

The Israel Lobby and the Left Uneasy Questions



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THE ISRAEL LOBBY AND THE LEFT:
UNEASY QUESTIONS

by Jeffrey Blankfort

If there is one event that exposed [the Zionist] influence over of the [peace] movement, it is what occurred in the streets of New York on June 12, 1982, when 800,000 people gathered in front of the United Nations to call for a ban on nuclear weapons. Six days earlier, on June 6th, Israel had launched a devastating invasion of Lebanon. Its goal was to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization, then based in that country. Eighty thousand soldiers, backed by massive bombing from the air and from the sea were creating a level of death and destruction that dwarfed what Iraq would later do in Kuwait. Within a year there would be 20,000 Palestinians and Lebanese dead and tens of thousands more wounded.

And what was the response that day in New York? In recognition of the suffering then taking place in his homeland, a Lebanese man was allowed to sit on the stage, but he would not be introduced; not allowed to say a word. Nor was the subject mentioned by any of the speakers. Israel and its lobby couldn't have asked for anything more.

It was 1991 and Noam Chomsky had just finished a lecture in Berkeley on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and was taking questions from the audience. An Arab-American asked him to explain his position regarding the influence of America's Israel lobby.

Chomsky replied that its reputation was generally exaggerated and, like other lobbies, it only appears to be powerful when its position lines up with that of the "elites" who determine policy in Washington. Earlier in the evening, he had asserted that Israel received support from the United States as a reward for the services it provides as the US's "cop-on-the-beat" in the Middle East.

Chomsky's response drew a warm round of applause from members of the audience who were no doubt pleased to have American Jews absolved from any blame for Israel's oppression of the Palestinians, then in the fourth year of their first Intifada.

What is noteworthy is that Chomsky's explanation for the financial and political support that the U.S. has provided Israel over the years is shared by what is generically known as the Israel lobby, and almost no one else.

Well, not quite "almost no one." Among the exceptions are the overwhelming majority of both houses of Congress and the mainstream media and, what is equally noteworthy, virtually the entire American Left, both ideological and idealistic, including the organizations ostensibly in the forefront of the fight for Palestinian rights.

That there is a meeting of the minds on this issue between supporters of Israel and the Left may help explain why the Palestine support movement within the United States has been an utter failure.

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Chomsky's position on the lobby had been established well before that Berkeley evening. In *The Fateful Triangle*, published in 1983, he assigned it little weight:

The "special relationship" is often attributed to domestic political pressures, in particular the effectiveness of the American Jewish community in political life and in influencing opinion. While there is some truth to this it underestimates the scope of the "support for Israel," and it overestimates the role of political pressure groups in decision making. (p.13) ¹

A year earlier, Congress had applauded Israel's devastating invasion of Lebanon, and then appropriated millions in additional aid to pay for the shells the Israeli military had expended. How much of this support was due to the legislators' "support for Israel" and how much was due to pressures from the Israel lobby? It was a question that should have been examined by the left at the time, but wasn't. Twenty years later, Chomsky's view is still the "conventional wisdom."

In 2001, in the midst of the second intifada, he went further, arguing that "it is improper — particularly in the United States — to condemn Israeli atrocities," and that the "US/Israel-Palestine conflict" is the more correct term, comparable with placing the proper responsibility for "Russian-backed crimes in Eastern Europe [and] US-backed crimes in Central America." And, to emphasize the point, he wrote, "IDF helicopters are US helicopters with Israeli pilots."²

Prof. Stephen Zunes, who might be described as a Chomsky acolyte, would not only relieve Israeli Jews from any responsibility for their actions, he would have us believe they are the victims.

In *Tinderbox*, his widely praised (by Chomsky and others) new book on the Middle East, Zunes faults the Arabs for "blaming Israel, Zionism, or the Jews for their problems." According to Zunes, the Israelis have been forced to assume a role similar to that assigned to members of the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe who performed services, mainly tax collection, as middlemen between the feudal lords and the serfs in earlier times. In fact, writes Zunes, "US policy today corresponds with this historic anti-Semitism."³ Anyone comparing the relative power of the Jewish community in centuries

past with what we find in the US today will find that statement absurd.

