

# The U.S. Arab lobby now a force to be reckoned with

A FEW days before the U.S. Senate recently endorsed the warplanes sale to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, a unique event with considerable symbolic importance took place on Capitol Hill.

Testifying and being questioned together on the arms package before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, two lobbyists faced the divided senators.

One was a well-known face on the Hill, that of Morris Amitay, Executive Director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) — the Washington umbrella for 30-plus American Jewish organisations which has aptly earned the term "the Jewish lobby."

The other was a new-comer, John Richardson, Director of Public Affairs for the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) — the only Arab American organisation specifically devoting itself to political affairs and registered to lobby the Congress.

For the first time, the once invincible "Israel lobby" — "We've never lost on a major issue," Amitay told the *New York Times* in 1975 shortly after taking up his job — was required to share the stage with an upstart Arab American counterpart. This symbolism reflects what the *National Journal*, in a major review of the Jewish lobby, termed "fundamental shifts in attitudes and perceptions" regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict.

"I hope we are becoming known as 'the Arab lobby,'" NAAA's former president, Joe Baroody, told this writer just a year ago.

Though still unable to mobilise the 2½-million-strong Arab American community as AIPAC enlists American Jews, NAAA has blossomed in the past year into an embryonic Arab American counterpart whose activities are beginning to be felt and in some quarters, including the White House, appreciated.

"The voice of the Arabs is heard more clearly in the corridors of power today," a recent lobby comparison in *Atlantic* magazine concluded. "But their lobby remains a distant second to Israel's when it comes to size, efficiency and fire power."

During the very days of the Senate's historic debate on the arms package in early May, both NAAA and AIPAC held their annual membership conferences. Contrasts between the two lobbying groups were strikingly visible.

## Politically astute

For NAAA it was only its sixth annual convention. Held every other year in Washington, the site of this year's gathering was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. With fewer than 2000 members, only 300 of whom assembled in Pittsburgh, NAAA's grass roots is woefully thin. More importantly, NAAA's membership — largely of Lebanese-Christian ancestry — is politically conservative and rather unsophisticated about the Washington scene.

While NAAA's leadership and staff are considerably more politically astute, John Richardson felt it necessary to win even his most active members, that "if we can't

deliver this constituency for which we speak, we're going to look like a paper tiger. AIPAC is effective because when Morris Amitay testifies on the Hill he has a constituency whom he represents and which will back him up."

Baroody and Richardson have been the two key architects of NAAA's rise. Until recently, NAAA has primarily been an elaborate social club concentrating more on joyous "halutz" than brutal realism.

Shortly after becoming president in April 1977, Baroody purged the former executive director, Michael Saba. Shortly after that he hired John Richardson who had been president of American Near East Relief Agency, a Palestinian relief organisation, for the new public relations-lobbyist position. And throughout his tenure, Baroody directed an exhaustive nine-month search for an executive director a position redesigned to handle mostly organisational affairs. Jean Abinader, a young and energetic specialist in inter-cultural communications was selected at the Pittsburgh meeting from a group of five finalists.

Also largely thanks to Baroody's decisive leadership, NAAA has established itself in a modest suite of offices and raised its operating budget beyond \$R690,000. With some 700 delegates, AIPAC's annual policy conference was its 19th and was held, as always, where the power is — Washington. With about 10 times NAAA's membership, AIPAC is also uniquely able to enlist the efforts of dozens of well-established American Jewish organisations, their staffs and their members. Its research capabilities and organisational facilities are unmatched by any Washington foreign policy organisation. *Atlantic* concluded that AIPAC, with an annual budget around \$R2.9 million, continues to create "an impact that others could not achieve with millions more."

While the NAAA conference was partially an exercise in public relations — the Press was eagerly courted and all meetings were open — AIPAC's affair was a highly politicised, unusually secret gathering. The Press was barred from most sessions and only AIPAC members were allowed to pass special security guards.

It was a difference beyond style reflecting the political realities facing the two competing lobbies. NAAA is still

AMERICA'S Arab lobby has blossomed into an effective counter-balance to the powerful Israeli lobby and its activities are beginning to be felt and appreciated. Mark A. Bruzonsky analyses its success story.



NAAA'S Public Affairs Director John Richardson addressing a meeting as former NAAA President Joe Baroody looks on.

## Pitted against the powerful Jewish body...

feeding on publicity and operates with a candidness befitting a political group whose lectures are on the upswing. AIPAC's leadership, on the other hand, has developed a somewhat paranoid vision which neatly divides the world into "we against they" — "they" being everyone. Press and Presidents included, but the hard-core applauders of Israeli policies.

Since Amitay's takeover, AIPAC's hold on the American Jewish community can be compared with the more recent Likud grasp on Israeli politics. Neither has majority support but both maintain control by base appeals to emotionalism and fear and for lack of any populist opposition.

## Outrageous qualities

Amitay himself has become completely inaccessible to the Press. His abrasive personality and belligerent views have earned him a rather sinister reputation. Hyman Bookbinder, Washington representative of the American Jewish Committee, has indicated that Amitay "has personal qualities which are outrageous and very harmful to the cause we all share."

Even more cutting are the recent public remarks of Senator Abraham Ribicoff — Amitay's former employer. Mentioning AIPAC by name, Ribicoff told the *Wall Street Journal* that "they do a great disservice to the U.S., to Israel and to the Jewish community." Upon hearing of this slap in the face, Amitay was said to be uncontrollably enraged.

