

**Council for the National Interest (CNI) Public Hearing on Capitol Hill
May 29, 2008
John Mearsheimer's Comments**

“Congress and Israel”

I would like to thank the Council for the National Interest for organizing this event and inviting me to speak along with such distinguished and brave speakers as Uri Avnery, Menachem Klein, and Edward Peck. I would also like to thank all of you for coming out to hear us speak.

It is widely recognized that the US is in serious trouble in the Middle East. Therefore, one would expect Congress to be holding hearings to determine what has gone wrong in that strategically important region, and what might be done to fix the problems we face. In particular, one would expect Congress to examine American policy toward Israel. After all, the US-Israel relationship, to quote from a recent AIPAC press release, “is the keystone of America’s policy in the Middle East.”

But such hearings are not taking place and will not happen in the foreseeable future. We all know the reason why, although few of you will say it publicly. The Israel lobby, which is probably the most powerful interest group in Washington today, and certainly the most influential foreign-policy interest group in American history, will not allow either the House or the Senate to critically examine the “special relationship” between Israel and the US which it has worked long and hard to build. Instead, the lobby demands that legislators support Israel generously and unconditionally, and the lobby usually gets what it wants.

Of course, anyone who says that the Israel lobby profoundly influences US Middle East policy is likely to be called an anti-Semite or some other terrible name. But any fair-minded look at the evidence makes it clear that Alan Dershowitz was correct when he said that “my generation of Jews became part of what is perhaps the most effective lobbying and fund-raising effort in the history of democracy,” and that the prominent pro-Israel journalist Jeffrey Goldberg was

correct when he said AIPAC “is a leviathan among lobbies.” Former Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) surely would not disagree with this assessment. After all, he noted as he was leaving office in 2004, “You can’t have an Israeli policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here.”

Let us consider in more detail how the lobby operates on Capitol Hill. To start, AIPAC scrutinizes almost every candidate running for Congress. Its president, Howard Friedman, told the organization’s members in August 2006, "AIPAC meets with every candidate running for Congress. These candidates receive in-depth briefings to help them completely understand the complexities of Israel's predicament and that of the Middle East as a whole. We even ask each candidate to author a 'position paper' on their views of the US-Israel relationship—so it's clear where they stand on the subject."

AIPAC also closely monitors the voting records of every representative and senator, and then plays a key role in steering campaign contributions to candidates or incumbents who it considers pro-Israel. Those who are seen as hostile to Israel, on the other hand, can expect AIPAC to guide campaign contributions toward their opponents.

The end result of this constant pressure is that few members of Congress are willing to cross the lobby. Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE) put the point well when he recently said that “the political reality is that ... the [Israel] lobby intimidates a lot of people up here.” The success of this intimidation is reflected in votes on matters relating to Israel, which almost always pass with overwhelming support in both the House and the Senate. Journalist Michael Massing reports that a congressional staffer sympathetic to Israel told him that, “We can count on well over half the House – 250 to 300 members – to do reflexively whatever AIPAC wants.” Similarly, Steven Rosen, the former AIPAC official who has been indicted for passing classified government documents to Israel, illustrated AIPAC’s power for Jeffrey Goldberg by putting a napkin in front of him and saying: “In twenty-four hours, we could

have the signatures of seventy senators on this napkin.” As most of you know, these are not idle boasts.

The absence of serious deliberation where Israel is concerned is nicely revealed in a hearing on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process held on February 14, 2007 by the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. The chair of that subcommittee is Gary Ackerman (D-NY), an ardent backer of Israel, while the chair of the larger Committee on Foreign Affairs was the late Tom Lantos (D-CA), who had no rival on Capitol Hill in his devotion to Israel. As one former AIPAC leader put it, Lantos “is true blue and white.”

At the time, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was trying to restart the moribund peace process. The subcommittee sought testimony from three witnesses. Despite some differences on certain policy issues, all three witnesses are central players in the lobby: Martin Indyk, a former AIPAC official and former U.S. Ambassador to Israel who now heads the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, David Makovsky of the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP); and neoconservative pundit Daniel Pipes, who directs the rightwing Middle East Forum (MEF). No critic of Israel, much less a Palestinian or an Arab-American, was brought in to offer alternative views or suggest the United States take a different approach. M.J. Rosenberg, who once worked for AIPAC and is now a key figure with the Israel Policy Forum (IPF), a moderate pro-Israel group that actively supports a two-state solution, summed up the situation nicely: “This was a hearing about two sides of a conflict where only one side was allowed to speak.”

The House held another sham hearing dealing with Israel on December 5, 2007. This time Chairman Lantos brought two witnesses before the House Foreign Affairs Committee to assess the consequences of the recent Annapolis Conference, which aimed to get Israel and the Palestinians talking to each other about settling their differences. The witnesses were Dennis Ross and David Wurmser, both of whom

are fervently pro-Israel, and both of whom have worked at key think tanks in the lobby. Again, no critic of Israel, much less a Palestinian or an Arab-American, was brought in to testify.

