THE MIDDLE EAST

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

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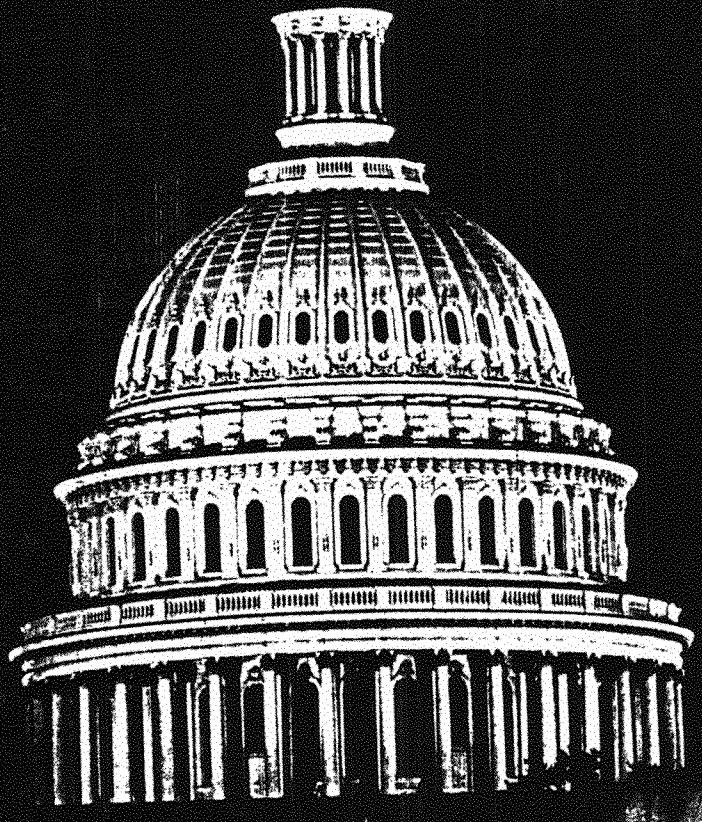
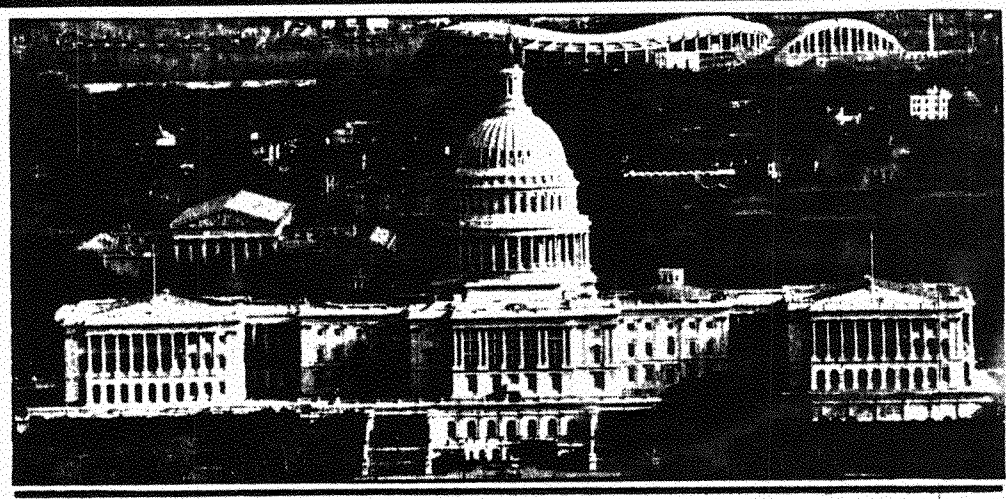


HOW BATTLEGROUND

Many people believe that the Middle East conflict will not be decided in the Middle East itself but in Washington. For this reason the battle between the Jewish and Arab lobbies for the support of Congress takes on considerable significance. The power and success of the Jewish lobby is well known and in the past it has faced little opposition from any Arab counterpart. Now, however, there is evidence that the Arabs are becoming aware of the importance of this theatre of operations with the revamping of the National Association of Arab Americans. It is largely because of the efforts of this organisation and its new Public Relations Director that Congress passed the controversial arms package including planes for Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It may only have been a narrow victory, but in view of the big guns brought to bear by the Jewish lobby, it was an important one and may be a pointer to the future.



LOBBIES ON THE HILL

THE NEW BATTLEGROUND

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has long been an influential body in the US Congress supporting policies favourable to Israel. Now it is being challenged by an Arab organisation, the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), which could in time counter the pro-Israeli bias in the US Congress which AIPAC has brought about. *Mark Bruzonsky*, in Washington, looks at the aims and methods of both groups.

