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## THE FRIENDS OF BIBI (FOBs) vs. “THE NEW MIDDLE EAST”

LEON T. HADAR

*Led by a group of neoconservative intellectuals, who occupied top positions in the Reagan administration, an antipeace coalition has emerged in the U.S. capital. Working together with the Likud party and its leader Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu and using powerful outlets in Congress, the media, and think tanks, these Friends of Bibi (FOBs) have been instrumental in the lobbying efforts aimed at scuttling the PLO-Israeli accords and in building support for the new Likud government in Israel. This article examines the evolution of these “neocons” as a force in American politics and how their growing influence may affect the United States and the peace process.*

IT WAS THE WINTER OF DISCONTENT in the halls of the pro-Israeli lobby in Washington, where the New Year, 1996, had brought nothing but bad news for the officials of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). With peace arriving slowly but surely to the New Middle East and with Arabs and Israelis working together with the United States to achieve common goals, some observers were asking: Who really needs those guys, anyway? The new realities appeared to be wearing away AIPAC's political and organizational *raison d'être* and made AIPAC officials face very real concerns about how to maintain their jobs and influence.

### THE “NEW” AIPAC

Indeed, given the new situation, there was no longer a need to mobilize the lobby's troops on Capitol Hill to block U.S. arms sales to the Arab states, demonize Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, or thwart American diplomatic pressure on Israel. If anything, Israel itself was now doing many things that probably would have been targeted for an aggressive opposition campaign by AIPAC only a few months earlier. Thus, for example, the Israelis were urging the Clinton administration and lobbying Congress to follow through with American promises of economic aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and to Jordan and were putting pressure on Washington not to burn bridges with another favorite AIPAC villain, Syria's Hafiz al-Asad.

Moreover, the Arab-Israeli peace process, and in particular the Oslo II accord between Israel and the PLO, was beginning to reduce the centrality of AIPAC,

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indeed even of Israel itself, in the American Jewish community. And not unlike Washington's veteran cold warriors and the heads of the military-industrial complex in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, many American Jews, particularly the ostensible leaders of the community and some of the more hawkish intellectual figures who had constituted the main driving force behind America's support for Israel, were feeling that their services were no longer needed. Many seemed in the grips of a bad case of the "New Middle East blues."

The new trend first surfaced back in 1992, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin made clear to AIPAC officials during a visit to Washington that he would conduct diplomacy directly with the White House. He went so far as to demand that they stay out of his way, leaving many of them, including those who had been cozy with the former Likud government, shocked and dismayed.

The Labor government thus succeeded in establishing direct lines of communication with both the Bush and Clinton White House. It even sidelined former AIPAC official Martin Indyk, subsequently selected by Clinton to serve as the U.S. ambassador in Israel. Their primary role eliminated, the heads of AIPAC and its satellites began casting about for new causes and missions. Iran, alleged leader of the putative worldwide Islamic fundamentalist movement seen as a threat to Israel, emerged as a convenient target for AIPAC's new crusades. (One might note that it was Indyk, in his previous position as National Security Council aide, who first launched the U.S. "dual containment policy" aimed at isolating Iran and Iraq diplomatically and economically.)

The reinvigorated lobbying group, cleansed of many of its pro-Likud operatives and acting in alliance with the powerful Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato of New York, the chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, moved last year to push through Congress sweeping sanctions against Teheran. First, AIPAC was instrumental in persuading the White House to stop Conoco Inc., the energy unit of DuPont, from going ahead with plans to help develop two Iranian oil fields. Not surprisingly, the president announced his decision to impose trade sanctions against Iran during a World Jewish Congress conference in New York in May 1995.

By utilizing pressure from D'Amato and other sympathetic legislators (including the new chairman of the House International Relations Committee, Benjamin Gilman), AIPAC pressured the White House to adopt a more forceful approach toward trade with Iran, notably a form of "secondary boycott" that punished third parties trading with Iran. The proposed D'Amato legislation imposed trade sanctions on foreign companies that assist Iran in its effort to develop oil and gas projects. It also called for a mandatory ban on U.S. government purchases from companies dealing with Iran, denying export licenses to their subsidiaries, and refusing entry to their executives. The president, while initially opposed to some aspects of the legislation, ended up embracing a modified form of it, which he signed in August. In effect, the legislation is very similar to the "secondary boycott" imposed by the Arab League against Israel which provoked such outrage and indignation in both Congress and the White House.

