annual convention earlier last month.

Originally CNI was something of a spinoff of the AET. The concept at inception was that CNI could become a political, lobbying arm to the otherwise primarily educational and tax-exempt AET.

For its formative years CNI was indeed headquartered with AET on 18th Street. But partly because of dissatisfaction with CNI's lack of growth and influence, and partly because different personalities wanted to run things their own way and raise funds from overlapping sources, CNI has gone its own way while never emerging as a serious lobbying organisation after all — and its prospects are not very great.

And so, in short, when it comes to both the battle of images and the battle for political power the Israeli lobby in Washington spearheaded by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) remains the dominant political force on any and all matters to which the Israelis have an interest; and does so practically unchallenged despite the growing array of groups and organisations claiming to be working to balance its influence.

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Next week in Part 3 of The Image of Power some reflections on the importance of being perceived to be able and willing to help one's friends as well as to hurt one's enemies