

Israel Lobby in the US and Iran - P5+1 Negotiations

Alireza Ahmadi*

Abstract

The Israel lobby in Washington is a network of organizations and community groups dedicated to influencing American policy towards the Middle East. Their success and access has made them the model for lobbies on Washington's Capitol Hill and US Government. Long known for successfully influencing American policy towards the Middle East, the lobby now faces its strongest challenge in history at a time when it is also facing what it considers a historically significant issue. The interim accord between Iran and members of the P5+1 have led to turmoil in Washington over the wisdom and plausibility of President Obama's diplomatic approach and about the softening of the current US posture towards Iran. In this debate, powerful conservative groups, a number of key Democrats, and the Israel lobby have been pit against progressive groups and Democratic elected officials in the Senate and the White House. In this article, I will briefly look at the history of the Israel lobby in America and explore its evolution as well as investigate the factors that, over time, caused it to take on a hard-line posture and drift towards the right. I will explore the tactics and strategies that the Israel lobby – the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in particular – has undertaken to influence the outcome of events and undermine the possibility of diplomatic conflict resolution. Finally, I will examine the pitfalls and challenges hard-line pro-Israel groups face in effectively pursuing these policies and the long term harm they expose themselves to in alienating progressive and pro-peace groups.

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* MA in International Relations, City University, New York (aliahmadi110356@gmail.com)
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Introduction

Diplomatic negotiation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5+1 (the US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany), over Iran's nuclear program represents the largest international diplomatic development of the past year. It represents a historic opportunity for the United States and Iran to communicate productively and bring about diplomatic resolution in the case of Iran's nuclear file, while reversing the historic sanctions regime imposed on Iran. Many, including United States President Barak Obama, have even openly speculated that if successful, these negotiations could result in a broader settling of disagreements that can lead to better relations between the two countries and a dramatic realignment of Middle East regional dynamics.

Such a remaking of the region has been interpreted to be at the expense of some other countries, most notably historic American allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia that consider Iran a regional adversary that threatens their security and interests on levels beyond the nuclear issue. These countries have experienced a significant increase in defense and geostrategic support from the United States as Washington has sought to strengthen them against Iran. Israel in particular sees the leveling of tensions between the US and Iran as a threat to American commitment to its security. Against this backdrop, a very public and bitter debate has emerged in Washington regarding the wisdom and plausibility of the American President's diplomatic approach towards Iran with many in Congress opposing diplomacy and questioning whether a final agreement that provides sufficient

assurances to the West regarding the peaceful nature of its nuclear program is possible and whether Iran will abide by its commitments.

The American body politic has considered Iran an enemy of the US for decades, and strong forces historically opposed to Iran and its interests have an authoritative presence in Washington. The Israel lobby, long considered one of, if not the most powerful and important lobby group in Washington has emerged as the energy source behind efforts to oppose and undermine the President's efforts at diplomacy. The US Congress plays a critical role in US foreign policy and can obstruct the ongoing negotiations. Though the US Constitution affords the President the role of chief navigator on diplomacy, Congress has important "advise and consent" responsibilities on issues ranging from foreign policy/national defense cabinet nominees to the ratification of treaties. The Congress can use "power of the purse" to make the President have to compromise on foreign policy issues that Congress has limited control over (Leyton-Brown, 1983). Also, since the sanctions against Iran have been passed by Congress, they would have to repeal them and the President cannot unilaterally remove the sanctions beyond limited waiver authority and relevant executive orders. This allows Congress to influence negotiations by outlining the circumstances in which they would be willing to repeal sanctions and make good on the promises of Executive Branch negotiators.

But the decisions of Congress are very often influenced by the advocacy and pressure of powerful lobby groups that are a mainstay of Washington. This includes lobby groups advocating on behalf of foreign governments. The most powerful lobbies promoting the interests of foreign nations are driven by cohesive and civically active ethnic groups in the US such as Armenia, China, Greece, India, Israel, Taiwan, Ukraine, and, historically, Ireland. Even countries with strong bilateral relations with the United States use lobbying to further their efforts. As John Newhouse explains "lobbyists can operate within the system in ways that experienced diplomats cannot. A lobbying group

can identify with a domestic ethnic bloc even though it is paid by a foreign government. Ethnic politics can trump corporate interests and, more importantly, influence what agencies within the U.S. government may see as the national interest. (Newhouse, 2009)”

The Israel lobby is a network of Jewish organizations that along with sympathetic pundits, think tanks, and community groups have long been a leading force in influencing US policy regarding Israel and the Middle East. Its success in doing so has made it the model for other institutions lobbying Washington, especially those advocating for foreign interests. The centerpiece of these organizations is the AIPAC. Although AIPAC defines its role as defending American financial support for Israel through Congressional appropriations, this support has become non-controversial and routine. The lobby’s main focus has been more broadly aligning American policy with that of hard-line Israeli government policy, in particular those that originate from the most hawkish Israeli political groups such as Likud. In recent years, most of the lobby’s energy is devoted to pressuring Washington to adopt the Israeli view on Iran as a threat to international security and stability (Newhouse, 2009).

I. Historical Context

Originally founded in 1954 by Isaiah L. Kenen, a lifelong Zionist activist, AIPAC focused on persuading Washington to strengthen ties with Tel Aviv especially with regards to large military weapons acquisition packages that Israel was requesting in the aftermath of Israeli cooperating with the US and Great Britain to protect pro-western governments in Lebanon and Jordan from pro-Nasser elements. Washington was wary about being perceived as pro-Israel in the Arab world and only allowed some of the transactions (Little, 1993).