## NETANYAHU: CURING THE "PEACE DEPRESSION"

The anti-Iran campaign may have allowed the AIPAC lobbyists to continue raising funds from supporters around the United States and demonstrating their power on Capitol Hill—and thereby to secure their jobs and budgets. Still, the campaign in and of itself did not do much to alleviate the "New Middle East blues" going around the lobby community.

In a way, the feeling of gloom and doom that seemed to engulf many veteran Israel supporters reflected a Zionist version of the end of history paradigm proposed during the final stages of the cold war by philosopher Francis Fukuyama. The Zionist version would involve the end of a century-long historical epoch dominated by the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Many analysts were predicting that integration of Israel into the Middle East was going to lead to the "normalization" of that state and its entry into a "post-Zionist" era. In the long run, that could only mean a growing cultural and even political split between Israel and the American-Jewish community.

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As a matter of fact, when the secular, liberal, and dovish younger leaders of the Labor party, including Ministers Haim Ramon and Yossi Beilin, were calling for a reassessment of Israeli dogmas (e.g., opposition to an independent Palestinian state, Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, long-held positions on Jerusalem and the Jewish Law of Return), they found to their surprise that some of their more strident opposition came not from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem but from New York and Washington—from leaders of Jewish organizations, congressional staff members, top think tanks, and the editorial boards of major newspapers. It was thus that in late 1995, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States found himself in the peculiar position of having to defend Israel's peace diplomacy to a skeptical group of American-Jewish leaders in New York.

While public opinion polls indicated that the majority of American Jews supported the Labor government's peace diplomacy, support was very "soft" when it came to issues like the future of the Golan Heights and an independent Palestinian state. Moreover, the opponents of the peace process in the United States were louder and more vocal than the supporters. The conservative Heritage Foundation in Washington, with its close ties to the Republican party, became a major forum for foes of Israeli efforts to make peace with its neighbors, while leading columnists—including William Safire and A.M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* and Charles Krauthammer and George Will of the *Washington Post*—seemed to have been transformed into the American media's voice of the Likud.

Indeed, the Israeli political Right was poised and ready to take advantage of the growing hostility toward Labor among many American Jewish figures. Prodded by members of Likud and the orthodox religious parties in Israel, a powerful pro-Israel/antipeace lobby was emerging in 1995 alongside the more traditional

“new” AIPAC. The Likud’s new leader, the Americanized telegenic newsbiter Benjamin Netanyahu, together with three former Israeli diplomats (former Ambassador to Washington Zalman Shoval, Yoram Ettinger, and Yosef Ben-Aharon), traveled to the U.S. capital several times to lobby lawmakers against Labor policies, urging them to end U.S. financial aid to the Palestinians and to oppose sending U.S. troops to take part in peacekeeping operations on the Golan Heights in the event of an Israeli-Syrian peace accord. Press releases from Netanyahu’s Likud offices in Tel Aviv, containing the same messages, were faxed daily to the *Times* and the *Post*.

The pro-Likud coalition taking shape in Washington included, among others, almost all the major orthodox groups, the Zionist Organization of America, Americans for a Safe Israel, as well as new groups and think tanks in Israel and the United States. It received various forms of support from what might be called the “American Friends of Bibi” (FOBs): Cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder and former junk bond king Michael Milken were among those who provided financing, while influential lawmakers and journalists, including Larry King and Ted Koppel, assured wide exposure. “Strolling triumphantly on the streets of Manhattan between interviews at *The New York Times* and CBS, he [Netanyahu] attracted throngs of groupies,” wrote David Margolick of *Vanity Fair*. So often did Netanyahu appear on “Nightline,” according to Margolick, that wags began referring to “Ted Netanyahu” and “Bibi Koppel.”

