

# How Does Congress Shape the Middle East; and How Does AIPAC Shape Congress?

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Israel's Influence: Good or Bad for America?

National Press Club, Washington, DC

March 18, 2016

# Brief comments re. methodology

- I like to learn via interviews
  - Best way to learn how, why “insiders” think and act
- Congressional staffers, promised anonymity, seemed a logical choice
  - House staffers – random sample (130+)
  - Senate staffers – entered all 100 offices (30+)
  - A handful of House and Senate members
- Dozens of interviews with special interest groups, lobbyists and foreign ambassadors

# Overall Focus of Book: What Factors Shape Congresspersons' Behavior Re. Middle East Policy Making?

- Re. staffers, I wanted to know who they were:
  - How old? Where they had studied? What expertise?
  - How long they'd been on the Hill?
  - What their workloads were like?
  - How they did their jobs?
  - Where they got their information?
  - Which on-Hill and off-Hill actors most influential?
  - **How do their “bosses” arrive at their decisions?**
- No intention to focus on AIPAC, but every single interviewee spoke of AIPAC = It is the “800 lb. gorilla”

# How Does AIPAC Create Its Influence? (A) Electoral Politics Role

- Vetting promising political figures from very early on
  - Municipal candidates in major cities
  - Early “educational” trips by American Israel Education Foundation
- As regards campaign finance = a dicey, hugely important dimension
  - Youngish Jewish-American staffer: “Don’t talk about the money.”
  - But one that can’t be neglected:: “ I need to see your **green side.**”
- With regard to AIPAC’s campaign finance role, AIPAC staff do hook up candidates with campaign donors at their fund raisers
- Relative absence of significant, countervailing influences (until arrival of J Street)

## (B) Sustaining Influence on the Hill

- Structural constraints on the Hill:
  - Staffers' workloads and lack of expertise
- AIPAC better positioned to take advantage of staffers' predicament
  - Staffers learn quickly that AIPAC cannot be ignored
  - AIPAC skillfully uses home-based constituents to maintain regular contact
  - Provides information and policy proposals in timely, digestible manner
  - AIPAC, other lobbyists, seen as potential employer? Don't bite the hand ...
- AIPAC keeps "scorecards" : scoring members' votes. Members warning one another: "This is an AIPAC vote."
- Keeping members of Congress mindful of backlash
  - Direct calls, contacts by AIPAC and/or faithful constituents
  - Contacts by major donors or their agents
- AIPAC goes to great lengths to sustain its image among members of Congress as a lobby not to be crossed
  - "To cross AIPAC would be the 'kiss of death;' it's just not worth it."
  - Incumbent members' fears of being "primaried"
- AIPAC "better" than competing groups, to a great degree, because its human and material resources are huge by comparison – 50 X the personnel; 50 X the \$

# Playing the Game on the Hill: A Tale of “Foxes and Chicken Coops”

- AIPAC’s friends in Congress keep up constant flow of “Dear Colleague” letters, resolutions and bills:
- Influence with party leaderships enables stacking membership of key committees and subcommittees; e.g., on Foreign Affairs; Appropriations
  - Minimum winning coalitions of members with almost, or totally, unshakable commitments to Israel: includes many Jewish American and Christian Evangelical members, and/or “security hawks”
  - For some members, foreign policy is “local politics” re. their constituents
  - Members do not have to recuse themselves = do the bidding of special interests and major donors
- Committee and subcommittee domination very important because of:
  - Control over drafting of legislation
  - Control over selection of Professional Staff Members (PSMs)
  - Bias in recruitment of experts for briefings and hearings (from WINEP, Saban)
  - Other members turn to them for advice on foreign policy, apropos issues
- Party leaderships’ ability to limit time for floor debate; rigging the “rules”

# Is Congress's Role Important?

Some argue that on foreign policy issues, only executive authority is of importance and can always impose its will – e.g., Aaron David Miller has long made this argument

With all due respect, I disagree

The president clearly has tremendous power,  
but Congress is certainly not lacking re. ability to influence foreign relations and foreign affairs

# How Does Congress Shape Forces in the Middle East?

- Congress behaves like a no holds barred racehorse trainer, writing checks that “Bute up” Israel’s military and economy
  - Decades of \$3.2 billion in annual military and economic assistance
  - First Free Trade Agreement (1985) was w/ Israel
  - Congress has defied presidents’ wishes, with both D and R majorities passing legislation against presidents of their own party!
- These factors, *inter alia*, have empowered Israel tremendously, and enabled its leaders to flaunt UN resolutions and international law
- Congress serves as important recruitment channel for presidential candidates
  - So the heavy vetting of individuals, pre- and post-recruitment to Congress, by right-wing pro-Israel forces, has shaped the presidential field
- Foreigners perceive Congress as reflection of US citizens’ views, even though polls show there’s a disparity, so the US’ international reputation is diminished
- Senate control of executive branch ambassadorial and institutional appointments has mobilized bias in a right-wing pro-Israel direction