Increasingly over time, Jewish organization in America gravitated towards the right in favor of their hawkish counterparts in Israel and away from the mainstream of the American Jewry. The Six-

Day War and its aftermath brought about a generation of “new Jews” drawn disproportionately from hard-line Zionist, Orthodox, and neoconservative Jews. After Kenen retired from AIPAC in 1974, four men were primarily responsible for the organizations growth. They were Robert H. Asher, a Chicago manufacturer; Lawrence Weinberg, a Los Angeles real-estate developer; Edward Levy, a Detroit construction-materials executive; and Mayer Mitchell, a builder from Mobile, Alabama. Known as the “gang of four,” they took on hawkish positions on Israel policy at odds with the more compromising attitudes of the liberal democrats who populated much of the organizations leadership. These influences continued to move AIPAC to the right and by the 1990’s more liberal Jewish organizations criticized AIPAC’s hawkish positions as being out of touch with the dovish view of most Jewish Americans of foreign policy issues relating to Israel (Verbeeten, 2006). They also claimed that AIPAC, though officially non-partisan, tends to show greater support for Republican candidates for office over Democrats. AIPAC did not endorse the Oslo Accord, and only dropped its opposition to a Palestinian State until Ehud Barak became Prime Minister in 1999 (Mearsheimer, Walt, 2009, 126). It still does not endorse statehood for the Palestinians.

AIPAC is particularly vulnerable to the influence of a small band of donors for, as writer Michael Massing notes, its Board of Directors is composed of the largest donors not those who best represent AIPAC membership or the broader Jewish community, and that those top donors (and by extension the organization’s leadership) are typically far more hawkish and zealous in their support for Israel than most Jewish Americans (Massing, 2002). This rightward trend was also reinforced by hard-liners in the Israeli government even as they were sharing power with more moderate elements, by working behind the scenes to strengthen more hawkish elements in key Jewish organization. As J.J. Goldberg describes in his book, *Jewish Power*, the strategy was “to manipulate the central bodies of Jewish



representation so that, without taking sides, they became voices for the Likud half of the government. More attention and support was given to the more conservative members of these organizations creating the perception that they are the authoritative voices of the Jewish community in America, (Goldberg, 1997, 161)".

An example of this strategy's effectiveness is the effect it had on the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations where the selection of Malcolm Hoenlein to executive chairman is directly attributed to the support of Likud elements in the Israeli government (Massing, 2002). A powerful organization with substantial sway in Washington, the Conference's influence is not gained through money or lobbying but rather exclusively through the fact that they are considered to speak for the politically active and civic minded Jewish community in America. The organization and its executive chairman are to speak for the consensus of the 51 member groups, but that does not always occur. Larger and more moderate groups like the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism get one vote each. Smaller organizations such as Agudath Israel of America, the Zionist Organization of America, and American Friends of Likud are much more hawkish and also receive one vote (Massing, 2002). This results in the smaller conservative groups decisively outnumbering the larger moderate ones, therefore neutralize their influence, and leaving executive chairman Malcolm Hoenlein with considerable discretion when describing the views of the American Jewish community in Washington.

This has even resulted in the lobby being at odds with the Israeli government at times when it is under the control of politicians from the center or left of the Israeli political spectrum. In 1994, for example, the lobby – led by the hawkish Zionist Organization of America – successfully lobbied for an amendment of a foreign aid bill that put additional restrictions on US aid to the Palestinian authority even though it was opposed by both the Clinton Administrations and

the Rabin government in Israel (Mearsheimer, Walt, 2009, 127).

Lobbying efforts, especially on foreign policy, are often more successful in Congress than in the Executive Branch. Administrative agencies are legally restrained in terms of what they can do for lobbyists and much of the decision making is done by one person – the elected President – while cabinet members and administrative directors serve at the President's pleasure and do not need much of the incumbency-reinforcing assistance that lobbyists can provide. Congress, on the other hand, is far less restrained and values its relations with fundraisers and Capitol Hill insiders that can return favors during reelection campaigns. As Newhouse explains, "functionally, the U.S. government is an anomaly, with a potent legislature unconnected to the executive branch but open to being exploited by domestic agents representing foreign governments, (Newhouse, 2009)".

II. The Lobby and Iran

On the eve of the Geneva accord, a major adversary of the Obama administration's diplomatic effort was and will continue to be the powerful political organizations that lobby the United States Government on behalf of the interests of Israel. Most of the Israel lobby, in coordination with the Israeli government, has criticized the administration's approach on many levels, while not condemning the diplomatic approach, so as to look openly hostile to the administration (Gerstein, 2013).

The influence of the pro-Israel forces in Washington was evident even before the interim deal was struck. Once the outline and probability of an agreement became evident in mid-November, the administration became locked in an information war with these forces in Washington regarding the nature and structure of the deal. The administration began the process of briefing members of Congress on the deal and the diplomatic process while the pro-Israel forces also began taking to the halls of Congress to present a different account of

what the possible interim accord would involve. They provided a contrary set of facts and data on the outline of the agreement being considered by the parties in Geneva (Hudson, 2013). Though, as previously stated, the term Israel lobby refers to a wide array of organizations and individuals, in this case, as is often the norm in quickly evolving situations, the rapid response duties fell primarily to the most potent of these groups: AIPAC.

Israeli ambassador to the U.S., Ron Dermer, and AIPAC representatives spoke to numerous members of Congress in an effort to discredit the administration's prospective interim deal with Iran. For instance, according to information provided by the Secretary of State, the US was providing Iran with an offer of seven to nine billion dollars in sanctions relief. But Israeli officials and AIPAC advocates were telling members of Congress that the sum was actually about twenty, if not, forty billion dollars. They also claimed that the concessions offered by Iran would only set the program back twenty four days (Hudson, 2013). These claims had been raised by Israeli newspapers that cited sources from Israeli intelligence. The State Department rejected these allegations but declined to take aim at those making them.