## THE NEOCONS STRIKE BACK

But Netanyahu’s ability to spread the Likud message in the New York-Washington corridor was not dependent entirely on his support from powerful journalists and billionaires or on his talent for projecting to the American public an image of a “kinder and gentler Likud”—a kind of “Shamirism with a human face.” What helped lift Netanyahu and the Likud to new prominence in Washington was the GOP’s 1994 congressional coup as well as his ties with the so-called neoconservative intellectuals, many of whom now form the backbone of the Republican party’s foreign policy establishment. Ties with this group, which includes Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle, Joshua Muravchik, Frank Gaffney, and Douglas Feith, could have a major effect on the future of the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

The neoconservatives’ power stems from their ability to set the policy agenda in Washington. Their views have been playing a leading role in such prestigious think tanks as the American Enterprise Institute, the Hudson Institute, and the Manhattan Institute, and they dominate such important Republican-oriented outlets as the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*, *Commentary*, and the *Weekly Standard* (a new conservative publication edited by William Kristol and John Podhoretz, sons of neoconservative gadflies and FOBs Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, and financed by another FOB, media owner Rupert Murdoch).

During the Reagan administration, the "neocons" occupied several top national security and foreign policy posts, where, according to their version of events, they stood up to such "anti-Israeli" figures as former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Kirkpatrick was then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, where Bibi was serving as Israel's spokesman. They both spent their time at the UN headquarters bashing the UN, the third world, and pro-Soviet "terrorist groups" (read: the PLO). Indeed, according to Margolick, many Americans during that period told pollsters that they thought Bibi was the American ambassador to the UN. Later, during the Bush term, the "neocons" tried (unsuccessfully) to derail the strategy of the "Arabist" Bush-Baker team to use a \$5-billion loan guarantee to force Likud to halt Jewish settlement in the West Bank. They were also critical of Bush's refusal to "go all the way" in Desert Storm and invade Baghdad.



**Prime Minister Netanyahu with Ted Koppel on the set of Nightline, 2 October 1996. Photo is courtesy of Terry Ashe/ABC News.**

The Bush-Baker strategy, which was in fact developed by a group of Hebrew-speaking American-Jewish Mideast experts led by Dennis Ross and Aaron Miller, was instrumental in the electoral defeat of Likud and the victory of Labor that led to the PLO-Israel accord. That in turn resulted in the marginalization of Netanyahu in Israel and contributed to the weakening of his neoconservative pals in America. Some of the "neocons" tried to jump onto Clinton's 1992 election bandwagon, hoping to move the new president in a more interventionist approach around the world. Most of them, however, remained in the GOP camp, waiting for their favorite son, former New York Congressman Jack Kemp (another

staunch FOB), to run for president in 1996. Certainly the close cooperation between Clinton and the Rabin-Peres team over the opening to the PLO and the new president's refusal to adopt a more aggressive approach toward Iran and Iraq ended up alienating the few "neocons" who had allied themselves with Clinton.

## THE "LIKUDIZATION" OF THE GOP

The neoconservative thinkers and operators had played a very limited role in the events leading to the Republican congressional victory in 1994, and foreign policy issues were quite marginalized in Newt Gingrich's "Contract With America." But the neoconservatives' ability to control many of the GOP's research and media outlets provided them with an opportunity to influence the Mideast spin of their party in Congress, imposing on it a clear pro-Likud direction.

Hence, the Israeli accord with the PLO and the attempts to reach an agreement with Syria have been portrayed by the neoconservative pundits as a product of the machinations of the wimpy and "left-wing" figures occupying both the White House and the Israeli prime minister's office, where a kind of save-the-whales mentality was thought to be responsible for "pandering" to the "terrorists" Arafat and Asad. Never mind that it was the Republican Bush who had opened the diplomatic door for the Israeli-PLO agreement, that Clinton had played only a supporting role in the Oslo process, and that it was General Rabin, Mr. Israeli Security himself, who shook hands with PLO Chairman Arafat at the White House.

