

Opinion: Guest Essay

AIPAC Has Failed

By Eric Alterman

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In December 2018, Representative Nancy Pelosi made a pledge to a largely Jewish audience: If the U.S. Capitol “crumbled to the ground, the one thing that would remain is our commitment to our aid — and I don’t even call it aid — our cooperation — with Israel. That’s fundamental.” That commitment apparently faltered in mid-July, when Ms. Pelosi voted with over a hundred of her colleagues to slash U.S. aid to the Jewish state.

Unconditional support for Israel was once as common in Congress as the flag pin on a senator’s lapel, largely thanks to the bipartisan efforts of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Today, in the aftermath of Israel’s bloody war on Gaza, launched in reaction to Hamas’s brutal attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, Israel has reached near-pariah status globally and domestically. “The condemnation of what Bibi Netanyahu is doing is almost universal” within the Democratic Party, California Governor Gavin Newsom [told PBS News](#) in September, speaking of Israel’s actions in Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank. Furthermore, he said, these days the party has a “pretty overwhelming opposition to accepting money from AIPAC.”

The age of AIPAC’s unmatched political power and influence is at an end. Rejection may be the most bipartisan act the group inspires. In the U.S. Senate race in Michigan, allies of the Republican candidate Mike Rogers [reportedly asked](#) AIPAC not to advertise on his behalf. AIPAC and affiliated groups invested nearly \$30 million in advertising during the summer’s Democratic primaries to help Representative Haley Stevens in her bid for the Senate nomination in Michigan. During that race, her opponent Dr. Abdul El-Sayed bragged, “AIPAC has called me the single most dangerous candidate in this race.” Dr. El-Sayed, of course, won.

Despite the profound transformation in how the world sees AIPAC’s sole client, and its increasing marginalization in American politics, the group not only hasn’t acknowledged the change, but it operates as though Israel were as popular as it was in 1991, when the Jewish state enjoyed a nearly 80 percent favorable rating among Americans. According to [a](#)

[2026 NBC News poll](#), just 32 percent of American voters now view Israel positively; among Democrats, that number falls to just 13 percent.

What's more, Israel has lost even many American Jews. According to a 2025 [Washington Post poll](#), 61 percent of American Jews said they believe Israel committed war crimes in Gaza and some 40 percent believe Israel has committed genocide. Another recent poll [found](#) nearly half of American Jews under the age of 35 believing that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be solved by creating a single, binational state, an idea considered to be fringe since the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said [advocated it](#) in 1999.

Support for Israel is now a millstone around the neck of Democratic politicians and a source of profound inner conflict for American Jews who seek to balance their Zionism with their liberalism. Many of the Jews who continue to define their identities via their support for Israel are, today, most likely calculating the cost of nursing homes and retirement communities. Younger Jews, like [most young Americans](#) of virtually all religions and ethnicities, increasingly express negative views about the Jewish state.

The question facing AIPAC is not simply whether it can find a way to adjust to this new political world but, more fundamentally, whether it can even see the changes demanded by these new circumstances?

AIPAC was founded by I.L. “Si” Kenen, a former lobbyist for the Israeli foreign ministry, in the wake of a 1953 Israeli military massacre of 69 Palestinians in a village called Qibya. Mr. Kenen suggested to friends and colleagues that they create a new organization, initially called the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, to make Israel's case whenever circumstances made it necessary. The U.S. State Department consistently [tried to pressure Israel](#) to take a more generous attitude toward the roughly 750,000 Palestinians it had expelled before and during its war of independence — what Palestinians call the Nakba, or “catastrophe”— but were stymied in part by the political opposition AIPAC's predecessor helped engender.

AIPAC's goal in those early years was to promote the interests of an Israel then understood to be a young and scrappy David surrounded by a Goliath of hostile Arab nations. Its message was straightforward and bipartisan: As a democracy in the Middle East, Israel was morally deserving of generous American financial, military and diplomatic support.

For the United States, that support could be expected to pay strategic dividends, both in the region, where America would gain a reliable ally, and in domestic politics, where Israel was extremely popular with voters, pretty much regardless of religion. By 1963, Senator J. William Fulbright, then the chair of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called AIPAC “the most powerful and efficient foreign policy lobby in American politics.”

In the early 1980s, AIPAC's executive director Thomas Dine, a former aide to Ted Kennedy, set out to expand the lobby into a coast-to-coast operation comparable to the National Rifle Association or the AARP, with a national membership made up of wealthy funders as well as American Jews who increasingly defined their religious and political identities through support for Israel. Both groups could be relied upon to call, write and, if necessary, threaten senators and representatives. Relying on a mix of the extremely wealthy and the extremely committed, Mr. Dine [increased](#) AIPAC's annual budget to \$15 million from some \$1.7 million. By the end of the century, it was \$50 million, with nine regional offices and 10 satellite offices. At the same time, U.S. public spending on military aid to Israel roughly doubled.

AIPAC also began to woo candidates and congressional staff and provided each with language for legislation and talking points. It funded luxury junkets and met frequently with reporters and editors to try to shape the narratives about Israel and the Middle East that reached the public. Rabbis were offered ready-to-use pro-Israel sermons.

