



**Dispatches**

**Channel 4  
Dispatches  
investigates The  
pro-Israel lobby in  
Britain:**

**FULL TEXT**

## The pro-Israel lobby in Britain: full text

Peter Osborne and James Jones, 13 November 2009

### Author's Note by Peter Osborne:

Every year, in a central London hotel, a very grand lunch is thrown by the Conservative Friends of Israel. It is often addressed by the Conservative leader of the day. Many members of the shadow cabinet make it their business to be there along with a very large number of Tory peers and prospective candidates, while the Conservative MPs present amount to something close to a majority of the parliamentary party. It is a formidable turnout.

This year's event took place in June, with the main speech by Tory leader David Cameron and shadow foreign secretary William Hague in attendance. The dominant event of the previous twelve months had been the Israeli invasion of Gaza at the start of the year. So I examined Cameron's speech with curiosity to see how he would handle that recent catastrophe.

I was shocked to see that Cameron made no reference at all to the invasion of Gaza, the massive destruction it caused, or the 1,370 deaths that had resulted. Indeed, Cameron went out of his way to praise Israel because it "strives to protect innocent life". I found it impossible to reconcile the remarks made by the young Conservative leader with the numerous reports of human rights abuses in Gaza. Afterwards I said as much to some Tory MPs. They looked at me as if I was distressingly naive, drawing my attention to the very large number of Tory donors in the audience.

But it cannot be forgotten that so many people died in Gaza at the start of this year. To allow this terrible subject to pass by without comment suggested a failure of common humanity and decency on the part of a man most people regard as the next prime minister. To praise Israel at the same time for protecting human life showed not merely a fundamental failure of respect for the truth but also it gives the perception, rightly or wrongly, of support for the wretched events which took place in Gaza. That is not to condone or excuse the abhorrent actions of Hamas, but to overlook Israel's culpability is undoubtedly partisan.

It is impossible to imagine any British political leader showing such equanimity and tolerance if British troops had committed even a fraction of the human rights abuses and war crimes of which Israel has been accused. So that weekend, in my weekly Daily Mail political column, I criticized Cameron's speech to the CFI, drawing attention to his failure to mention Gaza and his speaking of Israeli respect for the sanctity of human life. Soon I received a letter from Stuart Polak, the longstanding CFI director: "Peter, the snapshot of our lunch concentrating on the businessmen and David's alleged comments was really unhelpful." The CFI political director, Robert Halfon, wrote saying that my letter was 'astonishing' and accusing me of making a 'moral equivalence' between Israel and Iran. I wrote back to them citing a number of reports by international organizations such as Amnesty International highlighting breaches of codes by the Israeli army.



I resolved then to ask the question: what led David Cameron to behave in the way he did at the CFI lunch at the Dorchester Hotel last June? What are the rules of British political behaviour which cause the Tory Party leader and his mass of MPs and parliamentary candidates to flock to the Friends of Israel lunch in the year of the Gaza invasion? And what are the rules of media discourse that ensure that such an event passes without notice?

On a personal note I should say that I have known both Stuart Polak and Robert Halfon for many years and always found them fair-minded and straightforward to deal with. Indeed in the summer of 2007 I went on a CFI trip to Israel led by Stuart Polak. No pressure was put on me, at the time or later, to write anything in favour of Israel. The trip, which was paid for by the CFI, certainly enabled me to understand much better the Israeli point of view. But we were presented with a very full spectrum of Israeli intellectual and political life, ranging from disturbingly far right pro-settler MPs to liberal intellectuals consumed with doubt about the morality of the Zionist state. The trip was also balanced to a certain extent by a meeting with a leading Palestinian businessman and with the British consul in East Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, the job of a political journalist is to try and explain how politics works. Ten years ago I exposed, in an article for The Spectator headlined “The man who owns the Tory Party”, the fact that the controversial offshore financier Michael Ashcroft was personally responsible for the financial survival of William Hague’s Conservatives. I asked how legitimate Michael Ashcroft’s contribution was, how much he spent, and did my best to investigate how he used his influence. Now I want to ask a question that has never been seriously addressed in the mainstream press: is there a Pro-Israel lobby in Britain, what does it do and what influence does it wield?

## **Chapter One: Introduction By James Jones and Peter Osborne**

In 2007 two US academics, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, published a study of what they called the US Israel lobby, exploring in particular the connection between the domestic power of the lobby in the United States and US foreign policy. The book caused controversy in the United States and even in Britain.

No comparable study has ever been made in this country. Indeed the pro-Israel lobby is an almost completely unexplored topic. In 2002 The New Statesman ran a cover story “A Kosher Conspiracy?”, in which Dennis Sewell examined the groups and individuals which comprise the pro-Israel lobby. Sewell cited instances of journalists being pressured and even being accused of antisemitism, but concluded: “the truth is that the ‘Zionist lobby’ does exist, but is a clueless bunch.” The very mild piece involved little investigation and, if anything, played down the influence of the groups.



There was a very strong reaction to the story and to the front cover depicting a gold Star of David piercing a British flag. The magazine was denounced as being guilty of the “new anti-Semitism”. A group of activists calling themselves Action Against Anti-Semitism marched into the magazine’s offices demanding it print an apology. Soon, editor, Peter Wilby, felt the need to apologise: “We (or more precisely, I) got it wrong... [we] used images and words in such a way as to create unwittingly the impression that the New Statesman was following an antisemitic tradition that sees the Jews as a conspiracy piercing the heart of the nation.” Since this time no national publication has attempted to investigate the pro-Israel lobby head-on.

Making criticisms of Israel can give rise to accusations of antisemitism - a charge which any decent or reasonable person would assiduously seek to avoid. Furthermore most British newspaper groups – for example News International, Telegraph newspapers and the Express Group - have tended to take a pro-Israel line and have not always been an hospitable environment for those taking a critical look at Israeli foreign policy and influence. Finally, media critics of Israeli foreign policy – as we will vividly demonstrate in this pamphlet – can open themselves up to coordinated campaigns and denunciation.

Whether as a result of these pressures or for some other reason, mainstream political publishing in Britain tends simply to ignore Israeli influence. Andrew Marr’s Ruling Britannia: The Failure and Future of British Democracy contains not a single mention at all of either Israel or the Israel lobby. Nor does the Alan Clark’s The Tories, or Robert Blake’s The Conservative Party from Peel to Major.

Similarly the presence of an Israel lobby as a factor in British public life is systematically ignored in British reporting. For example, a search of the newspaper database Lexis Nexis showed there have been only 154 mentions of the Conservative Friends of Israel in the British press, the first of which was apparently on 22 September 1985. By contrast The Tobacco Manufacturers Association enjoyed 1,083 citations during the same period, and the Scotch Whisky Association no fewer than 2,895. The Conservative Party donor Michael Ashcroft has been the subject of 2,239 articles over the comparable time period, and the 1922 Committee of Tory backbenchers got over 3,000. The purpose of this pamphlet is to enquire whether this paucity of public coverage is indeed a reflection of the real influence of the pro-Israel lobby in British government. In our voyage of discovery we have interviewed MPs, leading Jewish intellectuals and academics, diplomats, newspaper editors and others.

However, many people just don’t want to speak out about the Israel lobby. So making our film at times felt like an impossible task. Privately we would be met with great enthusiasm and support. Everyone had a story to tell, it seemed. Once the subject of doing an interview was raised the tone changed; “Anything at all I can do to help...” quickly became “Well, obviously I couldn’t.” or “It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to.” Many people who privately voiced concerns about the influence of the lobby simply felt they had too much to lose by confronting it. One national newspaper editor told us, “that’s one lobby I’ve never dared to take on.” From MPs, to senior BBC journalists and representatives of Britain’s largest charities, the pattern became depressingly familiar. Material would come flooding out on the phone or



in a meeting, but then days later an email would arrive to say that they would not be able to take part. Either after consultation with colleagues or consideration of the potential consequences, people pulled out.