Much of the outreach to Senators is done through senior members of the lobby, known inside the organization as "key contacts." AIPAC has many ways of communicating with Congress but key contacts fulfill a particularly important role. They are those who have a special relationship with the member of Congress, often big donors or fundraisers, but can also be someone who has a personal relationship with the member. Former AIPAC legislative liaison Ralph Nurnberger defined the key contacts as "someone who has enough of a personal relationship that the elected official would return a phone call within a day. (Lake, 2014)"

Many Senators quickly adopted the position of the pro-Israel advocates. Senator Mark Kirk said Kerry's briefing was "anti-Israeli," and that "the administration very disappointingly discounts what the

Israelis say.” He went on even to say that “I think the Israelis probably have a pretty good intelligence service.” The senator said that he was briefed by a “senior Israeli official” who he would not name (Hudson, 2013). Similar attitudes were reflected by other members of Congress, including many Democrats. This speaks to the power of Israel and the Israel lobby especially when one takes into account that in this episode, some members of Congress were not only taking the word of a foreign government over their own, but they were taking the facts as presented by foreign intelligence over their own officials who were actually party to the talks and designed the proposals in questions. It also speaks to the resistance towards diplomacy with Iran as accepting the set of allegations presented by Israel would make an agreement with Iran easier to reject.

Unlike many other pro-Israel groups and the government of Israel, AIPAC maintained that it is open to a diplomatic solution and yet strongly supported new sanctions against Iran that would likely have put the interim accord out of reach. In a statement issued on the Monday following the announcement of a deal in Geneva, AIPAC stated that “Congress must...legislate additional sanctions, so that Iran will face immediate consequences should it renege on its commitments or refuse to negotiate an acceptable final agreement.” Adding that “Congress, working with the administration, must strictly oversee the initial agreement and ensure Iranian compliance. In the event Iran violates the agreement, the administration must revoke all sanctions relief” (Gerstein, 2013).

This strategy by AIPAC is not without precedent. After the Oslo Accord was finalized in 1993, AIPAC did not openly oppose it, though it was clearly hostile to the outlined agreement. Official condemnation would likely marginalize the organization as both the Clinton Administration and the Israeli government had signed onto the Accord. They did however champion the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, (that would order the Clinton Administration to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem) that was seen by many as

transparent attempt to complicate the path to compromise at a time when the status of Jerusalem was a major point of contention for the Israeli and Palestinian authorities and an emotional hurdle for their people (Mearsheimer, Walt, 2009, 127).

The effort to impose new sanctions championed by hawkish members of Congress and pro-Israel groups was once considered to have unstoppable momentum. The legislation was dubbed “the Nuclear Free Iran Act” and was sponsored by Senators Robert Menendez and Mark Kirk. AIPAC banded with a number of smaller pro-Israel groups to aggressively advocate for the bill trying to equate support for sanctions with support for Israel. Senator Kirk described “heavy” contact with the pro-Israel community and “regular” briefings with AIPAC leadership about the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act. “Being anti-Iran today is like being anti-Soviet during the Cold War,” said Doug Bloomfield, AIPAC’s former legislative director to the National Journal. “Who wants to be tagged by being called pro-Iranian and opposing [sanctions]?” (Sorcher, Izadi, 2014)” With 59 senators (43 Republicans and 16 Democrats) co-sponsoring the bill it seemed destined to pass with even enough support to thwart the President’s veto pen (Lake, 2014).

In a rebuke to Senator Menendez, who chairs the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, 10 Democratic Senate Committee Chairmen circulated a letter to Senate Leader Harry Reid asking him to reject the effort to impose new sanctions out of concern that it would hurt the prospects of a diplomatic resolution with Iran. The letter stated that “at this time, as negotiations are ongoing, we believe that new sanctions would play into the hands of those in Iran who are most eager to see the negotiations fail. (Zengerle, 2013)” Adding weight and potency to the letter was that its signatories included Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin and Intelligence Committee Chairwoman Diane Feinstein. They chair key foreign policy/national defense committees, but the fact that they are Jewish Senators is also relevant. As Scott McConnell, founding editor of the

American Conservative, explains that “the unspoken but habitual deference on Capitol Hill to key Jewish lawmakers on Israel-related matters was given a jolt by senators Carl Levin and Dianne Feinstein, who not only supported the Obama diplomacy but did so forcefully and eloquently. (McConnell, 2014)”

The tone of the debate was becoming increasingly hostile as the administration sought to raise the stakes and become more explicit in its accusations. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney called such legislation “a rush to war,” adding that “The American people do not want a march to war.” He explained his comments by saying “it is important to understand that if pursuing a resolution diplomatically is disallowed or ruled out, what options then do we and our allies have to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon” (Gerstein, 20 Nov. 2013). The President used the occasion of his nationally televised annual State of the Union Address to reiterate his opposition to the Kirk-Menendez bill stating that “If John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan could negotiate with the Soviet Union, then surely a strong and confident America can negotiate with less powerful adversaries today. The sanctions that we put in place helped make this opportunity possible. But let me be clear: if this Congress sends me a new sanctions bill now that threatens to derail these talks, I will veto it. For the sake of our national security, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed.” He then added, “let me be clear: if this Congress sends me a new sanctions bill now that threatens to derail these talks, I will veto it. (Obama, 2014)”

Strong resistance from Democratic leaders and the White House eventually took its toll on the bill’s Democratic support. Following the President’s address four Democratic co-sponsors of the legislation seemed to backtrack on their support. Senators Chris Coons of Delaware, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and Ben Cardin of Maryland said they would not support the bill coming up for a vote on the Senate floor while negotiations are ongoing. They joined Senator Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut who



had already adopted that position earlier in the month (Weber, 2014).