A few days before the US Senate endorsed the Carter Administration's sale of military aircraft 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 well known — Morris Amitay, Executive Director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Washington umbrella for over 30 American Jewish organisations which has earned the title "the Jewish lobby".

The other was a newcomer, John Richardson, Director of Public Affairs for the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA) — the only Arab American organisation devoted 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 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, said a year ago. The NAAA, though still unable to mobilise the two-and-a-half-million-strong Arab American community as efficiently as AIPAC enlists American Jews, has in the past year become an embryonic Arab American counterpart whose activities are beginning to be felt, and in some quarters, including the White House, appreciated.

John Richardson (top); from left, Hisham Sharaki, Sen. James Aburezk and Joseph Baroody; AIPAC boss Morris Amitay (bottom)

"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 days of the Senate's historic debate on the arms package in early May, both NAAA and AIPAC held their annual membership conferences. The contrast between the two was striking.

For NAAA it was only its sixth annual convention. It holds the convention every other year in Washington, and this year's was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. With less than 2,000 members, only 300 of whom assembled in Pittsburgh, its grass roots support is weak. More important, NAAA's membership — largely of Lebanese Christian ancestry — is politically conservative and rather unsophisticated about the Washington scene.

Although NAAA's leadership and staff are more politically astute, John Richardson felt it necessary to warn even his most active members: "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 key architects of NAAA's recent success. Previously it had primarily been an elaborate social club concentrating more on joyous "haflis" than brutal "realpolitik".

Shortly after becoming president in April 1977, Baroody purged the Executive Director, Michael Saba, and engaged John Richardson, (formerly President of the American Near East Relief Agency, a Palestinian relief organisation) as Public Relations Director. Throughout his tenure, Baroody had directed an exhaustive search for a good Executive Director — a position now redesigned to handle mostly organisational affairs. Jean Abinader, a young, personable and energetic specialist in intercultural communications, was selected at the Pittsburgh meeting from a group of five.

Thanks largely to Baroody's decisive leadership, NAAA has now established itself in a modest suite of offices and has raised its operating budget beyond $200,000.

AIPAC's Annual Policy Conference, attended by some 700 delegates, was its 19th and was held, as always, where the power is in Washington. With about 10 times NAAA's membership, AIPAC is able to enlist the efforts of dozens of well-established American Jewish organisations, their staff 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 of around $750,000, continues to create "an impact that others could not achieve with millions more".

While the NAAA conference was partly 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 of style reflecting the political realities facing the two competing lobbies. NAAA is still feeding on publicity and operates with a candour befitting a political group whose fortunes are on the upswing. AIPAC's leadership, on the other hand, has developed a somewhat paranoid vision which neatly divides the world into "us against them" — "them" being everyone, press and presidents included, except the hard-core applauders of Israeli policies.

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

Amitay has become inaccessible to the press. His abrasive personality and belligerent views have earned him a rather sinister reputation. Hyman Bookbinder, representative in Washington of the American Jewish Committee, and one of the most respected Jewish "diplomats" there, 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. He told *The Wall Street Journal* that AIPAC does "a great disservice to the US, to Israel and to the Jewish community". Upon hearing this 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. But, the American Jewish community has little tradition of removing entrenched bureaucrats. Other officials — such as the Executive Director of the President's Conference, Yehuda Hellman, whose job it is to lobby the White House — are widely criticised but remain in power. Amitay's grasp may therefore remain firm.

Ironically, many American Jews may privately agree that NAAA may be one of the main beneficiaries of Amitay's continuing reign. Richardson's calm, reasoned attitudes are in such contrast to 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 time AIPAC could become the victim of its own inbreeding — its once expansive base of support seriously eroded. Fear of such a development may be leading to a basic transformation of the "Jewish lobby", with various functions being divorced from AIPAC without an actual purge of the organisation's leaders.

World Jewish Congress President Philip Klutznick may have had this in mind when he told *The Middle East* last month: "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, Richardson has increasingly given NAAA the task of acting as AIPAC's nemesis. NAAA's entrance into lobbying was best symbolised last December by its co-ordination of the first

meeting between Arab Americans and an American president. Then came its major effort on Capitol Hill on behalf of the arms sale package.

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.