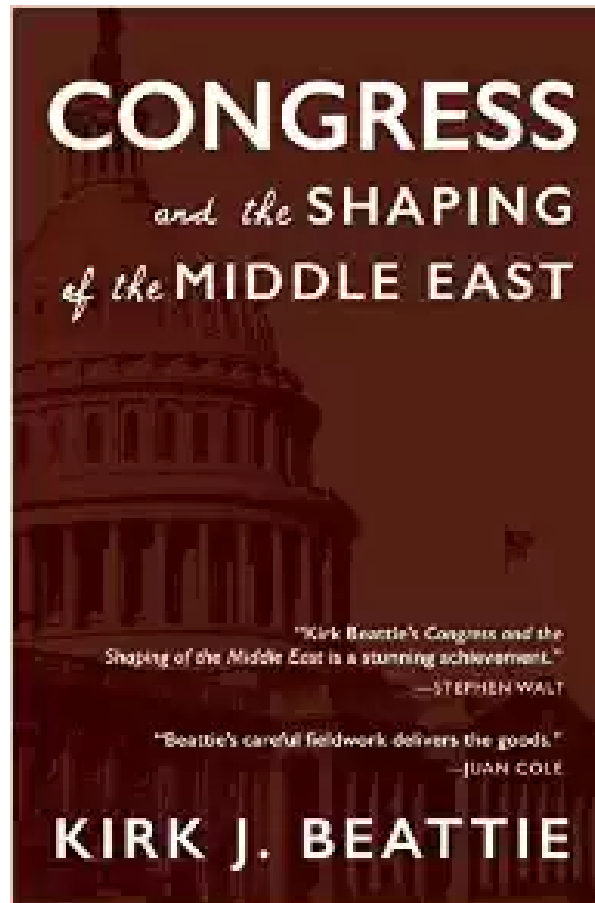


# Influence of Special Interests

- We live in a democracy, but how is it that over 90% of the American people, and POTUS, want gun reform legislation, and ....
- Is this issue area different? More complex? Perhaps yes.
- But AIPAC has been the NRA in this issue area
- AIPAC doesn't win all of its battles; it doesn't "own Congress." But look at its batting average; it's very successful, despite NOT reflecting most Americans' views
- I know much of what I've said is not new, espec. to people in this room, but at a minimum, I think I have documented the behavioral patterns on the Hill, and thereby, put to rest the debate over special interest influence in Middle East affairs in Congress

# And so, in conclusion, is AIPAC's Influence “Bad” for America?

- I learned that AIPAC's influence is damaging to the US in the eyes of many staffers and members of Congress
- I interviewed many Jewish American staffers
  - even some working for right wing members were embarrassed by the power of AIPAC
  - many others were disgusted by AIPAC's power
- In over 30 years of teaching, I never accused anyone of “ treason” or “dual loyalty;” i.e., I have 30 years of witnesses
- BUT, I interviewed veteran staffers, from both sides of the aisle, who said to me: **“Substitute the name of any other country, and people would call this treason;”** and if they believe this, **others must share their opinion**
- **Many Members of Congress are acting on fear, not principle**



**FIN**

# Quote of Philip Weiss

“ [Ilan Pappé] spoke often of the “lobby” inside Israel to colonize the West Bank but he never mentioned the lobby in America. I imagine he is a Marxist by training who doesn’t go in for a religious treatment of the conflict. But how else do you explain the anomalous exceptionalism of Israeli settler colonialism in the 20th century without speaking about Jewish history? The anomalous protection of Zionism by the west is a product of Holocaust guilt on the part of western powers, yes; but it is not an imperial strategy, it is against the American interest to have the Middle East as chaotic as it is today, an unrest that was perfectly predicted by State Department experts 70 years ago. So why would US presidents overturn the US interest? Because they are dependent on the Israel lobby, on rightwing Jewish donors. Sadly it’s just that simple; it is why Milbank Tweed backs events on CIA torture but pulls its gift to Harvard over a Palestinian event, it is why a Zionist responds to a Palestinian event at Vassar by calling for a “Jewish donor strike,” it’s why Truman violated a deeply-held principle, the separation of church and state, so as to keep donors on his side in a tight election. We must address empowered American Jewish Zionists who regard it as their duty to support a Jewish state. This discussion and decolonization must happen inside the United States if progress is to be made.”