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How to Use Antisemitism Against Antisemites



JEWISH POWER in America? When SAPIR approached me to contribute an essay to this issue, my first instinct was to decline. I was born in South Africa and raised and educated in Canada. I became a U.S. citizen only in 2015, 12 years after moving to the country. My “lived experience” as an American Jew is somewhat limited.

Then again, as the chief executive of a Washington think tank, I have had a prime perch from which to watch the exercise of Jewish power—or rather, *alleged* Jewish power—in this country. The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) spends considerable time observing the Islamic Republic of Iran. My 20 years of studying Iranian mullahs and Iranian rhetoric have given me an intimate acquaintance with Jewish power as it is perceived through the warped lens of antisemitism.

In 2019, I came to see my own image grotesquely distorted through that lens when the Iranian government, in an official sanc-

tions order, singled out FDD as “the designing and executing arm of the U.S. administration” and authorized Iran’s “judicial or security institutions” to “counter, prosecute, or punish” FDD—and me. A regime with the largest missile and terrorist arsenal in the Middle East had declared its intent to harm an American Jew who runs a 50-person think tank. In 2020, the regime also sanctioned my FDD colleague Richard Goldberg, a lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserve who had, for many years, worked in Congress and the White House on Iran policy.

To be fair to the mullahs, I have spent considerable time working with four administrations and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle on sanctions against the Islamic Republic. I have also been outspoken in my opposition to the nuclear deal of 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But my arsenal of weapons is limited. It comprises little more than my overly active Twitter account, periodic congressional testimonies, a steady stream of op-eds and media appearances, a habit of reading the fine print of International Atomic Energy Agency reports, and a willingness to nag policymakers to keep their focus on the Iranian threat.

The Iranian government isn’t the only one to endow me with outsize power. The mainstream American media have fed the same mindset.

In a 2018 profile, one prominent Washington reporter, referencing the influence of Jewish money, wrote that “Mark Dubowitz’s campaign to draw attention to what he saw as the flaws in the Iran nuclear deal has taken its place amongst the most consequential ever undertaken by a Washington think tank leader.” It’s a great quote that has helped me raise money from Jewish and non-Jewish donors alike. The article itself, however, was woefully inaccurate and wound up being appended by a massive four-point correction. Journalistic integrity has a way of going out the window when the target is a member of the you-know-who lobby.

But that will not have stopped the regime in Iran from seeing the article as further evidence that it’s the Dubowitzes and

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Goldbergs of America who are the puppet masters in Washington. When it comes to confirming crackpot theories of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, it helps to have the imprimatur of the same media they are said to control.

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To study Iranian rhetoric on the subject of Jews and Zion is to be reminded of the old joke about two Jews sitting on a park bench poring over the news. One, reading the *Jerusalem Post*, is in despair, lamenting Jewish vulnerability from a new barrage of attacks on Israel and a spike of anti-Jewish violence in European and American cities. The other Jew, reading the Iranian press, is delighted by tales of Jewish power, as he reads that the Zionists control Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, the global financial markets, and the global media.

Halevai that it should be so — if only we *were* that powerful.

Unfortunately this is not, actually, a joke. Here is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in real life: “Today,” he tweeted in 2020, “the epitome of rebellion, arrogance and tyranny is the U.S. government, which is controlled by the wealthy Zionist individuals and corporate owners.” In a 2017 speech, he declared, “The U.S. is the agent of global Zionism. There is a malicious and dangerous network in the world which is called ‘global Zionism.’” In 2015, he tweeted, “The day when West-

ern ppl realize that their problems result from #Zionism’s hegemony over govts they will make an inescapable #hell for them.”

Here is Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, heralded in left-wing circles as a “reformer” (and apparently the spearhead for the campaign against FDD): The pro-Israel lobby AIPAC, he tweeted in 2020, “dictates US — & Western — policy in the Mid East...#AIPAC has poisoned US politics for years, overtly giving instructions to Congress. Time to end #APARTHEID Israel’s tyranny over Western halls of power.”

And here is the 1988 charter of Hamas, an Iranian proxy, explaining the terrorist group’s reasoning (or should I say, “reasoning”) for despising the Jews: “With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations, and others. With their money they stirred revolutions in various parts of the world with the purpose of achieving their interests and reaping the fruit therein. They were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution and most of the revolutions we heard and hear about, here and there. With their money they formed secret societies, such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others in different parts of the world for the purpose of sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests.”

It would be bad enough if these fairy tales about Jewish omnipotence were limited to Islamist antisemites; even worse is the way they find currency within U.S. policy, media, and academic circles.