Taking a long-term view, NAAA added a call for the Administration "to build into its arms policy a schedule for systematic reduction in total transfers to the Middle East over a 5-10 year period and to seek commitments from other major manufacturers to do so too". NAAA's statement showed an awareness of congressional anxieties about the ever-increasing American role as arms arsenal and was an imaginative move designed to build credibility.

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 a US District Court on 11 May, names Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and the US 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 that Israel must move back across its northern border.

With Israel now pledged to do so, it is unlikely that the NAAA action, even if it should survive in the courts, will have any effect. But here, too, NAAA has given Israel notice that there are vigilant and capable opponents able to exploit the American legal and political systems to thwart Israeli designs.

There is concern in Washington that the arms package defeat may make AIPAC especially determined to prove itself in the next few tests of strength on the Hill. In April 1977, *The Middle East* quoted a senior American journalist, Joseph Harsch, to the effect that the new American president would have to face up to "the Jewish lobby" as all former presidents had tried to do.

Middle East policy "really comes down to a test of strength in Washington between the White House and the Israeli lobby," he noted. "The lobby has won most rounds 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 an important round, but the real test of his abilities will be whether he can enlist Congress to support his overall peace plan — now being formulated for public presentation within a few months. He would also need agreement on a strategy for nudging the parties to accept it, and there is considerable doubt here that his arms victory portends dethronement of the still potent Jewish lobby to such an extent.

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 monolithic lobby". Domestic political considerations apparently caused him to feel constrained about publicly pronouncing in diplomatic phrases what has become a constant White House refrain.

One of the Administration's greatest anxieties is that the Jewish community will turn to the Republican Party, which is already running advertisements in Jewish newspapers outbidding everyone in allegiance to Israel. Here too there is a considerable irony, for Morris Amitay, only two years ago, led the Jewish community in a major effort to defeat Ford and bring Carter to power.

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 NAAA's influence will not become really significant until Arab Americans act upon the realisation that they are up against a commitment far surpassing their own.

While NAAA members were entertained by the Royal Jordanian Folk Troupe and wined and dined by Alia Airlines, AIPAC members were attending two congressional receptions and spent an afternoon deluging congressional offices with home-town constituents. Whatever one thinks of the Jewish lobby, the dedication of its broad-based membership is to be admired 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 a prominent Republican family and heads a public relations company. Sharabi, who holds an endowed chair in Arab Culture at 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 the organisation has hitherto been willing to express. □

EVENTS
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Arab lobby develops political muscle

by Mark Bruzonsky

For the first time, a major lobbying effort to win Congressional support is being made by Arab Americans on a crucial aspect of US Middle East policy – the arms package. The National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA), in an unprecedented policy statement sent to all members of the Congress, has publicly endorsed the Carter administration's arms package to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel.

NAAA has become the only organisation registered officially to engage in lobbying activities on behalf of Arab-American interests. Increasingly the organisation is becoming the countervoice to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) which for years has monopolised opinion on Capitol Hill by bringing together nearly all important American Jewish organisations under one lobbying umbrella.

Achieving such unity for Arab Americans is proving considerably more difficult. Even when a group of Arab-American representatives met with President Carter on December 15, NAAA leadership was not sufficient to achieve a unified policy statement. A number of sometimes contradictory statements were released to the press, diminishing the potential impact the group might have achieved.

Recent comparisons of the Arab lobby with the Jewish lobby on CBS television news and in *Atlantic Monthly* magazine concluded the Arabs have yet to join the same league as their competitor. As *Atlantic* noted, AIPAC has only "an annual budget of $700,000" but with it, it creates "an impact that others could not achieve with millions more." In short, as *Atlantic* further notes, "the voice of the Arabs is heard more clearly in the corridors of power today, but their lobby remains a distant second to Israel's when it comes to size, efficiency and fire power."

NAAA's immediate goal, however, is not to challenge directly AIPAC's much-respected Capitol Hill authority. The initial goal, according to John Richardson, NAAA's Director of Public Affairs who is the organisation's only registered lobbyist, is "to build respect for Americans of Arab background" in much the same way that American Jewish groups such as the Anti-Defamation League of Bnai Brith and the American Jewish Committee have done for years.

NAAA is also plagued with a host of organisational and political difficulties as it makes the attempt to draw diverse sectors of the Arab American community together. Never before has national political action been mobilised by the essentially local organisations to which most Arab Americans belong. What NAAA is now attempting, the Jews did in the 1940s under the shock and impetus of Hitler and the creation of Israel.

