Israel's merchants of influence

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Ben Duncan in Washington DC  Last Modified: 29 Jul 2004 16:00 GMT

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, bills itself as not only a pro-Israel lobby, but as a group that is consistently ranked as the most influential foreign-policy lobbying organisation on Capitol Hill.

Many Middle East analysts in Washington seem to agree.

By almost all accounts, AIPAC is the vanguard of what is widely considered to be a well-oiled network of pro-Israel interest groups and thinktanks with enormous influence in Congress and electoral politics.

By comparison, Arab and Muslim American political groups are still in an "embryonic" stage of development, as one expert put it.

They have neither the financial resources, the congressional contacts nor the grassroots network in place to compete with the more established pro-Israel lobbies led by AIPAC, many experts say.

"In terms of influence, [Arab and Muslim lobbying] pales in comparison," says Samer Shehata, a professor of contemporary Arab studies at Georgetown University who specialises in US policy vis-a-vis the Middle East.

Political infancy

Few representatives from major Arab and Muslim advocacy groups would dispute this point.

"Obviously there is a disparity," says Rabiah Ahmed, a spokeswoman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). "The American Muslim community, in terms of its political status, is still in its infant stage."

While many experts dismiss the notion that the Jewish American community is driving US foreign policy in the Middle East, specifically with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they say the ability of AIPAC to coordinate fundraising activities and exert public pressure on members of Congress is substantial compared to Arab and Muslim organisations.

"They are one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington, period," said MJ Rosenberg, a former editor of AIPAC's Near East Report and now director of policy
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Rabiah Ahmed, Council on American-Islamic Relations spokesperson

analysis for the Israel Policy Forum.

Significant voice

Israel Policy Forum is a pro-Israel Jewish organisation that supported the Oslo Accords and the Bill Clinton administration’s policies of greater engagement in the peace process.

Rosenberg describes AIPAC as a group that advocates unfettered US support for the platform of the Sharon government.

An AIPAC spokesman did not return a phone call for this story.

Although AIPAC is not a political-action committee and does not officially endorse candidates, its ability to persuade other pro-Israel organisations and individuals to contribute money to political campaigns has given it a significant voice in Washington, according to people familiar with its activities.

From a fundraising standpoint, the pro-Israel lobby vastly outspends the competition.

Thus far in the 2004 election cycle, pro-Israel groups and individuals have donated more than $4.7m to various candidates and political parties, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a watchdog group in Washington that tracks campaign-finance figures.

More than $3m of that went to Democrats and $1.7m to Republicans. Comparatively speaking, Arab and Muslims donors are not even on the radar screen.

"There is far less money coming from Arab and Muslim interests," said Steven Weiss, a CRP spokesman.

Fight for influence

Not that the money is not there. "I think the resources are definitely there in the Muslim American community," CAIR's Ahmed says. "It's just a matter of convincing people that it's a good use of their money."

Fundraising, however, is only one aspect of the fight for influence in Washington.

Pro-Israel groups such as AIPAC who support a hardline, pro-Sharon approach to the US role in the peace process, have proved to be very effective at promulgating their message on Capitol Hill, many experts say.

So much so that a vote against legislation supported by AIPAC is viewed by some politicians as a potentially fatal career move, according to Rosenberg.

"I think that members of Congress don't want to get on the wrong side of a very powerful constituent group," he said.

Routine measures

Congressional resolutions expressing support for Israel on the peace process almost always pass with overwhelming support.

A recent Senate resolution co-sponsored by the Senate majority and minority leaders, Republican Bill Frist of Tennessee and Tom Daschle of South Dakota, endorsed the Bush administration's policy that said, among other things, "it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final-status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the
The ICJ ruling on Israel’s barrier was criticised by the US House.

"The sort of overall feeling of some members is it’s not in the US national interest, nor in Israel’s interest, to keep pumping out these very one-sided resolutions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," the Democratic staffer said.

Closing the gap

The challenge, he said, lies in convincing voters and large donors that a "no" vote on legislation supporting Israel is not an anti-Israel vote.

"My boss believes very strongly that Israel has the right to build this security fence," he said. "They should just build it on the green line. I don't think it was an anti-Israel vote in any way, shape or form."

While the staffer said AIPAC is "an excellent lobby group" in every way possible, Arab and Muslim organisations are beginning to close the gap "a little bit".

"Frankly on [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict], Arab-American constituents have a certain amount of influence," he said.

Ahmed of CAIR says Muslim-American groups are making headway as well. "Certain people in Congress have welcomed us and been receptive to our efforts," she said.

"Five or ten years from now, there will be a significant difference in terms of the amount of influence we have."

Until then, however, the pro-Israel interest groups can be expected to dominate the Washington lobbying scene.

Source: Aljazeera