The idea that “The Israel Lobby” runs Washington was made semi-respectable over a decade ago by Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer, two professors at the summit of U.S. academia. To this day, it is Jewish policymakers such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Richard Perle who are widely blamed for drawing the U.S. into the Iraq War, despite their being (respectively) second-, third-, and fourth-tier officials in the Bush administration, while all the principals — George Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, et al. — were Christians. The Obama

administration did much the same when its chief spin-doctor Ben Rhodes decried Jewish-American opposition to Obama's nuclear deal. One leading American broadsheet lent a helping hand when it listed the Jewish religion of those Democratic lawmakers who opposed the deal — with graphics to match.

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So what is the Jewish community to do with all this perceived power? The gap between reality and perception is wide. Yet it opens up a space for skillful negotiation by thoughtful Jewish leaders who understand that, as in certain martial arts, the key to winning is to turn an opponent's momentum against him.

By population, the Jews are a tiny people: almost 15 million worldwide, about 0.2 percent of the global population and about 2 percent of America's. There are approximately 6.9 million Israeli Jews, compared with an Iranian population of over 80 million, more than 420 million Arabs, and almost 2 billion Muslims. By sheer numbers, Jews are clearly outmatched. The intersecting echo chambers I have described mutually reinforce one another in a way that elevates the perceived power of a people who usually haven't had much power at all.

Yet the malignant perception of overwhelming Jewish power comes with a hidden but potent benefit: the chance to leverage the tropes used against Jews to Jewish advantage. If Khamenei, Hamas, and Hezbollah prefer to believe that Jews pull all the big levers of American might, it only feeds a mindset of paranoia and illogic that is usually self-defeating. It might even give them more reason to fear us than to fight us. If Tehran (or the Washington press corps) wants to feed the perception that my modestly sized think tank dictates U.S. policy in the Middle East, who am I to complain?

The challenge is to find a way to speak about Jewish power that neither gives aid to conspiracists nor feeds into a sense of Jewish hopelessness by decrying the decline of political influence.

What goes for U.S. policy in the Middle East goes for other areas of Jewish concern: Especially in a democracy, the perception of power *is* power, at least in the hands of those who know how to use it judiciously.

From biblical times onward, Jews have often proved adept at this, not for nefarious reasons but because we appreciate how necessary that perception can be to our own survival. To take one example: In 1991, after Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam lost his Soviet patron, he approached Israel as a conduit to Washington — doubtlessly on the idea that Israeli influence in Washington would surely be enough to rescue him. The belief was antisemitic, but it still helped set the basis for negotiations leading to the rescue of Ethiopian Jews in Operation Solomon.

Something similar might be said about the way Jewish politics play out in the U.S. By any standard metric, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is far from the biggest lobby in Washington — certainly not when compared with, say, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Rifle Association, or the pharmaceutical lobby. What *actual* power AIPAC has derives mainly from three strengths: the talent of its staff; the passion of its members; and, above all, the instinctual support that a majority of Americans (only a small fraction of whom are Jewish) feel for a

country they rightly see as an embattled bastion of democracy facing and fighting the same enemies that threaten the United States.

Yet AIPAC's critics, at home and abroad, like to paint it as a Washington juggernaut that politicians cross at their own peril. In a city where perception counts for almost everything, such a view can work in AIPAC's favor. As in the 1959 Peter Sellers classic, *The Mouse That Roared*, it's better to be a midget thought of as a giant than the other way around.



There is a final piece to the question of Jewish power in America, which is pedagogical.

For Jewish communal leaders, the challenge is to find a way to speak about Jewish power that neither gives aid to conspiracists nor feeds into a sense of Jewish hopelessness by decrying the decline of political influence. Those leaders must also contend with different manifestations of Jewish unease with power, particularly in the form of progressive Jews whose answer to the dilemmas of Jewish power is to become anti-Zionists while echoing anti-semitic allegations of Israel as a malignant, illegitimate, and even genocidal state.

Better for those leaders to *explain* Jewish history—a story that has often been about what happens to a powerless people in the face of the harshest geopolitical realities, from bigotry and legal discrimination to expulsion and genocide. Yet it's also a story of how that people have used power, whether real or reputed, to flourish against considerable odds. A people without power are, too often, a people without a future. Jewish leadership has a responsibility to ensure that this lesson is broadly understood.

Jewish communal leaders also should explain that Israel and its American Jewish supporters do not wield what power they have (or are perceived to have) indiscriminately. As Michael Oren, a historian and former Israeli ambassador to the United States, has

observed: “The IDF is generally regarded as one of the strongest and most sophisticated armies in the world, yet it does not use even a fraction of its potential strength against the people who, if they held such power, would hesitate not a moment to direct it at Israel's destruction.... Israelis fight, asking themselves at every stage whether in fact they are doing the right thing, the moral thing, the Jewish thing.”

Zionism, like Judaism, is not only about the relationship of the Jewish people to power. It is also about justice and peace—the return of a people to their ancestral homeland and a tireless commitment to building a society based on classical Jewish and liberal values. Judicious use of power, real or perceived, toward the realization of that goal is not only a historical necessity; it is a virtue. *