These co-sponsors expressed their new reservations by stating that they would oppose a vote on the legislation if it meant derailing the negotiations. Senator Manchin said that he would like to give peace a chance. Senator Cardin differed to Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who is opposed to bringing the bill to the floor for a vote, stating through a spokeswoman that he “wants to see negotiations with Iran succeed ... As for timing of the bill, it is and has always been up to the Majority Leader. (Weber, 2014)” This symbolized the forward motion of the bill not only stopping, but even reversing. Though it was the White House and senior Senate Democrats who were most effective in blunting the momentum of the legislation, outside pressure had also built up against the effort outside Capitol Hill.

By the time the bill's path to passage was clearly blocked, even Senator Menendez and AIPAC had asked for action on the bill to be delayed. Senator Menendez expressed concern about voting on the bill in such a partisan environment stating “that we will not find ourselves in a partisan process trying to force a vote on a national security matter before its appropriate (Alman, 2014).” Following those remarks, AIPAC released a statement stating “we applaud Senator Menendez's determined leadership on this issue and his authorship with Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) of the Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act. We agree with the Chairman that stopping the Iranian nuclear program should rest on bipartisan support and that there should not be a vote at this time on the measure. We remain committed to working with the Administration and the bipartisan leadership in Congress to ensure that the Iran nuclear program is dismantled (Alman, 2014).” This has been widely assessed as a rare retreat and surrender for the pressure group on this issue.

But on the following day, it sent another message to its supporters seeking to clarify its position on the legislature it had spent months advocating for in Congress. The message was aimed to

reassure supporters, who were disappointed by the new approach as well as to deny many media accounts that interpreted the new position as a retreat, the first since the Reagan Administrations agreed to sell Awacs surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia over the group's bitter objections (Landlerfeb, 2014). A day following the initial call for delay, AIPAC President Michael Kassem, in another message, reasserted his organization support for the new sanctions bill, and claimed that the media's characterization of AIPAC's position as having abandoned the bill is inaccurate. Mr. Kassem explained the request for the delay by again pointing to comments made by Senator Menendez and stating that "we agree with the Chairman that stopping the Iranian nuclear program should rest on bipartisan support and that there should not be a vote at this time on the measure (Landlerfeb, 2014)." These comments seem to reflect concerns that the increased partisanship surrounding this issue has complicated the efforts of supporters and undermined AIPAC's historically strong bipartisan influence on American policy towards the Middle East. The version of the new Iran sanctions bill in the House of Representatives had passed in a bipartisan manner by a margin of 400-20 in July, but before the Geneva interim deal (Lake, 2014).

As previously discussed, the reasons for the organizational effectiveness of AIPAC and other hard-line pro-Israel groups are many; fundraising prowess, organizational capability, strong and civically engaged Jewish-American populations, meaningful alliances with Christian Zionists and neoconservatives, to name a few. Another major reason for their success is the absence of consequential opposition in Washington on the matter of policy towards the region (Mearsheimer, Walt, 2009, 141-152). However, in this case, the lobby must for the first time engage a counterweight. Not in the form of a fellow mighty lobby apparatus, but rather, in confronting the collective combat wariness and new found understanding of the follies of war by the American people. After over a decade of war the American people are not inclined to dismiss peaceful paths to conflict

resolution with Middle Eastern countries.

Almost all the pressure against the sanctions has come from the traditionally anti-war democrats, who are emboldened by the fatigue of the American public after over a decade of war. Progressive organizations and opinion makers have been very critical of the effort to impose new sanction echoing concerns that it would derail sensitive negotiations and lead America down a road that will eventually lead to war with Iran. Progressive columnist and writers have not been shy to engage in the extremely rare practice of directly taking aim at AIPAC for pressuring members of Congress to support this bill and seeking to actively undermine the Democratic President's efforts. They have made regular references to AIPAC's endeavor as "sabotage" and "war-mongering" (Bendery, 2013) and elicited very defensive responses from the organization. AIPAC president Abraham Foxman wrote to the progressive news outlet Huffington Post, accusing them of rehashing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Foxman, 2013).

Many voices in the United States have now tried to warn these groups and their supporters that losing the supports of many liberals might permanently hobble the Israel lobbies efforts in the future and some have even warned that the ominous rhetoric and drumbeat of sanction and war from the Israel lobby can lead to the American public developing new reservations about the lobby, and perhaps to a structural change in the way American people see Israel itself. In turn, it could have long term incalculable ramifications for American Israeli relations and Israeli interests (Israel heads for, 2013). These warnings have yet to affect the aggressive posture of these hard-line groups. The moderate pro-Israel group J Street hesitantly endorsed the Geneva interim accord only to be attacked by the more hawkish Zionist Organization of America as "extreme leftwing" (Klein, 2013),

III. Friction with Conservative Allies

AIPAC's asking for the delay only hours after 42 Republican Senators

doubled down on their support for new sanctions by demanding an immediate vote, exposed frictions in their coalition. This friction, though not about substance, is also not merely about tactical disagreements. Republican members of Congress, several other pro-Israel groups, and the government of Israel itself are concerned that AIPAC's position on the timing of the vote represents the organization's sensitivity with being perceived as partisan, a sensitivity they do not share.

Speaking to the blog *The Daily Beast*, Senator Bob Corker, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said he had a "very direct conversation" with Israel's ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer on the matter early last month. He claimed that "AIPAC and Israel are in different places on this issue" and that Israel still supports sanctions and wants there to be a vote. Senator Corker continued by saying that AIPAC now "finds itself twisted in a knot." And that "obviously they are trying to navigate keeping access to the administration and candidly their support of Israel and their support of the Democratic Party. They find themselves in a very tough spot (Lake, 2014)." Other pro-Israel groups have also responded negatively. William Kristol, a renowned neo-conservative and ally of Israel issued a statement from his organizations, Emergency Committee for Israel, arguing that "It would be terrible if history's judgment on the pro-Israel community was that it made a fetish of bipartisanship—and got a nuclear Iran (Halper, 2014)."