Some had more reason than others. Jonathan Dimbleby had boldly expressed criticism in a powerfully argued article for Index on Censorship of the pressure from pro-Israel groups on the BBC, which led to the BBC Trust's report on Jeremy Bowen, and had initially been keen to be involved. Suddenly his interest evaporated. There simply wasn't the time, he said. At first we felt baffled and let down. But in due course we discovered that his comments had brought a complaint from the very same lawyer, Jonathan Turner of the Zionist Federation, that had complained about Jeremy Bowen. Dimbleby is now going through the exact same complaints process that he criticized. Turner is arguing that Dimbleby's comments make him unfit to host the BBC's Any Questions. The Dimbleby experience serves as a cautionary tale for anyone approaching this subject. Others, such as Sir John Tusa, who had opposed the BBC's refusal to broadcast the Disasters Emergency Committee Gaza appeal, were overcome with modesty, feeling that they simply didn't have the expertise to tackle the subject.

Indeed we found it almost impossible to get anyone to come on the record when we tried to investigate the BBC's decision not to launch the Gaza humanitarian appeal. Here is a list of the organisations which told us that to speak publicly about the BBC's refusal to screen the DEC Gaza appeal would be too sensitive: the Disasters Emergency Committee, Amnesty, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Save the Children Fund and the Catholic agency CAFOD. Only one of the organisations involved in lobbying on behalf of Israel, the Britain Israel Research and Communications Centre (BICOM), were willing to put forward an interviewee.

It was equally hard to find a publisher for this pamphlet. One potential publisher told us: "I don't think that our donors would like this very much." Another fretted that his charitable status would be compromised. One MP taunted the authors that we would never "have the guts" to make a television programme about the pro-Israel lobby. It was, he told us, "the most powerful lobby by far in parliament. It's a big story. If you have any balls you'll make a programme about it." When we returned to the MP later on to ask if he would talk to us on the record, he felt unable to come forward and do so. One front bench Conservative MP was so paranoid he insisted we remove the battery from our mobile phones to ensure our privacy during the conversation.

It was only senior MPs whose careers are winding down that felt able to voice what many MPs told us in private. One of them, Michael Mates, a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee and former Northern Ireland minister, told us on the record that "the pro-Israel lobby in our body politic is the most powerful political lobby. There's nothing to touch them." Mates added: "I think their lobbying is done very discreetly, in very high places, which may be why it is so effective."



Some journalists we spoke to had been accused of antisemitism, and felt inevitably it had done some damage to their careers. Others, like the BBC's Orla Guerin, against whom this very serious and damaging charge has repeatedly been made by the Israeli government, wouldn't even talk to us off the record. It is easy enough to see why. Guerin is a brave, honest and compassionate reporter. Yet the Israeli government has repeatedly complained to the BBC that Guerin is "antisemitic" and showed "total identification with the goals and methods of Palestinian terror groups." On one occasion, in an appalling charge, they linked her reporting from the Middle East to the rise of antisemitic incidents in Britain.<sup>1</sup> When Guerin was based in the Middle East in 2004, she filed a report about a sixteen year-old Palestinian would-be suicide bomber. Guerin said in the report that "this is a picture that Israel wants the world to see", implying the Israelis were exploiting the boy for propaganda purposes. Natan Sharansky, a cabinet minister at the time, wrote a formal letter to the BBC accusing her of "such a gross double standards to the Jewish state, it is difficult to see Ms Guerin's report as anything but antisemitic". The following year, when Guerin was awarded with an MBE for her reporting, Sharansky said: "It is very sad that something as important as antisemitism is not taken into consideration when issuing this award, especially in Britain where the incidents of antisemitism are on the rise."<sup>2</sup> Officially sanctioned smears like this show why so many people shy away from confronting the influence of the Israel lobby.

The former Conservative Party chairman and shadow foreign secretary, Michael Ancram, who is standing down as an MP at the next general election, did have the courage to talk to us. He told us that he had been accused of antisemitism "because I've been talking to Hamas and Hezbollah. I just take that with a pinch of salt." The accusation of antisemitism even touches the least likely of people. Antony Lerman, a man steeped in Jewish culture and history, who has worked for much of his career combating antisemitism, was labelled "a nasty anti-Semite" on a website designed to expose antisemitism on The Guardian's website, for an article he wrote during the making of the film. He told us: "I think there are people who are deliberately manipulating the use of the term antisemitism because they do see that it's useful in defending Israel."

We strongly believe the culture of silence that surrounds this issue allows sinister conspiracy theories and, by extension, genuine antisemitism to thrive. In making the lobbying transparent and an acceptable topic of conversation, we hope debate will be more open, and there will be less space for genuine antisemites to hide in the shadows.



## **Chapter Two: The Pro-Israel Lobby at Westminster**

The senior Tory MP David Amess recently put down a question in the House of Commons to enquire what the British government was doing to improve British relations with Israel. The reply came from Ivan Lewis, foreign office minister with special responsibility for the Middle East: “Israel is a close ally of the United Kingdom and we have regular warm and productive exchanges at all levels... We shall continue to foster a close relationship with Israel.”

This conversation was not quite the simple public exchange that it seemed. Neither politician mentioned that both of them had very close links to pro-Israel organizations. David Amess is the secretary of the Conservative Friends of Israel, which has been described by the famous Conservative Party politician and historian Robert Rhodes James as “the largest organization in Western Europe dedicated to the cause of the people of Israel.”

Meanwhile Ivan Lewis is a former vice-chairman of the Labour Friends of Israel. The connections of both men to the pro-Israel lobby were not declared on the parliamentary record. While neither acted inappropriately, their links would have been evident only to the most well-informed parliamentarian, and entirely invisible to the average voter.

Many of the most sensitive foreign affairs, defence and intelligence posts in the House of Commons are occupied by Labour or Conservative Friends of Israel. Mike Gapes, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, is a former deputy chairman of the LFI. Kim Howells, the chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee (and another former Middle East minister) used to chair Labour Friends of Israel. James Arbuthnot, chairman of the powerful Commons Defence Select Committee, is also the serving parliamentary chairman of the CFI. There is no prohibition on parliamentarians having membership of such groups, but how many voters are aware of these links.<sup>3</sup>

If a Conservative government wins the forthcoming general election the influence of the pro-Israel lobby is likely to increase. We believe that at least half, if not more, of the members of the shadow cabinet are members of the Conservative Friends of Israel.<sup>4</sup> Let’s try a thought experiment for a moment. Let’s suppose that over half of the members of the shadow cabinet were not Conservative Friends of Israel but Conservative Friends of Belgium, and that once a year an enormous dinner was held in central London attended by the majority of Conservative MPs.

Speculation would naturally ensue about the relationship between the Conservative Party and Belgium. Indeed the friendship between Belgium and the Conservative Party would become a matter of notoriety. Every trip made to Belgium by a Conservative would be a matter of prurient curiosity for the tabloid press. It is doubtful the Conservative Party would be able to sustain such a relationship for long.



And yet Belgium is not nearly as controversial a country as Israel. It does not illegally occupy large sections of neighbouring territory. Its soldiers are not accused of war crimes by human rights organizations. There is no question, therefore, that the connection between mainstream British political parties and the state of Israel is a matter of legitimate enquiry. We will now turn our intention to the lobby groups which act as advocates for Israel at Westminster.

## **Conservative Friends of Israel**

The Conservative Prime Minister Harold MacMillan once remarked that “there are three bodies no sensible man ever directly challenges: the Roman Catholic Church, the Brigade of Guards and the National Union of Mineworkers.” It is tempting to speculate that today he might have added the Conservative Friends of Israel to that list.