Congressman Lantos passed away this past February. But it mattered little for Israel, because his replacement as chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee is Howard Berman (D-CA), who is deeply committed to Israel. Indeed, he said that, “Even before I was a Democrat, I was a Zionist,” and he also said that Israel “is why I went on the Foreign Affairs Committee.” Of course there was never any reason to doubt that a staunch supporter of Israel would chair that important committee. As Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA), another devoted supporter of Israel, said in the wake of the 2006 election, “There will be some Democratic chairmen who may not share all my views . . . on Israel [but] . . . they will not be chairing committees dealing with Israel and the Middle East.”

It is important to emphasize that not everyone in the lobby is Jewish, and some of Israel’s strongest supporters on Capitol Hill are Christian Zionists like former House Speaker Richard Arme y, who said in September 2002 that “My No. 1 priority in foreign policy is to protect Israel.” One would think that the top priority for any US representative would be to “protect America,” but that is not what Arme y said. Regarding Tom DeLay, Arme y’s successor as speaker, Morton Klein, the president of ZOA, said that, “He cared about Israel in every fiber of his being.” DeLay himself said that he was “an Israeli at heart.”

The way that Congress deals with Israel is not good for America in two important respects.

First, it makes for bad foreign policy. The United States is in deep trouble in the Middle East in good part because of its special relationship with Israel, which enjoys unquestioned support here on Capitol Hill. It would make much more sense for the United States to treat Israel like a normal country, to treat it the way it treats other

democracies like Britain, France, Germany, and India. Israel, after all, sometimes pursues misguided policies, like all countries, including the US. And Israel's interests, like any other country's interests, are not always the same as America's. Thus it makes no sense to back the Jewish state no matter what it does. But that is what Congress insists on, mainly because so many of its members fear the lobby. Of course, that fear is not irrational; but is also not in the US national interest.

Second, the way that Congress relates to Israel is not healthy for the American political system. The founding fathers purposely set up a system that encouraged and facilitated open debate on important and controversial issues. They not only believed that this is what democracy is all about, but also that serious deliberation maximized the prospects that we would formulate smart policies. Congress, of course, is supposed to be a critical deliberative forum. In fact, Congress rarely shrinks from confronting contentious issues and competing viewpoints are usually easy to find. Whether the issue is abortion, arms control, affirmative action, gay rights, the environment, trade policy, health care, immigration, or welfare, there is almost always a lively debate on Capitol Hill. But where Israel is concerned, potential critics fall silent and there is hardly any debate at all.

One might respond that there is little criticism of Israel in Congress because an overwhelming majority of its members are deeply committed to Israel, as are their constituents. Thus, they do not hesitate to provide Israel with generous and unconditional support. This line of argument, however, fails the common sense test. If there was an abundance of support for Israel in the public and in Congress, there would be no need for a lobby, especially one that feels compelled to vet every potential representative and senator, and then closely monitor those who get elected. The real situation here on Capitol Hill was nicely summed up by a senator, speaking on condition of anonymity, to a *Washington Post* reporter in 1991: "My colleagues think AIPAC is a very, very powerful organization that is ruthless, and very, very alert. Eighty percent of the senators here roll their eyes on some of the votes. They

know that what they're doing isn't what they really believe is right, but why fight on a situation where they're liable to get beat up on?"

One might also respond to my analysis by arguing that interest group politics have been at the heart of the American political system since the country's founding and that the Israel lobby simply operates more effectively than other interest groups. It is a leviathan, so the argument goes, but there is nothing wrong with that. There is no question that pro-Israel individuals and organizations act for the most part like other interest groups. Nevertheless, it is not good for our body politic for any interest group – especially one that cares greatly about a foreign country – to have so much influence on Capitol Hill.

For example, it is not good for our democracy to have AIPAC vetting every prospective congressperson to make sure that he or she has politically correct views on Israel and the US-Israeli relationship. It is not good for our democracy to have AIPAC determining our Israel policy or to have the key foreign policy committees in the House chaired by committed American Zionists like Tom Lantos and Howard Berman, who only welcome testimony by individuals who are deeply committed to Israel and who believe that what is good for Israel is good for the United States and visa versa.

In short, when it comes to Israel, Congress is not doing its job, and for the good of our country, this problem needs to be fixed. If the founding fathers were alive today, they would be appalled to see how much power a lobby with an abiding commitment to another country has over Congress as well as most other important institutions in our society. This would certainly hold true for George Washington, who warned in his famous farewell address about the dangers that would arise if the US had a "passionate attachment" for another country. It would behoove all members of Congress to take a few minutes from their busy schedules and read Washington's farewell address and then reflect on what it says about the special relationship that the US has with Israel. Thank you.