This is not the first time AIPAC's consensus driven approach has foster tension with other Jewish groups. Its 1959 name change from the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee was criticized by the Zionist Organization of America, one of the first formal Zionist organizations in the United States and an important representative to the World Zionist Organization. They believed that AIPAC risked empowering Jews who were interested in financing Jewish charities, schools, and kibbutzim but were less dedicated to the traditional

Zionist idea of Israel as a sovereign Jewish state. These tensions persisted and obstructed cooperation between the two organizations for a number of years (Verbeenten, 2006).

AIPAC's need for being perceived as bipartisan is not a reflection of its moderateness as compared to its allies, but rather a matter of overall strategy. Bipartisan support for AIPAC and Israel ensured that numerous sanctions against Iran passed with near universal support in both chambers of Congress, making passage easy by limiting public debate and input that could challenge the existing dynamic. While many pressure groups in Washington focus heavily on getting their message out to voters directly, AIPAC favors an indirect model of communicating with the public through the institutions and politicians it influences. In fact, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, AIPAC sponsored for an advertisement in US newspapers that did not seek to directly argue in favor of the attack, but rather thanked members of Congress for their bipartisan support for Israel. The ad featured several popular members of Congress from both sides of the aisle pledging their support for Israel (source to be added).

AIPAC's bipartisan appeal and its presence in American politics also make the lobby a perfect institution for young ambitious politicians from both sides of the aisle to seek help from in advancing their careers. Those politicians then become loyal supporters of the organization and Israel. Doing so is considered the smart move in American politics. The Nation Magazine's editors once describes this phenomenon thusly: "Perhaps the most depressing feature of this ritual of abjection is its predictability—the fact that for decades, this has been standard operating procedure for many American politicians, even ones who are steadfast on core progressive issues." Adding that "Office-seekers learn to assume early in their career that if they don't pledge fealty to AIPAC, retribution will be swift and their political life could be a short one. So rather than test the limits of the lobby's power, most of them go along. (Editors, 2014)"

However, AIPAC's image being sullied by the specter of partisanship can make close alliance with the lobby group undesirable for young politicians averse to controversy.

AIPAC's strong support and connections with both parties also makes AIPAC and Israel largely insulated from scrutiny. Many Republicans concerned with the impact of unconditional US support for Israel have been left out of the party's decision making on foreign policy as the party has come to be dominated by neo-conservative ideologues with close ties to the Israel lobby. They also see Israel as an ally that shares their vision for the Middle East and are often suspicious of countries with Muslim leadership. Chuck Hagel's nomination for Secretary of Defense was initially blocked by Republicans in part due to his criticism of the Israel Lobby despite having served as a Republican Senator for twelve years. This was the first time a nomination for the post of Secretary of Defense had been filibustered in American history, though Republicans eventually relented and allowed confirmation (Friedman, 2013).

Democrats critical of Israel's occupation and mistreatment of Palestinians also face resistance from their own party due to its connections with the Israel Lobby. The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) has engaged in a campaign to convince Democrats in The New York State Legislature to defund academic organizations and institutions that participate in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel (Kane, 2014). This campaign is now being imitated by Jewish community groups around the country as targeting pro-Palestinian sentiment on campuses has become a new focus for the Israel lobby in recent years.

AIPAC's bipartisan appeal also frequently shields their allies in Congress from criticism. More partisan lobby groups frequently see their efforts attacked and politicians who support them held to account for putting special interest ahead to the national interest. Much of the ire of progressive commentators regarding the new sanctions bill was directed at Democratic Senators who co-sponsored

the bill. AIPAC, and the Israel lobby (perhaps lobby groups generally), are far more effective when they pressure lawmakers behind the scenes in ways that leave their influence largely unseen (Bendery, 2014). As former AIPAC foreign policy director Steve Rosen said “A lobby is like a night flower: It thrives in the dark and dies in the light. (Watzal, 2013)” But many hawks believe this strategic emphasis on bipartisanship has been difficult for AIPAC during the Obama Presidency, which they contend has not been as friendly to Israel as many preceding administrations (Glick, 2014).

This difference in strategy represents a challenge for hawkish groups. Though they may agree on opposition to diplomacy, the more aggressive components of the Israel lobby as well as Republicans will likely want to pursue a hard-line strategy of passing legislation/resolution against Iran along party lines with strong Republican support and a few Democrats that could be pressured to support the effort in an election year. For AIPAC, such a strategy would represent a departure from decades of prioritizing bipartisanship. But if it resists the strategy employed by those hard-line groups, it may be exposed to charges of over-aggressiveness, which would be especially damaging when they are being accused militarism on a policy level.

AIPAC's call for a delay on the Kirk-Menendez bill's vote should not be interpreted as a surrender but rather a tactical withdrawal. Shortly after it became clear that new sanctions were not politically feasible, the focus of those who supported the sanctions shifted to the notion of introducing a non-binding resolution. As early as December of last year Senator Menendez said that he would consider drafting a non-binding resolution that would look to the nuclear final agreement and allow the Senate to have a hand in molding that agreement. “I'm beginning to think... that maybe what the Senate needs to do is define the end game and at least what it finds as acceptable as the final status,” said Menendez to US officials who testified on the Iran deal before the Senate Banking committee.

“Because I’m getting nervous about what I perceive will be acceptable to [the administration] as the final status versus what ...the Congress might view as acceptable,” he added (Foroohar, 2013).