The Conservative Friends of Israel is beyond doubt the best connected, and probably the best funded, of all Westminster lobbying groups. Eighty percent of Conservative MPs are members. The leader of the Conservative Party is often expected to appear at their events, while the shadow foreign secretary and his team are subjected to persistent pressure by the CFI.

CFI’s director, Stuart Polak, is a familiar face in Westminster and well-known to everyone in the Tory establishment. Robert Halfon, the CFI’s political director and Tory candidate for Harlow, is sometimes regarded as the brains of the operation. Both are well-liked by Tory MPs.

One Tory MP has told us that, before he stood in the 2005 election, he met Stuart Polak, who put Israel’s case to him strongly at a social event. Towards the end of the meal, Stuart Polak asked if his campaign needed more money. Sure enough, weeks later two cheques arrived in the post at the Conservative office in the constituency. Both came from businessmen closely connected to the CFI who the Tory MP says he had never met before and who had never, so far as he knew, ever stepped inside his constituency. Another parliamentary candidate fighting a marginal seat told us that he had gone to see Stuart Polak, where he was tested on his views on Israel. Within a fortnight a cheque from a businessman he had never met arrived in his constituency office.

On studying donations to Conservative Constituency offices before the 2005 election a pattern emerges. A group of donors, all with strong connections to pro-Israel groups, (almost all are on the board of the CFI) made donations of between £2,000 and £5,000 either personally or through their companies to the constituency offices of certain Conservative candidates.<sup>5</sup>

The donors involved include Trevor Pears, a property magnate, who has sat on the BICOM board, used to sit on the CFI board, and has donated to Cameron in the past; Lord Steinberg, vice-president of Conservative Friends of Israel and sponsor of Stuart Polak in parliament; Michael Lewis, a South African businessman and deputy chairman of BICOM who was formerly on the Board of CFI; three or four other



prominent members of the CFI. The method of donation – medium-sized sums to constituency offices often through companies rather than personal names – means that connections to the CFI or other pro-Israel group are by no means obvious. These donors may never have met the candidates, nor stepped foot, let alone actually live, in the constituency, but were happy to make donations. All candidates in these constituencies either won the seat or came close. Interestingly, in constituencies where the Conservative candidate stood little chance, the CFI made the £2,000 donation themselves.

The Tory MPs fighting parliamentary seats in 2005 whose campaigns were funded by these donors included Ed Vaizey, shadow minister for culture, media and sport; Greg Hands, shadow treasury minister; Michael Gove, shadow education secretary; Brooks Newmark, opposition foreign affairs whip; Shailesh Vara, shadow deputy leader of the Commons; Grant Shapps, shadow minister for housing; Adam Holloway MP. Many of them then went on a CFI trip to Israel in 2006, although Michael Gove - whose polemic Celsius 7/7 comes free with CFI membership - has never been to Israel. Most have been supportive of Israel in speeches to parliament and none have been overtly critical.

There is also a suggestion that some members of the CFI target MPs who are critical of Israel. For instance Karen Buck, the Labour MP for Regent's Park and Kensington North, has been an outspoken critic. Her Conservative opponent Joanne Cash, who works for the think tank Policy Exchange, has received cheques cumulatively worth at least £20,000. It cannot be stressed too strongly that this pattern of donations is entirely legal. However, it is at least arguable that it contravenes one of the seven principles of public life, concerning integrity, as set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life: "Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties."

Over the past three years the CFI has flown over thirty Conservative parliamentary candidates to Israel on free trips.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes MPs can take their wives on these superbly organized events. Excellent access is granted to senior members of the Israeli political and security establishments, though the trips are balanced by a meeting with a Palestinian businessman or politician.

For a junior or a prospective MP to be taken on such a trip and granted access to which they are not accustomed can be a powerful and persuasive experience MP. The CFI will often include pro-Israeli quotations from many of the Conservative candidates in its newsletter. The impression given, normally far from inaccurate, is that they have new loyal supporters. In the months following one trip in November 2007, ten candidates received small donations to their constituencies from prominent CFI sponsors. The recipients included high-profile candidates such as Margot James, vice-chairman of the Conservative Party, who has not yet declared the trip. Another, Andrew Griffiths, who had spoken about the difficulties of negotiating with people "trying to blow up your friends, family and people you care about", received three donations, including one from CFI chairman Richard Harrington.<sup>8</sup> Often these donations are carefully targeted. In the months after William Hague was appointed shadow foreign secretary, he accepted personal donations from CFI board members totaling tens of thousands of



pounds.<sup>9</sup> However, Conservative MPs are extremely unwilling to talk publicly about CFI funding and influence inside the Party. Michael Mates told us that “no one will talk to you before the election.”

Conservative support for the Zionist cause dates back at least as far as the famous meeting between then Conservative Prime Minister AJ Balfour and the great Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in 1905, when Weizmann convinced Balfour of the case for the state of Israel. Weizmann also converted to the cause the future Conservative statesman Winston Churchill, then a Liberal candidate, at around the same time. Indeed one of Churchill’s most ferocious attacks on the Chamberlain government came in May 1939, when it announced its decision to cut back on Jewish immigration into Palestine. Churchill told MPs that “this pledge of a home of refuge, of an asylum, was not made to the Jews in Palestine but to the Jews outside Palestine, to that vast, unhappy, mass of scattered, persecuted, wandering Jews whose intense, unchanging, unconquerable desire has been for a National Home.”

The Conservative Friends of Israel was founded in 1974 by the Conservative MP Michael Fidler.<sup>10</sup> Since then it has emerged as a powerful lobby group. By 1984, the Conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had been prevailed on to become chairman of the CFI branch at her local Finchley constituency, a development which elicited the following denunciation on state controlled television in the strongly anti-Israel Soviet Union: “The Conservative Friends of Israel group essentially plays the role of a powerful pro-Zionist lobby within the Conservative Party.”<sup>11</sup>

No other lobbying organization – least of all one that acts in the interests of a foreign country – can virtually guarantee that the leader of the Conservative Party, his or her most senior colleagues, and scores of Tory MPs will attend such a grand annual celebratory lunch with such regularity. Most of today’s shadow cabinet are members, including the leader of the opposition, shadow foreign secretary and shadow defence secretary. As we have seen, many of the key back-bench positions are held by CFI supporters. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate how much influence the CFI actually wields within the policy-making apparatus of the Conservative Party.

For example the former Conservative Party chairman and shadow foreign secretary, Michael Ancram, has long been a member of the CFI. This has not prevented him being a severe critic of Israeli foreign policy – he was seen rolling his eyes when David Cameron praised Israel for the preservation of innocent life at it’s the CFI’s Dorchester lunch last June – and an advocate of direct negotiation with Hamas. Richard Spring is another senior Conservative MP who has made trips to Israel as a guest of the CFI. Yet he is also a regular visitor to Israel’s opponent Syria and often urges the return of the Golan Heights as prelude to a peace settlement. William Hague, the shadow foreign secretary, is also a member of the CFI, but that has not stopped him from being an occasional critic of Israeli foreign policy.



Hague is an important case study. He accepted donations from Conservative Friends of Israel board members after becoming Shadow Foreign Secretary, but within months William Hague had fallen out with the CFI.<sup>12</sup> Hague was on the receiving end of an ear-bashing, was targeted in a critical letter to *The Spectator*, and subject to threats to withdraw funding from Lord Kalms, a major Tory donor and member of the CFI, after he used the word “disproportionate” about Israel’s 2006 attack on Lebanon.

At the same time, rumours swirled around Westminster that Hague had been influenced by his Bosnian Muslim adviser, Arminka Helic. In the wake of this fall-out, we understand from Tory sources that Stuart Polak was able to secure a meeting with David Cameron in which the Tory leader gave what was understood as an undertaking not to use the word “disproportionate” again. Nevertheless, any effort to portray either William Hague or David Cameron merely as a passive instrument of the pro-Israel lobby is wide of the mark.

