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Critics of our Israel policy are outside mainstream

One wonders what the real motives of the objectors are

By **GEOFFREY BERG**
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Some have criticized our presidential candidates' positions on Israel as being in lockstep with the "hawkish" views of the Jewish state and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the pro-Israel lobby.

On this page and others, critics have suggested that some coercive force is at play, compelling all of our would-be presidents to toe a conservative Israeli line. These critics point in particular to speeches given by the candidates at AIPAC's recent policy conference in Washington.

That view is demonstrably false and says more about the malevolence or ignorance of those who hold it than it does about either the candidates who spoke or the audience that listened.

These critics aren't really concerned about our presidential election. As one observer wrote on this page recently, Israel's very existence as a Jewish state is viewed as its real crime by its enemies. No politician who believes that Israel has a right to exist and says so will ever win the approval of such extremists.

Like Israel, Thailand, France and India all have lobbies in Washington. Despite widespread American political support for the continued

existence of all of those countries, I don't recall articles in which these same critics of Israel and AIPAC decry what must be the obvious undue influence the Thai, French and Indian lobbies have over our politicians.

Instead, the critics' obsessive focus is on Israel, the world's only Jewish state. I wonder why that is.

The reality is that Americans of all political persuasions agree that Israel has as much right to exist as any other state. Instead of conceding that they are simply at odds with the overwhelming majority of Americans, many critics instead suggest another force is at play: Jewish money and outsized influence. But that's just not the case.

Poll after poll reveals that overwhelming majorities of Americans support Israel. A bipartisan survey released in March by Republican Neil Newhouse and Democrat Stan Greenberg found that among likely voters, 60 percent support Israel; 76 percent of these surveyed see it as a "vital American ally." A Gallup Poll released a month before found that 59 percent of Americans support Israel.

I've belonged to AIPAC and been a local board member for many years. I have spoken loudly and often, including on this page, about the need for both Israelis and Palestinians to compromise.

Unfortunately, in 2000, then-Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat rejected a full, comprehensive peace on terms which were extraordinarily generous to the Palestinians. Their leadership

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turned its back on peace and chose to launch a war against Israeli civilians. Americans and our leaders saw that and took note.

Even noted AIPAC member Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia said that Arafat's rejection of the two-state solution in 2000 was a "crime against the Palestinians." Is he under the thumb of the Zionists, too?

Before that tragic rejection, when it looked certain in 2000 that Palestine would be established alongside Israel in settlement of the conflict, I eagerly volunteered to participate in a new organization of AIPAC members, Arabs, Jews and others to provide support to the new Palestinian state. Am I one of the "hawkish" AIPAC conspirators who make American presidential candidates grovel at the feet of the Jewish lobby?

If believing that Israel has the indisputable right to exist, then I suppose I am. Of course, I also believe that once a settlement is reached, Palestine will enjoy the same right alongside of Israel.

I still believe in peace and hope that with the leadership of the next president, it can happen. I support Barack Obama, among other reasons, because he has taken what I believe to be a position more aggressively aimed at achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians. For example, Obama has (rightly) criticized Israeli settlement policy. McCain has tacitly endorsed it. Obama will actively work with the parties to achieve peace. McCain won't.

How can these candidates' views be in lockstep with AIPAC when they aren't in agreement with each other?

The critics don't care about this policy or that — what they object to is that neither presidential candidate will participate in the dismantling of the world's only Jewish state. Other details don't matter.

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