Jewish power has, in fact, been trumpeted by a number of Jewish writers, including one, J. J. Goldberg, editor of the Jewish weekly *Forward*, who wrote a book by that name in 1996.⁴ Any attempt, however, to explore the issue from a critical standpoint, inevitably leads to accusations of anti-Semitism, as Bill and Kathleen Christison pointed out in their article on the role of right-wing Jewish neo-cons in orchestrating US Middle East policy, in *Counterpunch* (1/25/03):

Anyone who has the temerity to suggest any Israeli instigation of, or even involvement in, Bush administration war planning is inevitably labeled somewhere along the way as an anti-Semite. Just whisper the word "domination" anywhere in the vicinity of the word "Israel," as in "U.S.-Israeli domination of the Middle East" or "the U.S. drive to assure global domination and guarantee security for Israel," and some leftist, who otherwise opposes going to war against Iraq, will trot out charges of promoting the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the old czarist forgery that asserted a Jewish plan for world domination.⁵

Presumably, this is what Zunes would call an example of the "latent anti-Semitism which has come to the fore with wildly exaggerated claims of Jewish economic and political power."⁶ And that it "is a naïve assumption to believe that foreign policy decision-making in the US is pluralistic enough so that any one lobbying group can have so much influence."⁷

This is hardly the first time that Jews have been in the upper echelons of power, as Benjamin Ginsberg points out in *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State*; but there has never been a situation anything like the present. This was how Ginsberg began his book:

Since the 1960s, Jews have come to wield considerable influence in American economic, cultural, intellectual and political life. Jews played a central role in American finance during the 1980s, and they were among the chief beneficiaries of that decade's corporate mergers and reorganizations. Today, though barely 2 % of the nation's population is Jewish, close to half its billionaires are Jews. The chief executive officers of the three major television networks and the four largest film studios are Jews, as are the owners of the nation's largest newspaper chain and the most influential single

newspaper, the *New York Times*.⁸

“What happened to all those nice plans?” asked Israeli journalist and peace activist Uri Avnery. “Israel’s governments mobilized the collective power of US Jewry — which dominates Congress and the media to a large degree — against them. Faced by this vigorous opposition, all the presidents; great and small, football players and movie stars — folded, one after another.”

That was written in 1993. Today, ten years later, ardently pro-Israel American Jews are in positions of unprecedented influence within the United States and have assumed or been given decision-making positions over virtually every segment of our culture and body politic. This is no secret conspiracy. Regular readers of the *New York Times* business section, which reports the comings and goings of the media tycoons, are certainly aware of it. Does this mean that each and every one is a pro-Israel zealot? Not necessarily, but when one compares the US media with its European counterparts in their respective coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the extreme bias in favor of Israel on the part of the US media is immediately apparent.

This might explain Eric Alterman’s discovery that “Europeans and Americans differ profoundly in

their views of the Israel/Palestine issue at both the elite and popular levels, with Americans being far more sympathetic to Israel and the Europeans to the Palestinian cause”⁹

An additional component of Chomsky’s analysis is his insistence that it is the US, more than Israel, that is the “rejectionist state,” implying that were it not for the US, Israel might long ago have abandoned the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians for a mini-state.

Essential to his analysis is the notion that every US administration since that of Eisenhower has attempted to advance Israel’s interests in line with America’s global and regional agenda. This is a far more complex issue than

Chomsky leads us to believe. Knowledgeable insiders, both critical and supportive of Israel, have described in detail major conflicts that have taken place between US and Israeli administrations over the years in which Israel, thanks to the diligence of its domestic lobby, has usually prevailed.