More recently, Tory sources say that the CFI played an influential role in stiffening the Conservative Party’s opposition to the UN resolution based on the Goldstone Report into the Israeli attack on Gaza. According to our sources, Hague was persuaded to sit down with David Cameron and Andrew Feldman, an influential supporter of the CFI, and produced the following quotation for the CFI newsletter setting out their opposition to the resolution: “Unless the draft resolution is redrafted to reflect the role that Hamas played in starting the conflict, we would recommend that the British Government vote to reject the resolution.” Hague had decided to take the American line of rejecting the UN resolution, unlike the Labour government, which, in effect, abstained.

To assess the influence of the CFI within the Conservative Party, it is useful to compare it to the Conservative Middle East Council (CMEC), which focuses on the wider Middle East in the Conservative Party and works hard to balance the CFI’s influence. According to its website, every year CMEC seeks to take “a series of delegations to Iran, the Arab states and Israel.” It claims that just over half of all Conservative MPs are members. Chaired by the former shadow cabinet minister Hugo Swire, CMEC has yet to establish itself as a potent serious rival to the CFI.

For the thirty-five years the CFI has existed, the Conservative Party, both in government and opposition, has taken a strongly pro-Israel stance. The CFI alone cannot take the credit for this. Indeed other factors – above all, British subordination to US foreign policy – are considerably more significant. Nevertheless, no political lobby inside the Conservative Party – and certainly no longer the Brigade of Guards – carries comparable weight.



## **Labour Friends of Israel (LFI)**

Whereas the CFI has the luxury of working with the grain of the Conservative Party, the Labour Friends of Israel has tended to face a considerably tougher job. There is a much stronger Labour tradition of supporting Palestinian causes since the 1967 war, where Conservatives are more likely to instinctively assume that Israel is in the right. The visceral anti-Americanism of many Labour MPs also plays a role here.

The LFI was founded in 1957 at a public rally at that year's Labour Party Conference. It describes itself as "a Westminster based lobby group working within the British Labour Party to promote the State of Israel". It has very close ties with the Israeli Labor Party, and British Labour Party figures like Philip Gould have given training to Israeli politicians in electoral strategy. For that reason the LFI is perhaps less unquestioning in its support of the Israeli government than the CFI. The two lobby groups both work closely with the Israeli embassy and even share supporters, such as the businessmen Victor Blank and Trevor Chinn, but they work independently within their respective parties.

Labour Friends of Israel has taken more MPs on trips than any other group. Only the CFI comes close. Since 2001, the LFI has arranged more than sixty free trips for MPs. LFI and CFI trips combined account for over 13% of all funded trips for MPs and candidates. That's more trips to Israel, a country with a population smaller than London's, than to Europe, America or Africa. Even in America, where the pro-Israel lobby is extremely influential, trips to Israel account for only ten percent of all politicians' foreign trips.<sup>13</sup>

The group is similarly well connected within the party, and has regular meetings with David Miliband and his Foreign Office team to make Israel's case. Labour MPs told us that young, ambitious MPs see a role at LFI as a good way to get ahead. Chairs of the LFI very often go on to become ministers. James Purnell and Jim Murphy, the Secretary of State for Scotland, are two recent chairmen. Ivan Lewis, the foreign office minister with responsibility for the Middle East, is a former vice-chair.

One of Tony Blair's first acts on becoming an MP in 1983 was to join Labour Friends of Israel. He remained close to the group throughout his career, regularly appearing at their events. Jon Mendelsohn, a former chairman of the LFI, and now Gordon Brown's chief election fundraiser, speaking in 2007, described Tony Blair's achievement in transforming the Labour Party's position on Israel. "Blair attacked the anti-Israelism that had existed in the Labour Party. Old Labour was cowboys-and-Indians politics, picking underdogs to support, but the milieu has changed. Zionism is pervasive in New Labour. It is automatic that Blair will come to Labour Friends of Israel meetings."

Blair succeeded in making the Labour party more attractive to donors connected with the Labour Friends of Israel. The key figure in building these relationships was, of course, Michael Levy.



Blair met Levy in 1994 at a dinner party thrown by Gideon Meir, number two at the Israeli Embassy. Blair was just back from a trip to Israel with the LFI.

The two men quickly recognised the mutual benefits offered by the relationship. By early 1995, Blair was leader of the opposition and he dropped in on his new friend for a swim and a game of tennis almost every weekend. Levy had been collecting donations to a blind trust, known as the Labour Leader's Office Fund, raising nearly two million pounds, a sum "previously unimaginable for a Labour leader".<sup>14</sup> Blair maintained that he was unaware of the sources of these donations despite being in almost constant contact with Levy and even meeting some of the donors.

We now know that the secret donors included funders of pro-Israel groups such as Trevor Chinn and Emmanuel Kaye. Levy had played a crucial role in persuading donors that Labour had changed. Blair told Levy, "I am absolutely determined that we must not go into the next election financially dependent on the trade unions."<sup>15</sup> Instead, Blair became financially dependent on large donors, some of whom had very strong views on Israel.

According to Levy, the subject of Israel was second only to fundraising in his conversations with Tony Blair. Levy is estimated to have raised over fifteen million pounds for Blair before the "cash for peerages" affair brought Levy's fundraising to an end in the summer of 2006.

### **Chapter Three- The Pro-Israel Lobby In The Media**

Many supporters of Israel have come to believe that they are a beleaguered minority in Britain. They are convinced that press and politicians alike are ranged against them and that the media routinely distorts the actions and intentions of the Jewish state. This belief is sincerely held, but it is difficult to support on closer examination.

Most of the mainstream British media takes a pro-Israel line. Rupert Murdoch, whose News International media empire controls between 30-40% of the British newspaper press, makes no secret of his pro-Israeli sympathies.<sup>16</sup> Indeed one well-regarded Times correspondent, Sam Kiley, took the extraordinary step of actually resigning from the paper because of interference with his work on the Middle East.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the Murdoch press, the Telegraph Media Group and Express Newspapers have tended to support Israel. So has Associated Newspapers, though to a less obvious extent. There are, however, two important media organisations, which have consistently sought to report fairly from the Middle East and present the Palestinian point of view with equal force to the pro-Israeli government line. These are The Guardian and the BBC. These two organisations have been subjected to ceaseless pressure and at times harassment both from the Israeli government itself and from pressure groups.



This chapter will document some of this pressure by chronicling some of the campaigns mounted by the pro-Israel lobby against The Guardian and the BBC. We will then turn our attention to the pro-Israel media lobby groups, of which the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM) is by some distance the most important.

## ***The Guardian***

The Guardian was more closely involved in the creation of Israel than any other British newspaper. Its editor C.P. Scott was instrumental in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, introducing Chaim Weizmann, the leader of the Zionist movement and later the first President of the state of Israel, to leading members of the British government.

However, the paper now finds itself at the centre of an international campaign accusing it of anti-Zionism and even antisemitism. Through much of the last decade, The Guardian has been in dispute with the Israeli government and in particular the combative Israeli Government press office director, Danny Seaman. In 2002, Seaman publicly boasted that he had forced The Guardian to move correspondent Suzanne Goldenberg after she had been transferred to Washington. “We simply boycotted them,” claimed Seaman, “the editorial boards got the message and replaced their people.”

Seaman is well known for using tactics such as denying or delaying visas to obstruct correspondents he sees as hostile to Israel. One reporter familiar with Seaman described him as a “bully” who was “at the forefront of the general harassment. Rusbridger wrote to Seaman insisting he withdraw his comments, only to be told by Seaman: “I will happily withdraw my comments about Ms. Goldenberg when your newspaper withdraws the biased, sometimes malicious and often incorrect reports which were filed by her during her unpleasant stay here.”<sup>18</sup> Rusbridger insists he had total faith in Goldenberg’s reporting, for which she received numerous awards, and that “only the Israelis would see a move to Washington as a demotion.”