*Attempts to reach accords with the PLO and Syria have been portrayed by "neocons" as a product of a wimpy, "left-wing" save-the-whales mentality.*

Exploiting the isolationist tendencies among the members of the GOP freshmen class in Congress, Douglas Feith, currently in charge of the Dole presidential campaign's Middle East "group" (Kirkpatrick heads Dole's foreign policy operation), and other "neocons" incited Gingrich & Co. to rally their forces against dispensing aid to the Palestinians or sending U.S. troops to the Golan. What was not considered was that other projects of the soldiers of the Republican 1994 "revolution"—including the GOP's efforts to "out-Israeli" the Labor government with its proposals to relocate the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, to launch an American program to destabilize Iran, and to add Syria to the list of "rogue" nations—would place the United States on a more interventionist and costly course than sending a small group of American peacekeepers to the Golan.

Most amazing of all has been the "Likudization" of presidential candidate Bob Dole. The former Senate majority leader had just missed being placed on the top of AIPAC's enemy list for advocating cuts in the U.S. aid package to Israel several years ago and for schmoozing with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad a month or two before the invasion of Kuwait, advising the Iraqi leader on ways to deal with the American media.

If anything, Dole by natural inclination is closer in his general foreign policy approach to Bush and Baker. For such realpolitik-oriented figures, the Middle East is a geopolitical arena where U.S. strategic and economic interests can be most successfully pursued through an even-handed policy toward Israel and the oil-rich Arab states; the neoconservative notion of an exclusive strategic alliance with the Jewish state would normally be seen as counterproductive. But this is a presidential election year, and in the same way that the moderate Republican Dole has adopted the extremist position of the Christian Right as a way of winning key support among conservative white voters, so too has this man who has never been known as an ardent supporter of Israel suddenly found himself embracing the neoconservative pro-Likud platform. This platform has also been promoted by the head of his presidential campaign in New York, Senator D'Amato.

### ALL OF BIBI'S MEN

There are interesting parallels between the political calculations driving the campaign strategies of D'Amato and Netanyahu. Both are being opposed by the liberal and secular Jewish voters in their constituencies. Both are backed by powerful local electoral blocs of bearded orthodox Jews. And both enjoy the financial backing of such contributors as Ronald Lauder. A reflection of the political and ideological marriage between the GOP's pro-Likud wing and the Israeli Right was the role played by media strategist Arthur Finkelstein, a former political consultant to D'Amato and other Republican politicians, in Netanyahu's uphill campaign for prime minister.

Indeed, while Clinton and his aides were trying to help Peres get reelected, organizing the international antiterrorist conference in Sharm al-Shaykh (following the deadly bombing incidents in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) and treating with benign neglect Peres's bloody Grapes of Wrath assault on Lebanon, many Republican lawmakers and neoconservative spokesmen were portraying Netanyahu as "one of us," pointing to his "macho" foreign policy approach and his commitment to deregulate and privatize the statist Israeli economy. Forgotten was the fact that it was Labor's peace policy that had opened for Israel new trade and investment opportunities in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and that Netanyahu's antipeace approach could halt the effort to revive and "globalize" the Israeli economy. Not surprisingly, most of Israel's leading business executives supported Peres's reelection.

Nor did Netanyahu's free-market advocates in Washington attempt to explain how his policy of dispensing government patronage to the religious parties in his coalition fits with his public support for reducing the role of the government in the Israeli economy. Moreover, the newsbiting by the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* and other neoconservative outlets portraying Netanyahu's policies as an Israeli version of Thatcherism ran against political realities of Israel: The majority of Israel's pro-free market yuppies had voted for Labor, while the lower-middle-class Oriental Jews are the backbone of the Likud's political support.



But notwithstanding such examples of cognitive dissonance produced by the Republicans' championing of Netanyahu as "their man," Bibi's victory trip to New York and Washington in early July and his congressional address helped "spin" the new Israeli prime minister as an Israeli Jack Kemp. (Kemp himself, in an interview with CNN's Larry King after being selected as Dole's running mate, described Netanyahu as a "Jewish Ronald Reagan" and one of his closest political buddies.) Indeed, columnist Paul Gigot, writing in the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, noted that "you could see the longing in Republican eyes" during Netanyahu's address in Congress. "There in the chamber of the U.S. House was a foreigner giving the kind of speech they yearn to hear from their own leader, Bob Dole," wrote Gigot. "I want to make [Netanyahu] an honorary member of the freshman class," declared Philadelphia Republican Representative Jon Fox after the speech. Connecticut Republican Chris Shays quipped, "I was thinking to myself: Why can't we run him?"