Though resolution in question has not yet been formally introduced, one need only look to two months before this point to see what the contours of such a resolution would be. In December, while the new Iran sanctions bill had yet to be introduced, two Republicans, Majority Leader Eric Cantor and Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce along with their Democratic counterparts Steny Hoyer and Elliot Engle introduced a non-binding resolution in the House of Representatives that they claimed would add the input of Congress to help mold the final agreement (Alberta, Kaper, 2013). The resolution they drafted claimed that sanctions are the only reason Iran is willing to negotiate and that it is US policy that no country has the right to enrich. The resolution called on Iran to “suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities” and allow for inspections of "all suspect sites, including military facilities, and full access to all Iranian personnel, scientists, and technicians associated with Iran's nuclear program. (Hudson, Trindle, 2013)" The resolution goes on to become a grab bag for any gripes and complaint the Congressmen have against Iran and would like to see addressed in the context of the negotiations. They make a number of claims against Iran involving international agreements and resolutions as well as human rights. They call Iran a state sponsor of terror and demand American citizens who they claim are “unjustly detained in Iran (Hudson, Trindle, 2013)” to be released, including Robert Levinson who was recently revealed to be a CIA operative.

The purpose of the resolution was to allow Cantor and the House Republican leadership, who have repeatedly criticized the idea of diplomatic conflict resolution between Iran and the US in general, to look for ways to express opposition to negotiations that President Obama is pursuing and to put obstacles in its path. Many of the demands made regarding the Iranian nuclear program contradict the

positions of the Obama Administrations and the many non-nuclear issues raised have never been discussed by the President in the context of these negotiations. The resolution would create the strictest possible parameters for the American negotiators to the point that it would either significantly harm sensitive international negotiations or derail the process all together.

That resolution eventually lost Democratic support under heavy pressure from the White House and was abandoned by the Republicans in favor of the new sanctions legislation. However, Members of the House involved with crafting the new resolution discussed in recent days have already indicated their interest in many of the provisions of the previous resolution. “I want this administration to know that the Congress believes in dismantling, removing and stopping (Zengerle, 2014)” the Iranian nuclear program said Senator Lindsey Graham, a noted Senate hawk.

In an opinion article published in The New York Times on February 21st, AIPAC leaders Michael Kessem and Lee Rosenberg expressed support for a new resolution, stating that “We strongly believe that the assertion by Congress of its historic role in foreign policy can, in fact, complement and enhance the administration’s efforts by forcing Iran to recognize the stark implications of intransigence. The president should welcome such congressional initiatives, which would actually strengthen, not weaken, the hand of his administration in forthcoming negotiations. Thus we urge Congress to outline for Iran the acceptable terms of a final accord. This must include, at a minimum, the dismantling of its nuclear program, so that Iran has neither a uranium nor a plutonium pathway to a nuclear weapon. (Kessem, Rosenberg, 2014)” They also reasserted their support for new sanctions legislation, indicating that they would like to revisit the matter if political circumstances were to change.

IV. The New Challenges of the Lobby

Lobby groups have a long and rich history in American politics and

there are lobbyists representing virtually every special interest and position in the nation. The representing of the interests of countries in Washington is traditionally the role of the embassies of countries, but over one hundred foreign countries now rely on lobbyists to protect and promote their nations interest's before the US government. As Newhouse notes, the "subculture of public relations and law firms that do this kind of work reflects a steady decline and privatization of diplomacy – with an increasing impact on how the United States conducts its own foreign policy (Newhouse, 2009)."

On the domestic policy front, many policy battles in Congress are often the interplay of those interest groups and the outcome will largely be dictated by their respective power and influence, as well as their standing with members of Congress and the public. Every lobby group has a counterweight in the world of domestic policy. Religious group clash with women's right groups, business with labor, and so on. But on foreign policy this is not always the case. On the matter of Middle East policy there is simply no other lobby group of note in the field. There is no significant Arab or Persian lobby groups. Ones that exist either focus on rights of Diaspora communities inside the U.S. and don't concern themselves with foreign policy, or are not organizationally developed enough to even compete (Mearsheimer, Walt, 2009, 141-146). However, in this case the lobby might for the first time in recent memory have to engage a counterweight. Not in the form of a fellow mighty lobby apparatus, but rather, it would have to confront the collective combat wariness and new found understanding of the follies of war by the American people. The American people, aware of the toll of these conflicts both in terms of cost and lives have become less interested in military engagement around the world. These conflicts have also taken much longer than anticipated. The Afghanistan engagement was considered all but over by the Bush Administration before the invasion of Iraq began in 2003 and the Iraq war itself was said to be a short term and inexpensive effort by the architects of the war when it began. Secretary of

Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke of the length of US military operations in Iraq in February of 2003. He said “it is unknowable how long that conflict will last. It could last six days, six weeks. I doubt six months” (Page, 2003).

After over a decade of war, the war weariness of the public is apparent to doves and hawks alike. But the lessons learned during this conflict might be even more material to the prospect of future American military engagement and the outlook for public support for such actions. For years, stories of American soldiers being injured and kills by undetectable improvised explosive devices (IED) and overwhelmed at forward operating bases in the remote treacherous mountain ranges of Afghanistan (where close air support can be difficult) have been repeated in the American media.

These stories demonstrate at the micro level what the larger chronicle of these two wars, now the two longest in American history, show more broadly: That overwhelming American technological, logistical, training, and intelligence superiority does not necessarily translate into the US military being able to dictate terms on the battlefield, and that it is particularly vulnerable to asymmetrical methods of warfare. Also, that while military and civilian leaders may advertise a military action as being short term and limited with “no boots on the ground”, the ability and even willingness of those leaders to stay true to those promises depends on many unpredictable variants, in particular the reaction of the attacked. These lessons are likely more consequential to the new American attitude on war than simple fatigue. With the palpable suspicion of military options on the left and the rising paleo-conservative faction on the right that has railed against military adventurism and sought deep reductions in defense spending, as well as the nation’s bleak fiscal outlook, selling a new war the American people is significantly harder than it was a decade ago.