In particular, Chomsky ignores or misinterprets the efforts made by every US president, beginning with Richard Nixon, to curb Israel’s expansionism, to halt its settlement building and to obtain its withdrawal from the Occupied Territories.¹⁰

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Gerald Ford, angered that Israel had been reluctant to leave the Sinai following the 1973 war and backed by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, not only suspended aid for six months in 1975, but in March of that year made a speech calling for a “reassessment” of the US-Israel relationship. Within weeks, AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee), Israel’s Washington lobby, secured a letter signed by 76 senators “confirming their support for Israel, and suggesting that the

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We need to only look at the current Bush presidency to see that this phenomenon is still the rule. In 1991, the same year as Chomsky's talk, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir asked the first Bush administration for \$10 billion in loan guarantees in order, he said, to provide for the resettlement of Russian Jews. Bush Sr. had earlier balked at a request from Congress to appropriate an additional \$650 million dollars to compensate Israel for sitting out the Gulf War, but gave in when he realized that his veto would be overridden. But now he told Shamir that Israel could only have the guarantees if it freezes settlement building and promised that no Russian Jews would be resettled in the West Bank.

An angry Shamir refused and called on AIPAC to mobilize Congress and the organized American Jewish community in support of the loans guarantees. A letter, drafted by AIPAC was signed by more than 240 members of the House demanding that Bush approve them, and 77 senators signed on to supporting legislation.

On September 12, 1991, Jewish lobbyists descended on Washington in such numbers that Bush felt obliged to call a televised press conference in which he complained that "1000 Jewish lobbyists are on Capitol Hill against little old me." It would prove to be his epitaph. Chomsky pointed to Bush's statement, at the time, as proof that the vaunted Israel lobby was nothing more than "a paper tiger. It took scarcely more than a raised eyebrow for the lobby to collapse," he told readers of *Z Magazine*. He could not have been further from the truth.¹³

The next day, Tom Dine, AIPAC's Executive Director, declared that "September 12, 1991 is a day that will live in infamy." Similar comments were uttered by Jewish leaders, who accused Bush of provoking anti-Semitism. What was more important, his friends in the mainstream media, like William Safire, George Will, and Charles Krauthammer, not only criticized him; they began to find fault with the economy and how he was running the country. It was all downhill from there. Bush's Jewish vote, which has been estimated at 38% in 1988, dropped down to no more than 12%, with some estimates as low as 8%.¹⁴

Bush's opposition to the loan guarantees was the last straw for the Israel

lobby. When he made disparaging comments about Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem in March, 1990, AIPAC had begun the attack (briefly halted during the the Gulf War). Dine wrote a critical op-ed in the *New York Times* and followed that with a vigorous speech to the United Jewish Appeal's Young Leaders Conference. "Brothers and sisters," he told them as they prepared to go out and lobby Congress on the issue, "remember that Israel's friends in this city reside on Capitol Hill."¹⁵ Months later, the loan guarantees were approved, but by then Bush was dead meat.

Now, jump ahead to last Spring, when Bush Jr. forthrightly demanded that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon withdraw his marauding troops from Jenin, saying "Enough is enough!" It made headlines all over the world, as did his backing down when Sharon refused. What happened? Harsh criticism boomed from within his own party in Congress and from his daddy's old friends in the media. George Will associated Dubya with Yasser Arafat and accused Bush of having lost his "moral clarity."¹⁶ The next day, Safire suggested that Bush was "being pushed into a minefield of mistakes" and that he had "become a wavering ally as Israel fights for survival."¹⁷ Junior got the message and, within a week, declared Sharon to be "a man of peace."¹⁸ Since then, as journalist Robert Fisk and others have noted, Sharon seems to be writing Bush's speeches.

There are some who believe that Bush Jr. and Presidents before him made statements critical of Israel for appearances only, to convince the world, and the Arab countries in particular, that the US can be an "honest broker" between the Israelis and the Palestinians. But it is difficult to make a case that any of them would put themselves in a position to be humiliated simply as a cover for US policy.