In 2006 The Guardian was caught up in another row after publishing a controversial article by correspondent Chris McGreal comparing Israel to apartheid South Africa. The episode reveals the workings of the pro-Israel lobby with the Israeli embassy coordinating the offensive. An emergency meeting was called at the Israeli ambassador’s residence with BICOM chairman Poju Zabłudowicz, board of deputies president Henry Grunwald, community security trust chairman Gerald Ronson and Lord Janner of Labour Friends of Israel to plan the response.

Ronson and Grunwald were dispatched to visit Alan Rusbridger in his office to convey their feelings. According to Rusbridger, Ronson didn’t even take his coat off: “He began by saying, I think his phrase was ‘I’ve always said opinions are like arseholes, everyone’s got one’, and then he effectively said ‘I’m in favour of free speech but there is a line which can’t be crossed and, as far as I’m concerned, you’ve crossed it, and you must stop this’.” Ronson accused The Guardian of being responsible for antisemitic



attacks, a claim Rusbridger refused to accept: “I mean I didn’t want to get in a great row with Gerald Ronson, I just said I’d be interested in the evidence, I’m not sure how you make that causal connection between someone reading an article that is critical of the foreign policy of Israel and then thinking why don’t I go out and mug Jews on the streets of London. I just can’t believe that happens.”

The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), a pro-Israel media watchdog, made a complaint to the Press Complaints Commission, arguing that McGreal’s article was “based on materially false accusations”. The complaint was not upheld. Alan Rusbridger’s decision to run the Chris McGreal article was vindicated. The Guardian is not the only newspaper to come under pressure. and, according to Rusbridger, it works. He told us that “there are a lot of newspaper and broadcasting editors who have told me that they just don’t think it’s worth the hassle to challenge the Israeli line. They’ve had enough.”

## **The BBC and the Pro-Israel Lobby**

The case of the BBC is extraordinary. The organisation has become a hate figure for pro-Israel groups, who resent its global reach and supposed sympathy for the Palestinians. We have spoken to BBC journalists and recently departed staff who say that rarely a week goes by without having to deal with complaints about their coverage of the Middle East. This year has been particularly difficult for the Corporation. The BBC refused to screen an aid appeal from Britain’s top charities for the people of Gaza, resulting in millions of pounds less money being raised. It reacted to pressure from pro-Israel pressure groups by publishing a report, which criticised its own Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen. Finally, it refused to disclose a report by Malcolm Balen into its Middle East coverage which cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds to the licence fee payer. Through a Freedom of Information request we discovered the BBC had spent over a quarter of a million pounds on legal fees relating to the case.<sup>19</sup>

It is no surprise that at the start of the year the culture secretary, Ben Bradshaw, himself a former BBC reporter, remarked that “I’m afraid the BBC has to stand up to the Israeli authorities occasionally. Israel has a long reputation of bullying the BBC.” Bradshaw added that “I’m afraid the BBC has been cowed by this relentless and persistent pressure from the Israeli government and they should stand up against it.”<sup>20</sup>



## 1. The Balen Report

This report has its origins in the spring of 2003, when the BBC's relationship with Israel completely broke down. The Israeli government imposed visa restrictions on BBC journalists and refused access to Israeli government figures after a documentary about its nuclear weapons entitled "Israel's Secret Weapon" was shown on BBC World. The Israeli Government press officer, Danny Seaman, compared it to "the worst of Nazi propaganda".

For a time Israel joined a small band of countries, including North Korea, Zimbabwe and Turkmenistan, which refused the BBC free access. When Ariel Sharon visited London in July 2003, BBC journalists were in the ludicrous position of being banned from attending the press conference. By the autumn, pressure on the BBC from pro-Israel groups and the Israeli government was so great that the head of BBC news Richard Sambrook felt obliged to act.

Sambrook employed Malcolm Balen, a former head of ITV News and senior BBC executive, to write the now infamous Balen Report on the BBC's Middle East coverage during the previous four years. In October, the High Court finally ruled that the BBC does not have to publish the report, which has become an obsession for Israel's supporters, who hold this up as the BBC trying to hide its anti-Israel bias.

This is dubious. We have spoken to one of the very few people who have read the report. He says that far from concluding the BBC's coverage was biased against Israel, it simply finds examples where more context should have been given. If anything, our source claims, the impression given is that the BBC is sympathetic to Israel.

## 2. Punishing Jeremy Bowen.

In April this year, in an important success for the pro-Israel lobby, the BBC's Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, was criticized by the BBC Trust for breaching their rules of accuracy and impartiality in an online piece, and their rules of accuracy in a radio piece. Bowen's critics have seized on his humiliation, demanding that he be sacked and insisting that the episode proved the BBC's "chronically biased reporting". The real story behind the BBC Trust's criticism of Bowen reports is rather different: it demonstrates the pusillanimity of the BBC Trust and the energy and opportunism of the pro-Israel lobby.

The story begins with an essay written by Bowen to mark the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War for the BBC website. Though many people viewed Bowen's essay as a fair and balanced account, erring if anything on the side of conventional wisdom, this was not the reaction of two passionate members of the Pro-Israel lobby, Jonathan Turner of the Zionist Federation and Gilead Ini, who lobbies for CAMERA, an American pro-Israel media watchdog organization.



Turner and Ini subjected Bowen's article to line by line scrutiny, alleging some 24 instances of bias in his online article and a further four in a later report by Bowen from a controversial Israeli settlement called Har Homa. Turner and Ini's complaints were rejected by the BBC's editorial complaints unit, so they duly appealed to the BBC Trust. The meeting was chaired by David Liddiment who, to quote Jonathan Dimbleby, "is admired as a TV entertainment wizard and former director of programmes at ITV but whose experience of the dilemmas posed by news and current affairs, especially in relation to the bitterly contested complexities of the Middle East is, perforce, limited."

The BBC Trust found that Bowen had breached three accuracy and one impartiality guideline in his online report, and one accuracy guideline in his radio piece. This was a massive boost for the organizations to which Turner and Ini were attached. The Zionist Federation at once called for Bowen to be sacked, calling his position "untenable", while adding that what they called his "biased coverage of Israel" had been a "significant contributor to the recent rise in antisemitic incidents in the UK to record levels." Meanwhile, CAMERA claimed that the BBC Trust had exposed Bowen's "unethical" approach to his work and insisted the BBC must now take "concrete steps" to combat its "chronically biased reporting" of the Middle East.

These powerful attacks might have been justified if the BBC Trust had found Bowen guilty of egregious bias. In fact he was condemned for what were at best matters of opinion. In a majority of the cases, the complaints were found to have no merit, and where changes were made they changed the meaning very little.<sup>21</sup>

As Dimbleby concluded, "You don't have to search far on the web to find Zionist publications, lobby groups and bloggers all over the world using distorted versions of the report to justify their ill-founded prejudice that the BBC has a deep-seated and long-standing bias against the state of Israel. Conversely, millions of Palestinians, other Arabs and Muslims will by now have been confirmed in their — equally false — belief that the BBC is yet again running scared of Israeli propaganda..."

"Not only has Bowen's hard-won reputation been sullied, but the BBC's international status as the best source of trustworthy news in the world has been gratuitously — if unintentionally — undermined." The Trust's ruling was met with dismay in BBC newsrooms. A former BBC News editor, Charlie Beckett, told us "the BBC investigated Jeremy Bowen because they were under such extraordinary pressure... it struck a chill through the actual BBC newsroom because it signaled to them that they were under assault."

We can reveal that Jeremy Bowen had an article "Israel still bears a disastrous legacy" (31 May 2007) published a week earlier than his BBC piece (4 June 2007) in The Jewish Chronicle containing most of the contentious sentences.