Once NAAA can establish a base and a solid reputation, its next goal, Richardson adds, is to "become a source of credible information and a valid point of view." Had NAAA been active in Congress in 1975, for instance, the letter from 76 senators which helped to block the Ford-Kissinger "reassessment" policies might not have had such smooth sailing, Richardson explains.

NAAA's endorsement of the arms sale package comes at a crucial time. Intense efforts are underway by Jewish organisations to defeat at least the Saudi part of the package. A grass roots letter writing campaign is being mobilised. Already AIPAC has circulated an important memorandum declaring the sale a "threat to peace". In an unprecedented exchange, the State Department has formally responded to this AIPAC memorandum with one of its own challenging AIPAC's facts and interpretations. In response AIPAC has issued a persuasive rebuttal to the State Department's rebuttal. In response to all this assistant secretary for congressional relations, Douglas Bennett, has sent members of Congress a reassuring letter – including statements that the Saudis have no intention of basing any F15s at the airbase closest to Israel, Tabuk, and will definitely not transfer any F15s to any other country.

Israel's strategy appears to be first to attempt to unravel the package – to make each country stand on its own. Israeli officials are known to be incensed not just at the sale to the Saudis but at the very idea that the US military commitment to Israel could be made dependent on sales of weapons to the Arabs.

If this attempt at separating the package fails – and so far the administration has heatedly insisted that if any part of the package is disapproved, the entire sale, including the planes to Israel, will be dropped – an attempt might then be made to so restrict the weaponry for the F15s and the bases where the planes could be kept that the Saudi government would reject the terms. A few years back Jordan was put in much the same position regarding the sale of Hawk surface-to-air missiles. Eventually that sale did go through, but

Arab-Americans failed to achieve a unified policy when they met Carter in December 1977

not without months of bickering and not before King Hussein ventured to Moscow to see what might be available.

With 21 of 37 members of the House International Relations Committee already indicating their belief that the administration should reconsider the sale to the Arabs, the odds of the package going through, as now put together, are probably less than even. Both Houses of Congress must act by majority vote to disapprove the sale within 30 days of formal notification (which is expected in early April), otherwise the entire sale becomes approved.

NAAA's position paper, which has been widely read by members of Congress, makes the following major points:

1. "The proposed arms sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia should be interpreted politically, not militarily. They represent official acknowledgement of the growing political and economic bonds between America and the Arab world. It is inaccurate and misleading to characterise the arms for Egypt and Saudi Arabia as a security threat to Israel. They should, rather, be seen as indicative of changing American political relationships in the area in which Israel no longer plays the dominant role. The sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia are symbols of American rediscovery of its ties to the Arab world, which stretch back 150 years and which were cordial until the introduction of the Arab-Israeli dispute and American "choosing of sides."

2. "NAAA has traditionally opposed all large scale arms transfers to the Middle East . . . NAAA still holds to that policy but is making an exception in the case of the proposed arms sale for a compelling reason: the political significance of the sale to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. NAAA does not support the proposed sale of additional aircraft to Israel but accepts it as part of the package concept."

3. "NAAA calls for the development of a regional approach to arms transfers to the Middle East which would take into account the principal actors and their legitimate defence needs . . . NAAA calls on the administration to build into its arms policy a schedule for systematic reduction in total transfers to the Middle East over a 5-10 year period and to seek commitments from other major manufacturers to do the same."

4. Egypt. "The United States has an interest in supporting the goals of President Sadat and should be responsive to his defence needs as well . . . It is in the American interest to strengthen bilateral relations with Egypt."

5. Saudi Arabia. "The American national interest in Saudi Arabia is fast becoming one of this country's most important bilateral ties. The United States has a major interest in helping Saudi Arabia sustain orderly economic and social development . . . The proposed sale of F15s to Saudi Arabia should be viewed primarily as political symbolism and affirmation of the American-Saudi relationship."

6. "NAAA is of the opinion that much of the opposition to the Arab portion of the proposed arms sale is an attempt to thwart a shift in American political relationships in the region rather than fear for the military security of Israel."

7. "America can regain credibility and a moral position with regard to the Middle East. We can protect Israel without subjecting the rest of the region to Israeli hegemony; Israeli security must not mean the utter insecurity of all its neighbours. We can develop American ties to the Arab world that reflect mutual interests. We must begin, and begin soon, however, to develop a regional, rational approach to arms transfers to the Middle East that incorporates phased reduction in cooperation with the other principal arms suppliers of the world."

Annually, NAAA holds a full conference which brings hundreds of Arab Americans together for policy and organisation discussions. This year's annual conference will be held in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, from May 4 to May 8. ■