With the crisis felt by American Jewry in the wake of the arms package sale, the opposition to AIPAC's leadership and attitudes may become less soft-spoken and may come out of the closet. Still, the American Jewish community has little tradition of removing entrenched bureaucrats. Other officials — such as the Executive Director of the Presidents Conference, Yehuda Hellman, whose job it is to lobby the White House — are widely despised but nevertheless in power. Thus Amitay's grasp may remain firm.

Ironically, many American Jews would privately and mournfully agree that NAAA may become one of the primary beneficiaries of Amitay's continuing reign. Richardson's calm, reasoned attitudes are so in contrast with Amitay's behind-the-scenes, fist-pounding

approach that there is bound to be an effect as issue after issue pits the two against each other. Furthermore, while NAAA is reaching out to embrace a large network within the Washington scene, AIPAC is increasingly turning inward refusing to breathe the new atmosphere of "even-handedness."

In course of time AIPAC could become the victim of its own inbreeding — its once expansive base of support seriously eroded. Fear of just such a development may be leading to a basic transformation of the "Jewish lobby" with various functions being divorced from AIPAC without actually having to purge the organisation of its leaders. World Jewish Congress President Philip Klutznick may have had such thoughts in mind when he stated in a recent interview: "I think the worst lobbies are those that become known as such. The best lobbies are the ones that do their work and don't become identified."

With registration as a lobbyist a few months ago, NAAA's Richardson has increasingly given his organisation the delightful task of acting as AIPAC's nemesis.

NAAA's entrance into the lobbying game was best symbolised last December with NAAA's co-ordination of the first meeting between Arab Americans and an American president. Then came NAAA's major effort on Capitol Hill on behalf of the arms sale package which I wrote about in *The Saudi Gazette* on March 28.

In endorsing the sale, NAAA indicated "that much of the opposition to the Arab portion of the proposed arms sale is an attempt to thwart a shift in American political relations in the region rather than fear for the military security of Israel." It was a truthful deflation of AIPAC's primary argument. And taking a long-range view, NAAA added a call for the administration "to build into its arms policy a schedule for systematic reduction in total transfers to the Mid-east over a five-10 year period and to seek commitments from other major manufacturers to do so too." Aware of congressional anxieties about the ever-increasing American role as arms arsenal, it was an imaginative and credibility building step.

NAAA's most recent major effort involves a court challenge to block American arms to Israel until Israel completely withdraws from Southern Lebanon. The suit, filed in U.S. District Court on May 11, names Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and the U.S. government as defendants. It seeks a halt to all further arms

sales or deliveries until Israeli violations of the conditions under which it receives arms have ceased — meaning Israel back across its northern border. With Israel now pledged to do so, it is unlikely the NAAA action even if it should survive in the courts, will have any effect. But here too, NAAA has put Israel on notice that there are vigilant and capable opponents able to exploit the American legal and political systems to thwart Israeli designs.

There is a concern in Washington that the arms package defeat may make AIPAC even more determined to prove itself in the next few tests of strength on the Hill.

Mid-east policy "really comes down to a test of strength in Washington between the White House and the Israeli lobby," *Christian Science Monitor* columnist Joseph Houch noted when Carter became president. "The lobby has won roundly since the days of Lyndon Johnson, which will win this new round? It will be a fascinating test of Carter's political skill and strength."

To the surprise of many, Carter has won a big round. But the real test of his abilities will be whether he can enlist the Congress in support of his overall peace outline — now being formulated for public presentation within a few months — and behind an American strategy for nudging the parties to accept it. There is considerable doubt that Carter's arms victory portends dethronement of the still potent Jewish lobby to such an extent.

## Greatest anxiety

One early sign of administration squeamishness came a few days after the Senate vote when Vice-President Mondale addressed the American Jewish Congress. He deleted from his prepared text the statement that America's "commitment to Israel" will never be properly defined by a single or conditional lobby. "Domestic political considerations apparently caused Mondale to feel constrained about publicly pronouncing, even in diplomatic phrases, what has become a constant White House refrain.

One of the administration's greatest anxieties is that the Jewish Community will completely give up on them and turn towards the Republican Party. Already the Republicans are running advertisements in Jewish

newspapers outbidding everyone in allegiance to Israel. Here too there is considerable irony. For Morris Amitay, just two years ago, led the Jewish community in a major effort aiming at Ford's defeat and Carter's triumph.

As for NAAA's importance in this White House-Jewish lobby wrestling match, so far the going has been easy. "People are *looking* for an Arab point of view. It's great" Richardson recently exclaimed. But NAA's clout will not become of major significance until Arab Americans act upon the realisation that they are up against a commitment far surpassing their own.

While NAAA men were entertained by the Royal Jordanian Folk Troupe and dined by Alia Airlines, AIPAC leaders were hustling to two congressional receptions and spent an afternoon deluging congressional offices with home-town constituents. Whatever else one thinks of the Jewish lobby, the dedication of such a broad-based membership is widely respected in Washington and remains completely unmatched by that of NAAA.

With Joe Baroody's resignation and Hisham Sharabi's election as NAAA president, there is, however, a sign of maturity. Baroody represented a kind of Arab-Wasp image -- he is a member of prominent Republican family and heads a public relations company. Sharabi, who holds an endowed chair in Arab Culture v. Georgetown University's Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, is of Palestinian origin. He remains highly active in Palestinian intellectual and political circles and is editor of the well-respected *Journal of Palestine Studies*. Sharabi brings to NAAA a much more visible "Arab image" and probably a more positive attitude towards the PLO than NAAA has been willing to express during the past year.

An interview with Dr Sharabi will appear in the *Saudi Gazette* later this month.