AIPAC and Iran: Influential or Irrelevant?

One of the biggest headlines over the past couple of months has revolved around the question of Iran's nuclear capabilities. As Iran has developed these capabilities, other states, particularly Israel, have become concerned. Israel sees a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat that needs to be immediately and forcibly addressed. To this end, Israel has sought to gain the backing of the United States. However, the United States hopes to avoid war if at all possible. In response to the United States' position, Israel has enlisted the help of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). AIPAC is a pro-Israel lobby that wields significant political clout in American politics. There is literature that suggests that lobby groups, in particular those groups that lobby for Israel, can be very effective. Thus, the introduction of AIPAC into the debate surrounding Iran will move the United States' position to converge with that of Israel's. To determine whether this holds true this paper will first give a brief overview of the events surrounding Iran and the relevant scholarly literature. Subsequently, it will then analyze the role of AIPAC to determine whether or not AIPAC has the expected impact.

Iran began 2012 with a lot of saber rattling in the Persian Gulf. Iran threated to close the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway for commercial shipping. Regardless of whether or not Iran could shut down the Strait, any disruption could prove extremely damaging to an already lagging world economy. With the debate surrounding whether or not to attack Iran, the United States has already started taking precautions by increasing its military presence in the Persian Gulf, lest Iran seek to shut down the Strait (Starr, 2012). Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the nuclear capabilities of Iran.

A nuclear-armed Iran is a significant foreign policy concern. Israel believes that a nuclear Iran would seek to destroy Israel. A recent commentator, however, criticizes this view. David Rothkopf (2012) notes that this is not the first nuclear threat Israel has faced. That distinction goes to the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. Indeed, deterrence could be achieved and a tenuous peace maintained through cooperation with the United States. Rothkopf also notes, however, that a nuclear-armed Iran could touch off a regional arms race, further destabilizing the Middle East. In light of these events, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and American President Obama both felt the need to address AIPAC earlier this March seeking to rally support for their respective causes.

AIPAC is composed of many Jewish-Americans; by some definitions this would qualify it as part of a diaspora. As such, Yossi Shain (1994-1995) recognizes its importance in garnering attention to important events. While Shain's discussion of diasporas is only meant to discuss the diaspora's role in securing democratization or self-determination for their home country, a similar argument can be applied here. Even though AIPAC doesn't need to fight for democracy or self-determination anymore—though Israel is at times painfully aware of its tenuous existence—they still advocate for policies they deem to be to the benefit of Israel. Additionally, Israel has the benefit of a "special relationship" with the United States so that, in many cases, the United States is fully aware of political events surrounding Israel. But this begs the question: why does this special relationship exist in the first place?

In investigating the special relationship between the United States and Israel, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2009) highlight the role of the Israeli lobby. For them the lobby includes any pro-Israeli media, so-called "watchdog groups" and pro-Israeli think tanks. These categories include AIPAC. They believe that groups such as AIPAC can exert influence through monetary contributions to political campaigns, both by supporting pro-Israel politicians and targeting those deemed less pro-Israel than AIPAC would like. Additionally, they hold that the lobby is more

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influential in Congress than in the Executive branch. Their article, however, leaves the question of why the lobby has a more influence in Congress than in the Executive unanswered. What is clear, however, is the important role that the lobby plays in securing the special relationship between the United States and Israel.

The importance of AIPAC was none the more clear than on March 4th and 5th during which time both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu addressed AIPAC. The mere fact that both leaders felt the need to pander to a lobby group displays the group's political importance. Netanyahu used his time before AIPAC to reference the Holocaust and assert Israel's claim to justifiably take unilateral military action to "deal" with the Iranian threat (Karon, 2012). These words act as a rough indicator as to where the opinion of AIPAC is likely to lie, assuming a congruence of the preferences of Israel and AIPAC.[1] Speaking first, Obama stressed the importance of continuing to implement economic sanctions rather than escalating to military conflict. Obama's speech, however, was significantly more hawkish than a superficial reading would suggest. Michael Tomasky (2012) notes how Obama's speech, while stressing patience, made war with Israel inevitable. During his speech, Obama stressed that he would not contain a nuclear Iran, but would rather prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons in the first place. To Tomasky, this means that Obama has backed himself into a corner in which he, or even some future president, may be called upon to act on those words. Perhaps this was pandering to AIPAC simply because Obama simply understood his audience; perhaps these words represented his true policy stance. Only his future actions will make this clear.

We can thus see that Israel is more hawkish and that the position of the United States is actually not far off. But why is the AIPAC so influential? First of all, AIPAC has 100,000 members. While impressive in size, it is not just the quantity of members that matters so much as who is involved in AIPAC. Members include Congressmen on both sides of the aisle and other important political figures, as well as a leadership apparatus that controls a significant budget, which it uses to promote its objectives. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to use the organization as a sort of "backchannel" with which to communicate with Israeli officials (Lewis, 2012). The ability to draw the attention of those outside of the Executive branch is nowhere more evident than in the fact that three-quarters of all Congressmen were in attendance when Obama addressed the AIPAC in March (Karon, 2012). Thus, much of the power of AIPAC derives from its ability to bring many influential politicians directly into its organization.

To conclude, the AIPAC exhibits the ability to be an influential player in American foreign policy as it pertains to Israel. This has been demonstrated not only by President Obama's willingness to pander to AIPAC, but also the ability of AIPAC to attract so many Congressmen into their ranks. What the theory reviewed here misses is the impact of lobbies during election years. Though Mearsheimer and Walt recognized that the Israeli lobby does not have much of an impact on the Executive branch, it can be questioned whether this holds true during an election year. For example, one of the reasons Obama wants cooler heads when it comes to dealing with Iran is that uncertainty raises oil prices (Cooper, 2012). This could be detrimental to a presidential campaign regardless of where the fault actually lies. As such, the case of AIPAC points to some interesting routes for further research in order to create more generalizable results. Thus, while the influence of powerful lobby groups is important to understanding foreign policy, our understanding of their influence is far from complete.

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[1] Indeed, even a cursory glance at AIPAC's website (http://www.aipac.org) shows a wealth of articles written to convince the viewer of the imminent threat Iran poses not just to Israel, but to the United States as well.

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