A better explanation was provided by Stephen Green, whose *Taking Sides, America's Secret Relations with Militant Israel*, was the first examination of State Department archives concerning US-Israel relations. Since the Eisenhower administration, wrote Green in 1984, "Israel, and friends of Israel in America, have determined the broad outlines of US policy in the region. It has been left to American Presidents to implement that policy, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and to deal with the tactical issues."¹⁹

A slight exaggeration, perhaps, but former US Senator James Abourezk (D-South Dakota) echoed Green's words in a speech before the American-

Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee last June:

That is the state of American politics today. The Israeli lobby has put together so much money power that we are daily witnessing US senators and representatives bowing down low to Israel and its US lobby.

Make no mistake. The votes and bows have nothing to do with the legislators' love for Israel. They have everything to do with the money that is fed into their campaigns by members of the Israeli lobby. My estimate is that at least \$6 billion flows from the American Treasury to Israel each year. That money, plus the political support the US gives Israel at the United Nations, is what allows Israel to conduct criminal operations in Palestine with impunity.²⁰

That is a reality that has been repeated many times in many forms by ex-members of Congress, usually speaking off the record. It is the reality that Chomsky and the left prefer to ignore. The problem is not so much that Chomsky has been wrong. He has, after all, been right on many other things, particularly in describing the ways in which the media manipulates the public consciousness to serve the interests of the state.²¹ However, by explaining US support for Israel simply as a component of those interests, and ignoring the influence of the Israel lobby in determining that component, he appears to have made a major error that has had measurable consequences. By accepting Chomsky's analysis, the Palestinian solidarity movement has failed to take the only political step that might have weakened the hold of Israel on Congress and the American electorate, namely, by challenging the billions of dollars in aid and tax breaks that the US provides Israel on an annual basis.

The questions that beg asking are why his argument has been so eagerly accepted by the movement and why the contrary position put forth by people of considerable stature such as Edward Said, Ed Herman, Uri Avnery and, more recently, Alexander Cockburn, has been ignored. There appear to be several reasons.

The people who make up the movement, Jews and non-Jews alike, have embraced Chomsky's position because it is the message they want to hear; not feeling obligated to "blame the Jews" is reassuring. The fear of either pro-

voking anti-Semitism or being called an anti-Semite (or a self-hating Jew), has become so ingrained into our culture and body politic that no one, including Chomsky or Zunes, is immune. This is reinforced by constant reminders of the Jewish Holocaust that, by no accident, appear in the movies and in major news media on a regular basis. Chomsky, in particular, has been heavily criticized by the Jewish establishment for decades for his criticism of Israeli policies, even to the point of being "excommunicated," a distinction he shares with the late Hannah Arendt. It may be fair to assume that at some level this history influences Chomsky's analysis. But the problems of the movement go beyond the fear of invoking anti-Semitism, as Chomsky is aware and correctly noted in *The Fateful Triangle*:

[T]he American left and pacifist groups, apart from fringe elements, have quite generally been extremely supportive of Israel (contrary to many baseless allegations), some passionately so, and have turned a blind eye to practices that they would be quick to denounce elsewhere.²²

The issue of US aid to Israel provides a clear example. During the Reagan era, there was a major effort launched by the anti-intervention movement to block a \$15 million annual appropriation destined for the Nicaraguan contras. People across the country were urged to call their Congressional representatives and get them to vote against the measure. That effort was not only successful, it forced the administration to engage in what became known as Contragate.

At the time, Israel was receiving the equivalent of that much money on a daily basis, without a whimper from the movement. Now, that amount "officially" is about \$10 million a day and yet no major campaign has ever been launched to stem that flow or even call the public's attention to it. When attempts were made they were stymied by the opposition of such key players (at the time) as the American Friends Service Committee, which was anxious, apparently, not to alienate major Jewish contributors. (Recent efforts initiated on the internet to "suspend" military aid - but not economic - until Israel ends the occupation have gone nowhere.)

The slogans that have been advanced by various sectors of the Palestinian solidarity movement, such as "End the Occupation," "End Israeli

Apartheid," "Zionism Equals Racism," or "Two States for Two Peoples," while addressing key issues of the conflict, assume a level of awareness on the part of the American people for which no evidence exists. Concern for where their tax dollars are going, particularly at a time of massive cutbacks in social programs, certainly would have greater resonance among voters. Initiating a serious campaign to halt aid, however, would require focusing on the role of Congress and recognition of the power of the Israel lobby.