Indeed, even the problematic lines that led the BBC Trust to conclude there had been a breach of accuracy and impartiality, such as “Zionism’s innate instinct to push out the frontier” and “The Israeli generals, mainly hugely self-confident sabras in their late 30s and early 40s, had been training to finish the unfinished business of 1948 for most of their careers” are still in Bowen’s article on The Jewish Chronicle’s website. Perhaps the BBC Trust’s interpretation of due impartiality is different to that of Britain’s Jewish community.

## **The Gaza Humanitarian appeal**

The BBC has a long tradition of showing humanitarian appeals, including those that are seen as politically sensitive, such as the Lebanon appeal in 1982, and has helped raise tens of millions of pounds for people in need around the world. But in January 2009, Mark Thompson, director general of the BBC, took the unprecedented decision of breaking away from other broadcasters and refusing to broadcast the Disasters Emergency Appeal for Gaza, claiming it would compromise the BBC’s impartiality. ITV and Channel 4 screened the Gaza appeal, but Sky joined the BBC in refusing. The BBC’s decision had an undeniable impact. Brendan Gormley, Chief Executive of the DEC, told us that the appeal raised about half of the expected total: £7.5 million. In the first 48 hours of the appeal phone calls were down by 17,000 on the average.

Thompson also cast doubt on the charities’ ability to deliver aid on the ground despite assurances from the DEC and his own charitable appeals advisers that this was not the case.

We asked Charlie Beckett why the BBC had refused. He replied: “If there was no pro-Israeli lobby in this country then I don’t think [screening the appeal] would have been seen as politically problematic. I don’t think it would be a serious political issue and concern for them if they didn’t have that pressure from an extraordinarily active, sophisticated, and persuasive lobby sticking up for the Israeli viewpoint.”

## **The rise of BICOM**

BICOM, the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, is Britain’s major pro-Israel lobby. Founded in 2001 as an equivalent to America’s hugely influential AIPAC, it is bankrolled by its Chairman Poju Zabłudowicz, a Finnish billionaire and former arms dealer. Over the past three years Zabłudowicz has given over two million pounds in donations. This year, they sent thirty representatives to the AIPAC conference in America, a sign of BICOM’s growing ambition.



Incredibly, almost no one we interviewed for the film had even heard of Zabłudowicz, a key player at the heart of the pro-Israel lobby in Britain. Our questions continually met with blank expressions from senior politicians and people in the Jewish community. Zabłudowicz fiercely guards his privacy and does so with great success despite his wife being a renowned art collector, and counting Madonna and other A-list celebrities among close personal friends.

Zabłudowicz's father, Shlomo Zabłudowicz, made his money through Israeli arms manufacturers Soltam Systems, a company, which continues to thrive and recently provided the IDF with artillery for its Gaza campaign. Poju Zabłudowicz also ran Soltam, but has since moved his money from arms into property. He is now estimated to own around forty percent of downtown Las Vegas.

Far more significantly, we have discovered that he owns property in the illegal settlements in the West Bank. He has a stake in a shopping centre in Ma'ale Adumim, a settlement which is seen as strategically crucial in ensuring Jerusalem remains in Israeli hands. So much so that Netanyahu launched his election campaign in the settlement in 2005. "Starting my campaign here is not coincidental [it is] because Jerusalem is in danger."

Zabłudowicz believes Israel suffers unfairly from an image problem with Palestinian propaganda swallowed too readily by European liberals. He hoped to create one lobby that oversaw media and politics in the style of AIPAC, but met with resistance from the parliamentary Friends of Israel groups, guarding their patch. He does, however, play a role at Conservative Friends of Israel as a significant donor. He has also established a relationship with David Cameron, the man almost certain to be Britain's next prime minister.

In September 2005 when Cameron was planning his Conservative leadership election campaign he met Zabłudowicz for a coffee. Zabłudowicz was suitably impressed with what he heard, and Cameron received £15,000 from Zabłudowicz over the course of his election campaign.<sup>22</sup> To ensure that the donations complied with election law, he made the donations through his British subsidiary Tamares Real Estate Investments. Despite the CFI and BICOM not formally merging there is a huge amount of co-ordination. Many of BICOM's key figures also play roles in the CFI: Trevor Pears, Michael Lewis and Poju Zabłudowicz are driving forces behind both lobbies. David Cameron also accepted £20,000 from Trevor Pears in his leadership election.<sup>23</sup>

BICOM performs a similar role to the parliamentary groups: building relationships with key journalists and editors, taking them on paid-for trips to Israel, and setting up high level meetings in Israel and the UK. They also provide journalists with daily briefings and suggest stories and angles to friendly contacts. During key periods, like Operation Cast Lead, BICOM goes into overdrive.

In its early days, BICOM received criticism from some in the Jewish community for not doing enough and in 2006 they replaced Daniel Shek, a smooth Israeli diplomat, now ambassador in France, with Lorna Fitzsimons, a former Labour MP in Rochdale. The appointment surprised some as Fitzsimons is not



Jewish and has no obvious connection to Israel, but she is combative and, of course, had good contacts with the current government.

She leads a team of bright PR professionals who make Israel's case in a sophisticated way, not resorting to accusations of anti-Semitism and simplistic explanations, instead focusing on shared values and the threat from Israel's neighbours.

There is a question too of whether journalists should accept free trips from an organisation representing only one side in such a controversial conflict. And if they do so, then surely they should make clear in any resulting article that the trip has been funded by a pro-Israel lobby? Of the dozens of journalists that make the trips each year, only very few seem to make any reference to BICOM, giving the impression they were on a neutral fact-finding mission by default, whereas in fact it was a carefully coordinated trip. That is not to say such trips can never be useful for a journalist, just that they should declare them in the same way as MPs so their readers can take an informed view.

Two months after the end of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, BICOM sent half a dozen journalists on a free trip to Tel Aviv to talk to Israeli defence analysts. The message BICOM wanted to get across was that they should pay more attention to Iran than to the Palestinians.

The Sunday Times wrote a piece about how the world looks from the point of view of Israel's top generals. The News of the World contained a brief piece about Iran's nuclear ambitions: "Psycho Doomsday is Nigh". The Mirror's security correspondent wrote two pieces from Israel, detailing their list of meetings. Only The Sunday Times made any reference to BICOM, acknowledging it had arranged the trip half-way through the piece. The News of the World and The Mirror made no reference to BICOM arranging and funding the visit.<sup>24</sup>

In a response to our questions, Poju Zabłudowicz wrote: "BICOM is a British not-for-profit organization which produces information and provides activities that seek to explain the complexities of the issues facing Israel and the Middle East, while promoting the policy of a two-state solution with the Palestinians... There are countless numbers of journalists (broadcast and print), politicians (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat), as well as academics and analysts with whom BICOM maintains regular contact."

## **Chapter Four – Conclusion and Recommendations**

A Short Summary of Recent Relations Between Britain and Israel Since 1997 there has sometimes appeared to be an assumption at the highest levels of British government that the interests of Israel and Britain are identical. For example, during Israel's catastrophic invasion of the Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the Blair government failed even to call for a ceasefire.



The idea that British and Israeli foreign policy interests should be the same is, however, relatively new. While Britain played a famous role in the creation of the Israeli state, for a long time after World War Two it was never afraid to criticise Israeli foreign policy.

For example, the Conservative foreign secretary (and former prime minister) Sir Alec Douglas Home called at Harrogate in October 1970 for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and for Israel to abandon the territories occupied in the aftermath of the Six Day War in June 1967. This firm sense that Britain could confidently challenge Israeli foreign policy persisted for some time afterwards.

Margaret Thatcher was an instinctive and long-standing supporter of Israel. Through connections with the large Jewish community in her Finchley constituency she was a member of the Anglo-Israel Friendship League and a founder member of the Conservative Friends of Israel. Thatcher visited Israel twice before becoming PM, and became the first serving British prime minister to visit in 1986.