Over the past several months, AIPAC has confronted, for the first time ever, a broad coalition of forces: the coming of age of

progressive Zionists like the moderate J Street lobby and writers like Peter Beinart who give voice to broad cross sections of the American Jewish community – perhaps a majority – that support a more conciliatory path forward and a small but effective Iranian American group, National Iranian American Council, led by Trita Parsi, that managed to tap into an American longing for a reset in Iran – US relations in the wake of a more courtly and diplomatic posture from Tehran. The Obama Administration's efforts have also been effective, Scott McConnell, founding editor of The American Conservative magazine, reviewed the White House's performance by saying that the Administration "was precise in its messaging, never overstating the prospects of diplomatic success or what could be achieved (even if some observers believe that Obama is aiming eventually for a major diplomatic realignment that brings Iran as a Shia power into the coalition against Sunni extremism, al-Qaeda and its allies.)"

When the US government assessed that President Bashar Asad of Syria had used chemical weapons against his own people during that nation's ongoing civil war, therefore crossing a red line as laid out by President Obama, plans to use military force were announced. The Administration immediately faced strong public disapproval and decided to seek legitimacy by receiving authorization from Congress. By the time a diplomatic solution made a vote authorizing the use of force unnecessary, congressional observers had outlined how difficult getting such a resolution passed would have been (Jaffe, 2013). Most Democrats had remained undecided, they did not wish to harm the President's credibility by voting against him but they faced steadfast resistance from the voting public in their Congressional districts. The Republicans were overwhelmingly opposed (Landler, Thee-Brenan, 2013). Belated efforts by the Israel lobby to support the war effort seem to be largely ignored by lawmakers.

This demonstrates the difficult atmosphere that would be faced in achieving public support for war. However, that is not to say that the prospects of military actions against Iran would be met with the



exact same level of resistance. Part of the reason for the strong opposition involved the fact that American action in Syria was described as a humanitarian effort, not a necessary action in the face of a clear and present danger to America. Tens of thousands of Syrians had been killed during the conflict and the specter of a state using weapons of mass destruction against his own people cannot be responded to with silence, the administration argued (Sanchez, 2013). Presumably, if Syria had presented a danger to US national security, as many Americans believe a nuclear capable Iran does, a greater action imperative would exist.

AIPAC, in what was considered controversial by some of its supporters, decided to actively support the strike on Syria. They dispatched 200 advocates to set up hundreds of meetings with members of Congress to lobby in favor of war with Syria in what senior AIPAC officials called a “full court press.” From the beginning it was clear that their support for war against Syria had more to do with Iran. A senior AIPAC official speaking to the Daily Beast blog said that the organization worries about Iran being emboldened if the US does not deliver on its threats. “We see a direct link to this vote and dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue,” this official said. “Our view is that if this vote goes down, it will be devastating to American credibility” (Lake, 2013). But many insiders said AIPAC’s usual bare-knuckle tactics were lacking in this case. “Believe me, I have been around here when AIPAC was really putting the pressure on, and this isn’t one of those times,” said Howard Fineman, the editorial director of the Huffington Post. Senate Staffers claimed that they sense in Washington was that AIPAC was not involved because of its own beliefs but rather to bolster its relationship with the Obama Administrations (Wilkie, 2013).

Since the attempts to derailing the legislation failed, opponents of the diplomatic process have been left without a clear path to stop the final agreement and their efforts have taken on a more ad hoc nature. Two main tracks for their expression of this opposition have

been the public criticism of the specifics of the process by legislators – as well as writers and opinion makers – and the targeting of President Rouhani. Throughout the last few months, members of Congress have routinely raised objections through the drafting of public letters and the holding of Foreign Policy Committee meetings in both the House and the Senate severely critical of both what they consider the weakness of the Obama administration in negotiating with Iran as well as the offers and compromises reportedly proposed. In a letter to the President Obama first leaked to the conservative Israeli newspaper, the Jerusalem Post, House Foreign Relations leader Engel and Royce once again seek to impose pressure on the administration to take a tougher line in the talks. They outlined what they consider “minimum acceptable terms” for the deal and demanded that the final product face a vote in Congress (Letter to President Obama, 2014) – one that almost no expert believes it could survive.

Crucially, they also claimed that the President’s stated pledge to eliminate “nuclear-related sanctions” in connection to these talks – as oppose to other sanctions imposed in connection to other criticisms of Iran – is legally dubious. The letter states that “the concept of an exclusively defined ‘nuclear-related’ sanction on Iran does not exist in US law”. And additionally that “almost all sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear program are also related to Tehran’s advancing ballistic missile program, intensifying support for international terrorism, and other unconventional weapons programs.” (Letter to President Obama, 2014) Meaning for any sanctions to be removed, all of these issues should have to be addressed. The letter carried the signatures of 342 members of Congress.

Another letter drafted by the same two Congressmen, and this time signed by 354 members of the House, to Secretary Kerry protesting in their words, “Iran’s refusal to cooperate with investigators from the International Atomic Energy Agency.” The letter goes on to say that this cooperation should be considered

necessary for a deal and ominously concludes that “the only reasonable conclusion for its stonewalling of international investigators is that Tehran does indeed have much to hide. (Letter to Secretary Kerry, 2014)” The language of the letter was to some extent tempered with an endorsement of diplomacy as the ideal path to conflict resolution, presumably to gather more signatories. The purpose of this letter could be to force a greater focus towards this thorny issue by the State Department and create a new prerequisite for a final status agreement, but also to attract media attention towards this difficult disagreement between Iran and the UN’s nuclear watchdog. Much of the focus of hawkish critics in the media has been on several events and arrests in Iran that they deem human rights violations and specifically blaming President Rouhani as the perpetrator of these acts with headlines such as “Make no mistake, Mr. Obama, Iran's Rouhani is no 'moderate’” (Cooper, Brackman, 2013), “Three Reasons to be Skeptical about Hassan Rouhani” (Francis, 2013), and “Rouhani’s Republic of fear” (Berman, 2014), which in part compares the President to Saddam Hussein.