Chomsky's evaluation of Israel's position in the Middle East admittedly contains elements of truth, but nothing sufficient to explain what former Undersecretary of State George Ball described as America's "passionate attachment" to the Jewish state.²³ However, his attempt to portray the US-Israel relationship as mirroring that of Washington's relations to its client regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, has no basis in reality.

US involvement in Central America was fairly simple. Arms and training were supplied to military dictatorships in order for their armies and their death squads to suppress the desires of their own citizens for land, civil rights and economic justice, all of which would undermine US corporate interests. This was quite transparent. Does Israel fit into that category? Obviously not. Whatever one may say about Israel, its Jewish majority, at least, enjoys democratic rights.

Also, there were no Salvadoran, Nicaraguan or Guatemalan lobbies of any consequence in Washington to lavish millions of dollars wooing or intimidating members of Congress; no one in the House or Senate from any of those client countries with possible dual-loyalties approving multi-billion dollar appropriations on an annual basis; none owning major television networks, radio stations, newspapers or movie studios, and no trade unions or state pension funds investing billions of dollars in their respective economies. The closest thing in the category of national lobbies is that of Miami's Cuban exiles, whose existence and power the left is willing to acknowledge, even though its political clout is miniscule compared to that of

Israel's supporters.

What about Chomsky's assertion that Israel is America's cop-on-the-beat in the Middle East? There is, as yet, no record of a single Israeli soldier shedding a drop of blood in behalf of US interests, and there is little likelihood one will be asked to do so in the future. When US presidents have believed that a cop was necessary in the region, US troops were ordered to do the job.

When President Eisenhower believed that US interests were threatened in Lebanon in 1958, he sent in the Marines. In 1991, as mentioned, President Bush not only told Israel to sit on the sidelines, he further angered its mili-

tary by refusing to allow then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney to give the Israeli air force the coordinates it demanded in order to take to the air in response to Iraq's Scud attacks. This left the Israeli pilots literally sitting in their planes, waiting for information that never came.²⁴

What Chomsky offers as proof of Israel's role as a US gendarme was the warning that Israel gave Syria not to intervene in King Hussein's war on the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Jordan in September 1970.

Clearly, this was done primarily to protect Israel's interests. That it also served Washington's agenda was a secondary consideration. For Chomsky, it was "another important service" for the US.²⁵ What Chomsky may not be aware of is another reason that Syria failed to come to the rescue of the Palestinians at the time:

The commander of the Syrian air force, Hafez Al-Assad, had shown little sympathy with the Palestinian cause and was critical of the friendly relations that the PLO enjoyed with the Syrian government under President Atassi. When King Hussein launched his attack, Assad kept his planes on the ground.

Three months later, he staged a coup and installed himself as president. Among his first acts was the imprisonment of hundreds of Palestinians and their Syrian supporters. He then proceeded to gut the Syrian sponsored mili-

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tia, Al-Saika, and eliminate the funds that Syria had been sending to Palestinian militia groups. In the ensuing years, Assad allowed groups opposed to Yasser Arafat to maintain offices and a radio station in Damascus, but little else. A year after Israel's invasion of Lebanon, he sponsored a short, but bloody intra-Palestinian civil war in Northern Lebanon. This is history that has fallen through the cracks.

How much the presence of Israel has intimidated its weaker Arab neighbors from endangering US interests is at best a matter of conjecture. Clearly, Israel's presence has been used by these reactionary regimes, most of them US allies, as an excuse for suppressing internal opposition movements. (One might argue that the CIA's involvement in the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, and Abdel Karim Kassem in Iraq in 1963, had more of an impact on crushing progressive movement in the region.)

What Israel has provided for the US to their mutual benefit have been a number of joint weapons programs, largely financed by US taxpayers and the use by the US of military equipment developed by Israeli technicians — not the least of which were the “plows” that were used to bury alive fleeing Iraqi soldiers in the first Gulf War. Since high levels of US aid preceded these weapons programs, it is hard to argue that they form the basis of US support.

