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# TRANSFORMING AMERICA'S ISRAEL LOBBY

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*The Limits of Its Power and the Potential for Change*

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FOREWORD BY M.J. ROSENBERG

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Potomac Books – 2009

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## Excerpt from [Introduction](#)

### *Power Puffery*

“Political power,” Jimmy Breslin wrote, “is primarily an illusion. . . . Mirror and blue smoke, beautiful blue smoke rolling over the surface of highly polished mirrors. . . . If somebody tells you how to look, there can be seen in the smoke great, magnificent shapes, castles and kingdoms.”

My wife, Lisa, is in the advertising business, and she describes the conventional Israel lobby’s efforts to promote the image of its clout as “power puffery.” Convincing the political elite that it represents American Jews is only one of its promotional accomplishments.

In Washington, the line between the perception that you can accomplish something and your ability to accomplish it is virtually indistinguishable. The conventional Israel lobby, especially AIPAC, has thrived in part because of the widespread belief that its money controls the political system and that any president or politician who disagrees with it will be verbally and financially pummeled by well-organized, angry American Jews. In fact, I will show, while it is sensible for politicians to have queasy worries about messing with AIPAC, those worries are often overblown, and that suits AIPAC fine.

For example, the conventional wisdom that confronts congressional incumbents and candidates is that AIPAC can make or break political careers because of the campaign gifts its financial network either proffers or withholds. But, I will demonstrate the financial impact of the AIPAC-influenced money machine on congressional races is not as large as is commonly believed. Most members of Congress only glimpse the magnificent shapes, castles, and kingdoms that money from right-of-center Israel supporters supposedly provides. And AIPAC’s ability to launch successful revenge campaigns that drive political enemies out of office is exaggerated in the minds of people who should know better, notably politicians and their handlers.

The “reputation of power, wrote Thomas Hobbes, “is power.” This is a good description of the conventional lobby’s impact on the executive branch. There, the lobby’s clout owes more to fear, nervousness, and untested assumptions about the Jewish community’s reaction to policies than to actual overt pressure. It is based on the

perception of what the community *might* do and the punishment that it *might* exact.

Some administrations have ignored or overcome those fears and anxieties. "History shows that when presidents are determined to do something in U.S. interests, the lobby folds," said Samuel Lewis, a former U.S. ambassador to Israel who has held several other State Department posts related to the Middle East. "As [George H. W.] Bush demonstrated, the White House can win the fight. Carter had all kinds of problems with the Jewish community, but that didn't stop him from going forward with our Middle East policy. The lobby didn't have any substantive impact on Carter. To the extent that he was influenced [in Israel's favor], it was by the Israelis. Presidents actually have a lot more freedom than they feel like they have. If a president wants to stand up to the lobby, he can."

Obviously, if there is to be an effective alternative to the conventional Israel lobby, it will need to find a way to limit or counteract worries about political fallout and instill more courage in America's leaders. That is a tall order. But there is no need to rid the United States of some kind of right-wing Zionist puppeteer that is pulling the strings of American policy; that puppeteer does not exist.

Some analysts go so far as to dismiss as to dismiss the legendary power of the conventional Israel lobby as a "useful illusion, as David Verbeeten puts it, one that is propped up by different people for different reasons. According to this view, an exaggerated idea of "Jewish power" is a political asset not only to pro-Israel lobbyists. It allows Arab leaders to justify their inability to influence American policy or to address the Palestinians' plight. It gives America's elected officials an excuse for not doing what they want to do, such as take exception to some Israeli policies. It gives Israel's most vituperative critics material for endless speeches, essays, and blog posts. And, needless to say, power puffery enables some Israel-focused organizations to raise a lot of money.

That theory dramatically understates the conventional lobby's clout, which is most certainly not an illusion. If it were, there would be no reason to write this book. When we get to the end of the yellow brick road in our search for the truth about the lobby, we find that there are actual, powerful, well-heeled wizards behind the elaborate machinery of its influence.

Still, one can detect in the conventional Israel lobby some distinct elements of a little-known, Zionist tradition of power puffery, an ability to take advantage of deep-seated, nearly universal myths of Jewish power, reach, and money. Understanding these illusions is a prerequisite to assessing the limits of the conventional lobby's power and figuring out what, if anything, can be done about it.

Today's lobby has inherited some of the panache and bold self-promotion of Chaim Weizmann, the chemist who, while based in London, successfully and almost single-handedly lobbied for the Balfour Declaration in 1917. That was the statement in which Great Britain promised the Jews a homeland in Palestine. According to Israeli historian Tom Segev, Weizmann made this happen by taking advantage of British officials' fantasies that a powerful network of Jews turned the wheels of history...

...For years I have listened to American liberals—including those who once helped Middle East peace groups and became disillusioned—fume quietly about the success of the conventional Israel lobby. And I have watched them sigh, or throw up their hands in despair, or murmur phrases like “there's nothing we can do” or—as one of them once sneered to me—“good luck, Rabbi Don Quixote.” If they are based in Washington or involved with domestic politics, sometimes they flash that telltale exhausted grin that appears on the faces of people who were once idealistic Student Council presidents and now must spend their days rationalizing and defending injustice and *realpolitik*.

In fact, there is much that they can do. Jeremy Ben-Ami, one of the founders of the J Street project, told me about a dinner party he attended with Washington cognoscenti—media people, academics, political operatives, etc. “Everyone was talking about this issue and American policy, about what ought to happen. Everyone reached the same conclusion: the policy won't change because of the American Jewish lobby. The conversation about the Middle East in this town usually shuts down at that point. But I exploded. I told them, ‘We can't think in conventional political terms! We've got to change the political dynamic!’”

My hope is that if American Jews and other Americans, especially in Washington, learn there is a little less to the conventional Israel lobby than meets the eye, if they understand that it is, say, a four-hundred-pound gorilla rather than an eight-hundred-pounder, they will be

emboldened to do something about it instead of passively accepting its predominance."

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### **From the book jacket**

"An extraordinarily frank, courageous, and truly illuminating book. It dispels many myths while frankly exploring some perennial dilemmas faced by peace-seeking American Jews, and outlines a pro-peace, pro-Israel, and pro-American road forward for them to take. A genuine tour de force!"

-- Sam Lewis, U.S. Ambassador to Israel under Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan

"This is a brilliant study of two intriguing contradictions pertaining to the story of America's Israel lobby. One is the contradiction between the reality and limits of Jewish power, on the one hand, and the popular perception of that power, on the other. Another has to do with the yawning gap between the Israel lobby's hawkish policies and the liberal views of the majority of American Jews. Fleshler's work is a timely reminder of the need for Israel's friends in America to focus their advocacy efforts on promoting one of Israel's most vital, indeed existential, interests: advancing a two-state solution to its conflict with the Palestinians."

-- Shlomo Ben-Ami, former Israeli Foreign Minister, current Vice-President of the Toledo International Centre for Peace