Still, for many years, AIPAC did not endorse specific candidates or dispense funds directly to them. Instead, it merely made sure that certain candidates it approved of, from either party, were well-funded, and that those it did not were not.

AIPAC's role started to shift in 1993 with the resignation of Mr. Dine and his replacement by a more conservative set of board members and top executives. When former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin attempted to make peace with the Palestinians in the early 1990s, AIPAC only grudgingly supported the cause. While its leaders did not openly undermine the peace process, they did independently lobby for legislation that complicated the negotiations, such as a bill calling on the Clinton administration to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

After the 1995 assassination of Rabin and the subsequent collapse of the peace process, AIPAC resumed its steady march rightward. The lobby also began to embrace the support of far-right Christian Zionists. At a public interview in 2021, Ron Dermer, a former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. and a close ally of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, [said](#) "the backbone of Israel's support in the United States is the evangelical Christians" rather than American Jews, who he said were "disproportionately among [Israel's] critics." AIPAC followed suit.

The specific challenges the organization faces today can be traced to Mr. Netanyahu's decision to appear before Congress in March 2015 at the invitation of Representative John Boehner, then the Republican speaker of the House. In an unusual move for a foreign ally, Mr. Netanyahu publicly aligned himself with the Republican Party's attempts to undermine

President Obama, a Democrat and a leader who happened to be supported by a majority of American Jews. In his address, Mr. Netanyahu denounced the Obama administration's diplomatic efforts toward the nuclear disarmament in Iran, better known as the Iran deal. AIPAC and an affiliate spent [nearly \\$30 million](#) on a failed campaign to prevent the deal's passage.

AIPAC's increasing identification with both the methods and the goals of the Republican Party has become ever more evident over the past decade. In early 2020, it produced a Facebook ad [accusing](#) "radicals in the Democratic Party" of "pushing their antisemitic and anti-Israel policies down the throats of the American people."

AIPAC's annual conference was once a way station for all presidential hopefuls, but in 2019 Senators Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris, as well as former Representative Beto O'Rourke, among others, all declined to attend, a decision that would have been hard to imagine just four years earlier.

In December 2021, AIPAC created a super PAC that also swung right. The group immediately amassed an enormous war chest and [announced endorsements](#) of over a hundred Republicans, many of whom had voted against certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election. By 2022, its high-profile donors included conservative Republican [billionaires such as](#) the Home Depot founder Bernie Marcus and the hedge fund manager Paul Singer.

Using right-wing Republican money to defeat liberal candidates in Democratic primaries exposed AIPAC to considerable anger on the part of progressives, and further alienated the lobby from the mainstream opinions of American Jews. This was especially true of young American Jews whose views of Israel had been shaped by an ever more oppressive occupation of the West Bank and Gaza well before Oct. 7, and the mass killing of Palestinians that followed in its wake.

As a result, the group's electoral strategy has begun to backfire. In February, AIPAC's super PAC [dropped](#) \$2.3 million into a New Jersey special primary election to try to defeat former Representative Tom Malinowski for what it saw as his wobbly support for Israel. Mr. Malinowski lost — but not to the more pro-Israel candidate. He was ousted by a candidate to his left: Analilia Mejia, a former aide to Bernie Sanders who has indicated she believes that Israel's actions in Gaza amount to genocide.

In Illinois, AIPAC-aligned super PACs [invested](#) more than \$5 million in an effort to thwart Daniel Biss in his Democratic primary race for Congress in Illinois. Mr. Biss is the [grandson](#) of Holocaust survivors, and his mother is Israeli — but he supports limiting arms sales to

Israel and recognizing a Palestinian state. When Mr. Biss won his race, he [boasted](#) about his willingness to call “AIPAC out clearly and repeatedly.”

Even establishment Democrats such as Cory Booker and Ruben Gallego have sworn off AIPAC money, no doubt cognizant that public association with the lobby these days can turn a campaign radioactive. Many Democrats who support Israel feel compelled to resist Mr. Netanyahu and publicly criticize his government’s behavior — and to vocally and unequivocally reject the lobby’s support. AIPAC’s influence in future Democratic Party politics will likely be limited to the role of either boogeyman or secret spoiler.

By sticking to its long-held, inflexible, “Israel right or wrong” line and allying itself with a party whose views on race, immigration, economics — and, these days, democracy — are anathema to most American Jews, AIPAC has effectively forfeited the role it enjoyed in the days when Israel was a genuinely bipartisan cause. As America heads into the midterms, it is clear the lobby has all but lost the Democrats and may be skating on ever thinner ice with Republicans as well.

There remains, however, an opportunity for AIPAC to play a positive and, no less important, honest role in American politics.

While no doubt a traditional flavor of antisemitism occasionally attaches to pro-Palestinian arguments on the left, more recently it has been the right’s increasing tolerance of widespread antisemitism among its most influential voices — from Tucker Carlson to Candace Owens to Nick Fuentes — that has morphed into a particularly fervent form of anti-Zionism. MAGA anger over Iran (and Israel’s role in the war) has hardened that space.

Were AIPAC to commit itself to the battle against this fusion of old-fashioned right-wing antisemitism with its new, virulent anti-Zionism, it could serve the interests of Israel, American Jews and the United States simultaneously. It might also rescue its own reputation in the process.