Another argument advanced by Chomsky has been Israel's willingness to serve the US by taking on tasks which past US administrations were unable or unwilling to undertake due to specific US laws or public opinion, such as selling arms to unsavory regimes or training death squads.

That Israel did this at the request of the US is an open question. A comment by Israeli minister Yakov Meridor's comment in *Ha'aretz*, at the time, makes it unlikely:

We shall say to the Americans: Don't compete with us in Taiwan, don't compete with us in South Africa, don't compete with us in the Caribbean area, or in other areas in which we can sell weapons directly and where you can't operate in the open. Give us the opportunity to do this and trust us with the sales of ammunition and hardware.²⁶

In fact, there was no time that the US stopped training death squads in Latin America, or providing arms, with the exception of Guatemala, where

Carter halted US assistance because of its massive human rights violations, something that presented no problem for an Israeli military already steeped in such violations. In one situation we saw the reverse situation. Israel provided more than 80% of El Salvador's weapons before the US moved in.

As for Israel's trade and joint arms projects, including the development of nuclear weaponry, with South Africa, that was a natural alliance: two societies that had usurped someone else's land and saw themselves in the same position, “a civilized people surrounded by threatening savages.” The relationship became so close that South Africa's Sun City became the resort of choice for vacationing Israelis.

The reason that Israeli officials gave for selling these weapons, when questioned, was that it was the only way that Israel could keep its own arms industry functioning. Israel's sales of sophisticated weaponry to China has drawn criticism from several administrations, but this has been tempered by Congressional pressure.

What Israel did benefit from was a blanket of silence from the US anti-intervention movement and anti-apartheid movements, whose leadership was more comfortable criticizing US policies than those of Israel's. Whether their behavior was due to their willingness to put Israel's interests first, or whether they were concerned about provoking anti-Semitism, the result was the same.

A protest that I organized in 1985 against Israel's ties to apartheid South Africa, and its role as a US surrogate in Central America, provides a clear example of the problem.

When I approached board members of the Nicaraguan Information Center (NIC) in San Francisco and asked for the group's endorsement of the protest, I received no support. NIC was the main group in solidarity with the Sandinistas and, despite Israel's long and ugly history, first in aiding Somoza and, at the time of the protest, the contras, the board voted well, they couldn't vote not to endorse, so they voted to make “no more endorsements,” a position they reversed soon after our rally. NIC's board was almost entirely Jewish.

I fared better with GNIB, the Guatemalan News and Information Bureau, but only after a considerable struggle. At the time, Israel was supplying 98% of the weaponry and all of the training to one of the most murder-

ous regimes in modern times. One would think that an organization that claimed to be working in solidarity with the people of Guatemala would not only endorse the rally but be eager to participate.

Apparently, the GNIB board was deeply divided on the issue. Unwilling to accept another refusal, I harassed the board with phone calls until it voted to endorse. Oakland CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) endorsed. The San Francisco chapter declined. (A year earlier, when I had been quoted in the *San Francisco Weekly* criticizing the influence of the Israel lobby on the Democratic Party, officials from the chapter wrote a letter to the editor claiming that I was provoking "anti-Semitism.") The leading anti-apartheid organizations endorsed the protest but, again, after lengthy internal debate.

The protest had been organized in response to the refusal of the San Francisco-based Mobilization for Peace, Jobs and Justice, (Mobe), a coalition of movement organizations, to include any mention of the Middle East among the demands that it was issuing for a march opposing South African apartheid and US intervention in Central America.

At an organizing meeting for the event, a handful of us asked that a plank calling for "No US Intervention in the Middle East" be added to the demands that had previously been decided. The vote was overwhelmingly against it. A Jewish trade unionist told us that "we could do more for the Palestinians by not mentioning them, than by mentioning them," a strange response which mirrored what President Reagan was then saying about ending apartheid in South Africa. I was privately told later that if the Middle East was mentioned, "the unions would walk," recognition of the strong support for Israel that exists among the labor bureaucracy, as well as the willingness of the movement to defer to it.

