

Those 'powerful' Jewish lobbyists

Marvin Schick, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Tucked into a recent *New York Times* and, I suspect, read by few was a brief item with the bland headline "Software Company Abandons Deal."

This is not the sort of bait to pique readers' interest, yet it provides insight into how powerful Israel is - or is not - in Washington.

CheckPoint, an Israeli company, was forced by the Bush administration to drop plans to buy a small American software firm. The decision came "near the conclusion of a full-blown investigation by the same American panel that approved the now-abandoned ports deal involving DP World."

This body was expected to rule against the Israelis because "the transaction could endanger some of government's most secretive computer systems." Baloney.

While this latest demonstration of Israeli "influence" in Washington was unfolding, Stephen Walt, dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and Prof. John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago were putting the finishing touches to a paper entitled "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy," which posits that American Jews and others whom we control got the United States into the war in Iraq. More generally, the claim is that the Israel lobby, headed by the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, has vast influence in determining American foreign policy.

Those who want to think ill of Jews or Israel do not need material. Their fervid minds provide all they need to feed their dark fantasies. They know what to misread and what to exaggerate, what to link to their conspiratorial mind-set and what contrary evidence to distort or ignore.

Those who dislike Israel conveniently disregard US arm-twisting and expanding American interference in Israeli diplomatic and commercial activity, most crucially relating to China and India.

Israel bashers ignore that key AIPAC staffers are under indictment for alleged criminal charges of a kind that have never been brought against anyone else. It matters not at all to them that the White House says Dubai can buy up US ports, but an Israeli company cannot buy an American software company.

Reality does not dislodge the blind faith of Israel-bashers that Israel and Jews are in control. They will scarcely notice, several weeks from now when the dust settles on Israel's election and the new government is formed, that Condoleezza Rice will be putting intense pressure on Ehud Olmert to make concessions not in Israel's interest.

YET IT is right to enquire whether our Israel advocacy bears good fruit, or is counterproductive. The assumption is that we should continue doing what we have been doing - no questions asked. Organized American Jewry seems to have checked its intellect at the door, part of what I see as an extraordinary dumbing-down process that should be an embarrassment to people who once exalted the intellect and ideas.

AIPAC is a prime example of our refusal to raise vital questions. Each year in Washington it stages a massive extravaganza befitting a national party convention. Trotted out are more House and Senate members than can be found on the floor of Congress and there are loads of top administration officials and machers from Israel. The purposeful message sent by this display is that Jews are powerful, that Israel has great influence in Washington.

AIPAC wants everyone to believe that it is a powerhouse. We should not be surprised, then, when those who look at Israel through hostile eyes interpret what they see as evidence that the Israel lobby is all-powerful. We kvetch when others get the message that is intentionally sent.

This might be a reasonable price to pay if AIPAC made a difference. It does not. At the end of the day, other considerations determine Israel-US relations on all matters that count. At the end of the day, AIPAC is a bunch of shvitzers and people who run around a lot, acting like big shots who do not have power, although they do make noise, mainly for fund-raising purposes.

REAL INFLUENCE? Try Saudi Arabia, which connived with the White House to spirit dozens of its key people out of this country immediately after 9/11; or when it arranged back-channel military purchases from the US through Germany. Real influence is Dubai buying US ports with White House approval.

When the US demands control of Israel's relations with China, vetoes Israeli commercial activity in the US, brings criminal charges against AIPAC people and twists Israel's diplomatic arm constantly - that ain't influence. All the noise made by AIPAC and other advocates for Israel cannot change this reality.

Whether with respect to diplomacy or other spheres of activity, true influence is exerted quietly. Noise and publicity are antithetical to influence.

The chances that American Jewish leaders will reflect on the lobbying tactics that we cling to are zero. We believe that hoopla and attention are signs of success. Like those who bash Israel, reality is not allowed to intrude on fantasy.

And while it is truly meritorious for pro-Israel activists to be making the case for the Jewish state - we need to rethink how best to do so.

I fear that we are trapped in arrangements that promote self-deception. We seem to lack the capacity to evaluate the utility of our current stratagems.

I wish it could be otherwise. I wish we did not give ammunition to those who bash us by promoting the wrongful perception that we are powerful.

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