Indeed, why not? With his American accent, his adoption of the Republican mumbo jumbo, and, of course, his tough position on Israel, Netanyahu could probably find himself a home among the GOP "revolutionaries" on Capitol Hill, thereby saving on long-distance phone bills from Tel Aviv to Ted, Larry, Bill, Abe, and other media pals in New York and Washington. Unfortunately for Bibi, he will have to spend the next years proving to Israelis, including half of the voters who didn't support him, that he is "one of them." Proving to them that he can manage Israel's complex relations with America will be one of his main tasks. If he fails and is kicked out of office, he may indeed have no choice but to recover his American citizenship (which he renounced in order to run for office in Israel) and run for a safe congressional seat in Brooklyn.

But managing the American-Israeli relationship involves more than congressional addresses and "Nightline" appearances during the presidential campaign season, when chasing the Jewish vote takes precedence over pursuing U.S. national interests. While Netanyahu's congressional appearance, the Bibi-and-Bill White House photo-ops (followed by the Bibi-and-Bob photo-ops in New York), and the rest of the glib speech making that dominated the July victory trip to America helped Netanyahu shrug off serious discussion of his long-term foreign policy approach, he will probably not enjoy similar diplomatic free-riding during his meetings with the U.S. president following the November election. At that point, Washington can be expected to ask him the question eventually posed to telegenic newsmen: Where is the beef?

### FROM NEWSBITING TO POLICY-MAKING?

There is no doubt that the noisy pro-Likud forces on Capitol Hill, backed by the neoconservative "usual suspects" in the media and think tanks, will do everything in their power to harass any Democratic or Republican president who decides to challenge Netanyahu to fulfill Israel's commitments to the Palestinians and continue negotiations with Syria. Indeed, some FOBs, using the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* as their main lobbying tool, have already moved

forward to try forcing Netanyahu's agenda on Washington. Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a neoconservative foreign policy type and a veteran of the infamous Iran-Contra affair, proposed that the State Department be cleansed of the members of the peace clique led by Warren Christopher and Dennis Ross. And Richard Perle, Ledeen's colleague at AEI, suggested that Netanyahu work together with King Hussein and Turkey to oust Iraq's Saddam and return the Hashimite family to power in Baghdad. In the event of a Dole victory, Ledeen, Perle, and other "neocons" could end up occupying top positions in his foreign policy apparatus.

But with the presidential season over, any White House occupant intent on maintaining the current Pax Americana in the Middle East, with the Arab-Israeli peace process as one of main components, is bound to confront an Israeli leader who seems intent at sabotaging that project. Moreover, if an American administration decides to give a green or yellow light to the Likud government to implement its radical policies—expanding settlement in the West Bank, ending the Oslo track, adopting an uncompromising position on the Golan, launching a war against Syria—one can expect other interested parties to attempt the outside diplomatic intervention so strenuously opposed by Washington. Thus, if the Arab-Israeli process is allowed to die, the European Union (EU) as well as Russia and China will step up efforts to fill the diplomatic vacuum in the region, proposing alternative forums for Arab-Israeli negotiations and using diplomatic and economic pressure to change Israel's policies.

The EU's opposition to U.S. efforts to isolate Iran, its attempt to undercut U.S. diplomacy in Lebanon during Grapes of Wrath by advancing an alternative negotiating mechanism, and its proposals for independent economic structures of cooperation with the Middle East (the "Euro-Med" partnership launched in Barcelona last year), all point to the European refusal to accept the marginal role in the Middle East assigned them. Reluctance on the part of Washington to confront Netanyahu and his antipeace coalition could well create the conditions for growing U.S.-EU tensions over Middle East policy.

Hence the U.S. president taking office in 1997 will have to choose between confronting the Friends of Bibi in Washington or having to deal with the rising costs of maintaining the U.S. position in the Middle East with Bibi at the helm. Without such presidential leadership, Bibi's victory in Israel and the FOBs' triumph in Washington will only mean one thing. To paraphrase Sir Edward Grey's sad description of Europe on the eve of the Great War: The lamps are going out all over the Middle East. We shall never see them lit again in our lifetime.