The timing of the Mobe's refusal was significant. Two and a half years earlier, Israel had invaded Lebanon and its troops still remained there as we met that evening. And yet, the leaders of the Mobe would not let Tina Naccache, a programmer for Berkeley's KPFA, the only Lebanese in the large union hall, speak on behalf of the demand.

Three years later, the Mobe scheduled another mass march. The Palestinians were in the first full year of their intifada, and it seemed appropriate that a statement calling for an end to Israeli occupation be added to the

demands. The organizers, the same ones from 1985, had already decided on what they would be behind closed doors: "No US Intervention in Central America or the Caribbean; End US Support for South African Apartheid; Freeze and Reverse the Nuclear Arms Race; Jobs and Justice, Not War."

This time the Mobe took no chances and canceled a public meeting where our demand could be debated and voted on. An Emergency Coalition for Palestinian Rights was formed in response. A petition was drawn up and circulated supporting the demand. Close to 3,000 people signed it, including hundreds from the Palestinian community. The Mobe leadership finally agreed to one concession. On the back of its official flyer, where it would be invisible when posted on a wall or tree, was the following sentence:

Give peace a chance everywhere: The plight of the Palestinian people, as shown by the recent events in the West Bank and Gaza, remind us that we must support human rights everywhere. Let the nations of our world turn from building armies and death machines to spending their energy and resources on improving the quality of life — Peace, Jobs and Justice.

There was no mention of Israel or the atrocities its soldiers were committing. The flyer put out by the unions ignored the subject completely.

Fast forward to February, 2002, when a new and smaller version of the Mobe met to plan a march and rally to oppose the US war on Afghanistan. There was a different cast of characters, but they produced the same result. The argument was that what was needed was a "broad" coalition, and raising the issue of Palestine would prevent that from happening.

The national movement to oppose the extension of the Iraq war has been no different. As in 1991, at the time of the Gulf War, there were competing large marches, separately organized but with overlapping participants. Despite their other political differences, what the organizers of both marches agreed on was that there would be no mention of the Israel-Palestine conflict in any of the protest literature, even though its connections to the situation in Iraq were being made at virtually every other demonstration taking place throughout the world. The movement's fear of alienating American Jews still takes precedence over defending the rights of Palestinians.

Last September, the slogan of "No War on Iraq - Justice for Palestine!"

drew close to a half-million protesters to Trafalgar Square. The difference had been presciently expressed by a Native American leader during the first Intifada. "The problem with the movement," he told me, "is that there are too many liberal Zionists."

If there is one event that exposed their influence over of the movement, it is what occurred in the streets of New York on June 12, 1982, when 800,000 people gathered in front of the United Nations to call for a ban on nuclear weapons. Six days earlier, on June 6th, Israel had launched a devastating invasion of Lebanon. Its goal was to destroy the Palestine Liberation

Organization, then based in that country. Eighty thousand soldiers, backed by massive bombing from the air and from the sea were creating a level of death and destruction that dwarfed what Iraq would later do in Kuwait. Within a year there would be 20,000 Palestinians and Lebanese dead and tens of thousands more wounded.

And what was the response that day in New York? In recognition of the suffering then taking place in his homeland, a Lebanese man was allowed to sit on the stage, but he would not be introduced; not allowed to say a word. Nor was the subject mentioned by any of the speakers. Israel and its lobby couldn't have asked for anything more.

Twenty-one years later, Ariel Sharon, the architect of that invasion, is Israel's Prime Minister, having been elected for the second time. As I write these lines, pro-Israel zealots within the Bush administration are about to savor their greatest triumph. After all, they have been the driving force for a war which they envision as the first stage in "redrawing the map of the Middle East," with the US-Israel alliance

at its fore.²⁷

And the Left? Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a long-time activist with impeccable credentials, assured the Jewish weekly, *Forward*, that United for Peace and Justice, organizers of the February 15th anti-war rally in New York, "has done a great deal to make clear it is not involved in anti-Israel rhetoric. From the beginning there was nothing in United for Peace's statements that dealt at all with the Israel-Palestine issue."²⁸

Who Makes up the Lobby?