However, when events warranted, she was ready to criticize Israel, far more strongly than more recent prime ministers. After Israel's bombing of the Iraqi nuclear plant at Osirak in 1981, Thatcher described the actions as "a grave breach of international law" and a "matter of great grief". These were words that no government minister would use today, and certainly stand in stark contrast to William Hague's mild comments in the summer of 2006, condemning Israeli actions as "disproportionate", which provoked such outrage among the pro-Israel lobby at the time.

After the Lebanon war in 1982 Thatcher took an unprecedented stand by joining other European countries in imposing an arms embargo on Israel, which lasted twelve years until it was ended in 1994. Again this action contrasts with the reaction to the Lebanon war of 2006. Afterwards, British arms exports to Israel increased.

The election of Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997 marked the turning point in British-Israeli relations. Tony Blair soon brought Britain into line with the American position, which was significantly more supportive of Israeli policies. This change of approach can be measured by the use of Britain's vote as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

The United States has used its veto at the UN Security Council forty times since 1972 over resolutions concerning Israel. The resolutions have focused on the settlements, the status of Jerusalem, and Israeli military action. On Israel and Palestine, there has historically been a gap between US policy, being strongly supportive of Israel, and the other members of the Security Council. Between 1972 and 1997 inclusive, the UK and France voted the same way as China and the Soviet Union/Russia, and the opposite way to the US, on almost 80% of Middle East resolutions.

The Labour government has subtly changed Britain's approach. Since 2003, France has continued to vote the same way as China and Russia, but the UK has abstained on every Middle East resolution, which the US has vetoed. This suggests a growing reluctance to be seen to be contradicting US and by extension Israeli policy.



## Growing Importance of the Pro-Israel Lobby

Sir Richard Dalton, former British ambassador in Tehran and consul in Jerusalem, told us that when he was a young diplomat in the 1970s, Britain felt able to act purely in its own interests. Throughout his career he has seen that change as the influence of the pro-Israel lobby has grown. “One of the frustrations is that my colleagues and I are not pro-Palestinian, pro-Arab, pro-Israel, pro-anything. We want what is best for Britain. “But there is a pro-Israel lobby and it’s active in trying to define the debate in order to limit the options that British politicians can choose to options that would be acceptable to that lobby.”

He told us that increasingly politicians are afraid to express publicly what they may say in private. That means Israel is not subjected to the same public scrutiny as other countries. He cited the Lebanon war as an example: “The Israel lobbies appear to want to censor British politicians from saying that elements of the Israeli action were disproportionate and they appear to be willing to use financial pressures as a way of enforcing that decision.” Even more significantly this senior diplomat felt that his own actions when serving as Consul General in Jerusalem in the late 1990s were limited by the influence of the lobby at home in Britain.

This influence works in a variety of ways: the unceasing cultivation of British MPs; political donations; availability of research briefs; brilliant presentation of the case for Israel. The Israel lobby has enjoyed superb contacts at the very top of British politics, and never hesitated to use them. As we have shown in this pamphlet, it has used them at key moments; for instance the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon three years ago and the publication of the Goldstone Report into alleged war crimes during the invasion of Gaza earlier this year.

Beyond these specific examples of influence, there is also a wider presence. The Friends of Israel groups in the House of Commons have firmly established themselves in the interstices of British political life. Their heavy presence at party conferences is taken for granted, their lunches and dinners an ingrained part of the Westminster social scene, the donations a vital part of the political financing. An environment now exists where MPs and ministers feel cautious about criticizing the foreign policy of the Israeli state, wary of opening themselves to criticism on the home front.

Meanwhile, public discourse on Israel, as we have shown, is heavily policed. This policing takes two forms. First, critics of the Israel government policy – The Guardian and the BBC are the two most prominent examples – come under heavy and incessant attack from pro-Israel media monitoring groups. Second, journalists from key media outlets are assiduously cultivated.



## **The Need for Openness**

The pro-Israel lobby does nothing wrong, or illegal. It is not sinister and it is not unusual. It cannot be too much stressed that British public life is populated by all kinds of interest groups, many of them extremely active at Westminster.

While this pro-Israel lobbying is lawful, it is emphatically not transparent. We have shown in this pamphlet that journalists very rarely declare their BICOM funded trips to Israel. We have also shown how patterns of donations from CFI members to Tory candidates are sometimes opaque. Indeed, the financial structure of the CFI as a whole is obscure. It does not declare its funding, the identity of its donors, or its annual turnover. Despite being composed almost entirely of MPs and Conservative party members it is registered not as a members' association, a lobby, a company, or a charity, but as an unincorporated association. This means it does not exist as an organization, but merely as a collection of individuals.

This allows its donors to give money without being identified. This means that some of these donors could be foreign nationals, who under British electoral rules should not be allowed to fund political parties or members of parliament. For a foreign donor wanting to fund a British politician or political party, unincorporated associations offer that opportunity. This anonymity is not acceptable for any political pressure group of whatever persuasion in 21st century British politics.

A similar observation applies to other pro-Israel pressure groups. While BICOM's work is entirely legitimate, it is by no means transparent. They never declare, for example, which journalists go on trips and who they meet. In the United States, AIPAC must register as a lobby and declare its activities. Over here, BICOM is simply a company registered at Companies House, and doesn't make its work public.

## **The Pro-Israel lobby and British-Jewry**

There is one final set of questions to be asked. Who does the pro-Israel lobby represent? Is it mainstream British-Jewish opinion or the state of Israel or neither? More likely, it exerts pressure for a particular set of interests within Israeli politics. Globalisation has led to a wide and welcome recognition that we all have multiple legitimate interests and identities. There are countless good reasons for the interests of Israel to have a place in UK politics and vice versa, not only because of interests of State, but also because there are many British subjects who have direct legitimate interests and concerns for what happens in Israel and vice versa. The reason we need to ask who or what is represented by the UK's pro-Israel lobby is precisely so that we can understand what effect UK policy does actually have in Israeli politics and whether these legitimate interests are effectively being promoted.



Of course, this question is especially difficult to answer because the main pro-Israel lobbying organizations do not have a transparent financial structure. It is impossible to state with confidence that they receive all their money from British sources. Indeed we have discovered that the biggest funder for BICOM is not a British citizen, but a Finnish business tycoon with a commercial interest in a shopping centre in Ma'ale Adumim, a West Bank town regarded in international law as an illegal settlement. One of the enduring paradoxes of the discussion of Israeli foreign policy is that it is much more contested and debated inside Israel than outside.

Some Jewish interviewees told us that they were felt that the main pro-Israel organizations in Britain were less critical of Israeli foreign policy than mainstream British Jewish opinion. David Newman (who was appointed by Israel's ministry of foreign affairs to fight the proposed academic boycott of Israel in the UK):

“There is clearly a debate, and it's not just a debate it's a huge debate inside Israel, whether Israel should or should not continue to control the West Bank, whether settlements are legal or illegal, moral or immoral. And what you often find is that the groups such as AIPAC or BICOM outside Israel tend to close down that sort of debate, they tend to say you have to be totally supportive of Israel full stop, whatever Israel does.”

**Newman added that:**

“The fact that someone, if as you say, has a major investment in Ma'ale Adumim [and] is the major investor also of BICOM, that would tend to indicate in what direction BICOM is going. It's going to be more supportive of settlements or less critical of settlements than if someone on the left was investing their money in BICOM.”

One of the reasons for the stale debate in the UK and Europe around Israel and Palestine has little to do with the politics of the lobbies but stems from our own hang-ups and history: we resist being anti-Israeli because of the difficulty of confronting the reality of European antisemitism; and yet we resist being anti-Palestinian because of the difficulty in confronting the reality of the European colonial past. So partly the UK (and Europe more widely) needs to be prepared to confront the issues of Israel and Palestine themselves, and not the issues of its own fraught history towards them if it wants to have a mature debate and any significant influence in the region.