The special focus on President Rouhani regarding these rights issues comes even though he is often a major voice in Iran arguing for a reform of many of the related policies. The authors of these articles also almost never take aim at other entities that would have more direct control over these issues. This focus on Iranian domestic issues and the specific targeting of President Rouhani implies a strategy aiming to discredit the President in the eyes of the American public for he is the public face of Iranian diplomacy and outreach towards the P5+1 countries. As the Wall Street Journal editorial board put it, “Perhaps a regime, and a president, that can brutalize political dissidents as a matter of routine can prove reasonable at the nuclear negotiating table. We wouldn't count on it, and neither should the West. (Editorial board, 2014)”

Israel has also not sat idly during this period. In early September, Israeli cabinet officials led a delegation from Tel Aviv to

Washington to lobby for America taking a “tough line” on Iran (Williams, 2014). Netanyahu during his UN address compared Iran to the so called Islamic State (Daesh) and demanded that Iran to be barred from becoming a threshold state which he said would involve Iran being deprived of any enrichment capability or equipment. He also expressed this message during his meeting with President Obama and his extensive media tour while in America (Reider, 2014).

Conclusion

The long history of lobbying in the United States even on matters of foreign policy and national security will continue to be a major factor defining US policy towards the Middle East, and the unique vulnerability of Congress to these influences will continue to be a challenge for the Obama Administration. There is a long established rightward inclination of most pro-Israel groups and the hard-line leadership. Israel and the lobby are now concerned that the diplomatic initiative by the United States would soften Washington’s commitments to addressing Israel’s own grievances towards Iran – separate from the nuclear file, and that a new *détente* between Iran and the US could marginalize Israel. Moving forward, the debate in Washington will likely continue with the same level of tension and if/when a final agreement is reached between Iran and the P5+1 countries, an even larger battle will likely ensue as administration officials will face an uphill climb to see Congress repeal sanctions and help them deliver on their promises.

Most of the pro-Israel groups in particular AIPAC, long considered the model for pressure groups in Washington and a model for lobbying Congress, will continue to find ways to undermine the diplomatic efforts in progress while facing unprecedented challenges from a new coalition of progressive groups and influencers who have a new appreciation for the follies of war and a desire to reset US relations with Iran 35 years after diplomatic relations between the two countries were broken. Meanwhile, these groups as well as the



Christian Zionist and neoconservative elements will likely unite with the Republicans against any final agreement with Iran. The President and leading Democrats in Congress will likely have to continue the difficult task of blocking and obstructing these efforts.

For the Time being, they have largely relented in trying to derail the negotiations with legislation in Congress but have instead engaged in an effort to set up their arguments for opposing any eventual final status agreement by arguing for a series of minimum terms for the deal, almost none of which would perceivably be acceptable to Tehran, demanding an increasing number of prerequisites for a final deal, and tarnishing the public face of diplomacy with Iran in the West, President Hassan Rouhani.

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لابی اسرائیل در آمریکا و مذاکرات ایران و گروه ۵+۱

علیرضا احمدی

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کارشناسی ارشد، سیتی یونیورسیتی نیویورک

لابی اسرائیل در واشنگتن شبکه گسترده‌ای شامل گروه‌های اجتماعی و سازمان‌های بزرگی است که برای اعمال نفوذ بر سیاست‌های آمریکا در مورد خاورمیانه می‌کوشند. موفقیت و دسترسی آنها به سیاست‌گذاران آمریکایی تا حدی است که این گروه‌های فشار به مدلی برای انواع لابی‌ها در واشنگتن تبدیل شده‌اند. در دوره کنونی که یک موضوع بسیار مهم در مورد خاورمیانه، یعنی برنامه هسته‌ای ایران، در دستور کار دولت آمریکا قرار گرفته، این لابی با یکی از بزرگترین چالش‌هایش در دوره فعالیتش مواجه شده است. نیل به موافقتنامه موقت ژنو و ضرب الاجل سوم آذر ۱۳۹۳ برای نیل به یک موافقتنامه جامع، موجب شکستگی مباحث گسترده‌ای در مورد رویکرد دیپلماتیک باراک اوباما در مورد ایران و احتمال کاهش تنش بین دو کشور شده است. در این مباحث، گروه‌های قدرتمند محافظه کار، تعدادی از اعضای مهم حزب دموکرات و لابی اسرائیل از یک سو و کاخ سفید، گروه‌های ترقی خواه و مقامات ارشد حزب دموکراتیک در مجلس سنا از سوی دیگر در برابر هم قرار گرفته‌اند. در این مقاله، نگاهی خیلی گذرا به تاریخ لابی اسرائیل در آمریکا افکنده شده و سپس، بطور خلاصه، تکامل لابی اسرائیل و عواملی که در طول زمان آن را به نیرویی راستگرا و تندرو تبدیل کرده‌اند، بررسی شده است. تجزیه و تحلیل تاکتیک‌ها و راهبردهای این لابی، به ویژه کمیته روابط عمومی آمریکا و اسرائیل (ایپک)، برای تحت تاثیر قرار دادن دولت ایالات متحده و اخلاف در روند دیپلماتیک جاری بین کشورهای ۵+۱ و ایران در ادامه آورده شده است. در نهایت، به چالش‌ها و خطراتی پرداخته شده که این گروه‌های تندرو طرفدار اسرائیل در بلند مدت با پیگیری این سیاست‌ها و دشمنی با گروه‌های مترقی و طرفدار صلح موجب خواهند شد.

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کلیدواژه‌ها: لابی اسرائیل در واشنگتن، ایپک، کنگره آمریکا، تحریم علیه ایران