It is important to note that the Israel lobby is much more than AIPAC (American-Israel Public Affairs Committee), which primarily focuses on Congress and directs funding from Jewish PACs and individuals to those politicians it considers to be deserving. Its other more visible components are the biggest Jewish organizations, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Jewish Congress, but there are also a number of others, not the least of which is the extreme right wing Zionist Organization of America, which at the moment is extremely influential in Washington.

All of these organizations form part of the Council of Presidents of Major Jewish American Organizations, whose current president is Mortimer Zuckerman, owner of the NY Daily News and US News and World Report. Its job is to lobby the President. At the grass-roots you have hundreds of local Jewish federations and councils that cultivate the support of city councilors and supervisors and select the more promising among them to run for Congress, assured that they will be solid votes for Israel.

While not officially part of the lobby, since the establishment of

The timing of the Mobe's refusal was significant. Two and a half years earlier, Israel had invaded Lebanon and its troops still remained there as we met that evening. And yet, the leaders of the Mobe would not let Tina Naccache, a programmer for Berkeley's KPFA, the only Lebanese in the large union hall, speak on behalf of the demand.

Israel in 1948, the AFL-CIO has been one of its most solid cornerstones. It has provided millions of dollars for pro-Israel Democrats; it has blocked all international efforts to punish Israel for its exploitation and abuse of Palestinian workers, and it has encouraged its member unions to invest millions of dollars of their pension funds in State of Israel Bonds, thereby linking their members' retirement to the health of the Israeli economy. Over the past year, the lobby has cemented ties with the Christian evangelical right, which gives it clout in states where there are few Jews and access to hundreds of thousands of new donors to Israel's cause.

— Jeffrey Blankfort

Endnotes

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Christians Discriminated Against by Israel A report on Israeli policies and actions regarding Christians. By former *Time Magazine* Senior Editor and Jerusalem Bureau Chief Donald Neff

Do Palestinians Teach Their Children to Hate? A scholarly study of Palestinian textbooks and curricula. By George Washington Professor Nathan Brown. (The quick answer: no.)

Einstein's Letter to the New York Times A 1948 letter signed by Einstein, Hannah Arendt and other prominent thinkers opposing Menachem Begin's "terrorism." Begin later became Prime Minister of Israel.

The Information Blockade: The Prism Between Middle Eastern Reality and Americans A first-hand account of the perils of filming – and trying to air – an honest documentary on Israel. By prize-winning filmmaker and Ohio State Professor Tom Hayes

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The mission of If Americans Knew is to inform and educate the American public on issues of major significance that are unreported, underreported, or misreported in the American media.

It is our belief that when Americans know the facts on a subject, they will, in the final analysis, act in accordance with morality, justice, and the best interests of their nation, and of the world. With insufficient information, or distorted information, they may do the precise opposite.

It is the mission of If Americans Knew to ensure that this does not happen - that the information on which Americans base their actions is complete, accurate, and undistorted by conscious or unconscious bias, by lies of either commission or omission, or by pressures exerted by powerful special interest groups. It is our goal to supply the information essential to those responsible for the actions of the strongest nation on earth - the American people.

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- Senator James Abourezk (D-South Dakota)

About Jeffrey Blankfort

Jeffrey Blankfort was raised in a Jewish non-Zionist family. He produces radio programs on three stations and has written extensively on the Middle East. He was formerly the editor of the *Middle East Labor Bulletin* and co-founder of the Labor Committee of the Middle East. His photographs of the Anti-Vietnam War and Black Panthers Movements have appeared in numerous books and magazines.

In February 2002, he won a lawsuit against the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which was found to have had a vast spying operation directed against American citizens opposed to Israel's policies in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza and to the apartheid policies of the government of South Africa and passing on information to both governments.

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