The UK's pro-Israel lobby is able to take advantage of this stale debate in order to project and promote a specific view of Israel's interests, one that is hotly debated within Israel. It is in the interest of our own democracy, and our effectiveness in promoting the legitimate interests of Israel within the British state to have more transparency here.



## Summary and Conclusion

Israel is a wonderful and extraordinary country with a rich and flourishing democratic history. Founded in terrible circumstances in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and World War Two, it has a profound right to exist. But this moral legitimacy does not mean that the foreign and internal policies of Israel should be exempt from the same kind of probing criticism that any independent state must expect. Nor does it mean that the rights of Palestinians to their own state can be ignored.

The pro-Israel lobby, in common with other lobbies, has every right to operate in Britain. But it needs to be far more open about how it is funded and what it does. This is partly because the present obscurity surrounding the funding arrangements and activities of organisations such as BICOM and the CFI can paradoxically give rise to conspiracy theories that have no basis in fact. But it is mainly because politics in a democracy should never take place behind closed doors. It should be out in the open and there for all to see.

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1 *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 April 2005

2 *ibid*

3 Robert Rhodes James, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 13th 1995

4 We have been unable to establish an exact number because membership is not publicly listed, but members include senior figures, such as David Cameron, George Osborne, Michael Gove, Liam Fox, and Chris Grayling.



Michael Lewis, CFI Board Member		
28.02.05	Wantage	Ed Vaizey £3,500
09.03.05	Braintree	Brooks Newmark £4,000
10.03.05	Welwyn Hatfield	Grant Shapps £2,500
Trevor Pears, CFI Board Member		
16.04.04	Harlow	Robert Halfon £2,000
18.02.05	NW Cambridgeshire	Shailesh Vara £2,000
31.03.05	H'smith & Fulham	Greg Hands £2,000
Lord Steinberg, CFI Vice President		
05.02.05	South Ribble	Lorraine Fullbrook £5,000
08.02.05	Wirral West	Esther McVey £12,000
08.02.05	Southport	Mark Bigley £7,354.11
04.04.05	Wirral West	Esther McVey £13,575.50
14.04.05	Southport	Mark Bigley £7,354.11
Conservative Friends of Israel		
15.12.03	Harlow	Robert Halfon £2,000
		(unsuccessful)
18.02.05	Vale of Glamorgan	Alun Cairns £2,000
		(unsuccessful)
28.02.05	Leeds North East	Matthew Lobleigh £1,500
		(unsuccessful)
03.03.05	Chipping Barnet	Theresa Villiers MP £2,000
15.03.05	Finchley & Golders Gn Andrew Mennear	£1,500
		(unsuccessful)
21.03.05	Cheadle	Stephen Day £2,000
		(unsuccessful)
29.03.05	Eastwood	Richard Cook £2,500
		(unsuccessful)
31.03.05	CCHQ	£7,750
12.04.05	Hertsmere	James Clappison MP £2,000
Julian Schild, CFI member		
21.05.04	Gravesham	Adam Holloway £2,000
24.11.04	Reg Pk & Ken N	Jeremy Bradshaw £1,250
Zak Gertler, CFI member Through Gertler Properties Services:		
02.04.05	Surrey Heath	Michael Gove £5,000
Emanuel Davidson, CFI member Through ASDA Property Holdings:		
22.07.04	Harlow	Robert Halfon £2,000
25.02.05	Gravesham	Adam Holloway £2,000



6

Richard Harrington CFI Chairman 25.09.07	Reg Pk and Ken North	Joanne Cash	£2,000
Howard Leigh CFI Board Member 26.09.06	Reg Park & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£3,000
Edward Lee, CFI Board Member 30.11.07	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£1,500
Stanley Cohen Vice Chair CFI 20.07.06	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£1,250
Alan Bekhor CFI Member 25.01.07	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£5,000
11.10.07	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£4,999
Julian Schild CFI Member 14.12.05	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£2,000
30.05.06	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£2,500
07.11.06	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£1,000
Charles Wigoder CFI Member 18.10.07	Reg Pk & Ken N	Joanne Cash	£2,000

7 Seven PPCs on November 2006 trip; twenty PPCs on November 2007 trip; Three on February 2009 trip; two on September 2009 trip. [Source: CFI newsletters]

8

Lewis Trust Group:

Donations to constituencies:

03.03.08	S Basildon & E Thurrock	Stephen Metcalfe	£3,500
06.03.08	Brighton Kemptown	Simon Kirby	£2,000
11.03.08	Hove	Mike Weatherley	£2,000
27.03.08	Cheltenham	Mark Coote	£2,000
27.03.08	Stroud	Neil Carmichael	£2,000
30.03.08	Burton	Andrew Griffiths	£2,000
05.04.08	West Worcestershire	Harriet Baldwin	£2,000
09.04.08	Staffordshire Moorlands	Karen Bradley	£2,000
10.04.08	Burton	Andrew Griffiths	£2,000
20.04.08	Stourbridge	Margot James	£2,000
23.09.08	Northampton North	Michael Ellis	£2,000
Richard Harrington, CFI Chairman: 01.12.08	Burton	Andrew Griffiths	£2,000

10 Robert Rhodes James, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 13th 1995

11 Mrs Thatcher and the 'pro-Zionist lobby', 2nd July 1984, BBC Monitoring Service.

12 See note 10

13 Walt and Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby*

14 Michael Levy, *A Question of Honour*



15 Ibid

16 Murdoch's two daily newspapers, *The Sun* and *The Times*, between them account for some 35% of the daily newspaper market. His Sunday papers, *The News of the World* and *The Sunday Times*, have between them a market share approaching 40% of Sunday papers. Additionally, Murdoch controls the extraterrestrial Sky TV.

17 Kiley recorded that *The Times'* foreign editor and other middle managers flew into hysterical terror every time a pro-Israel lobbying group wrote in with a quibble or complaint, and then usually took their side against their own correspondent - deleting words and phrases from the lexicon to rob its reporters of the ability to make sense of what was going on. So, I was told, I should not refer to "assassinations" of Israel's opponents, nor to "extrajudicial killings or executions". *Evening Standard*, September 5th 2001. Kiley resigned in August 2001.

18 Danny Seaman's letter to Alan Rusbridger, 17th October 2002

19 Letter from BBC Information and Compliance, 10 November 2009

20 BBC Any Questions, 24th January 2009

21 On the grounds of 'accuracy', Bowen's [reference](#) to the 1967 war as a chance to "finish the unfinished business of Israel's independence war of 1948", was amended to define "the unfinished business" as "the capture of East Jerusalem". On the same grounds, a reference to Zionism's "innate instinct to push out the frontier" was amended to "the tendency with Zionism to push out the frontier". Israel's expansion of the settlements being "in defiance of everyone's interpretation of international law except its own" was amended to "in defiance of almost all countries' interpretation of international law except its own".

The report concluded that Bowen "should have done more to explain that there were alternative views on the subject which had some weight" to protect readers from concluding that "the interpretation offered was the only sensible view of the war". A paragraph which originally began: "The myth of the 1967 Middle East was that the Israeli David slew the Arab Goliath" was replaced with: "While historians hold different views on the 1967 war, one school of thought is that it is a myth..."

22 Through Tamares Real Estate: 17.10.05 David Cameron £5,000 03.11.05 David Cameron £10,000

23 13.10.05 David Cameron £10,000 03.11.05 David Cameron £10,000

24 Fraser Nelson's response: "I didn't mention BICIOM because the piece was a 110-word short – about the tenth of the size of the piece which Martin Ivens wrote up following the same trip. I was trying, in that period, to convey to readers a point that the Israelis would not want made: that for all their intent, they don't believe that can stop Iran developing nuclear weapons."

**Source:** <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/peter-oborne-james-jones/pro-israel-lobby-in-britain-full-text>

