

WHY ARE “PRO-ISRAEL” PACS DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER PACS?

By Elizabeth Berney, Esq.

Unfortunately, money is the life-blood of politics. Money gives a candidate the wherewithal to bring his or her message to the voters. Even the most worthy candidate is unlikely to win if he has to fight Goliath with a pea shooter. The situation has grown worse over the years as the cost of political campaigns has skyrocketed. In 2008, the average cost of winning a House seat was almost \$1.4 million, and the cost of winning a Senate seat averaged \$7.5 million. In expensive media markets such as New York, even more funds may be required. Back in 2000, Hillary Clinton spent almost \$30 million to win her Senate seat.

One important source of political campaign funds is contributions from “political action committees” (referred to as “PACs”) and from the individuals who are urged to support the PACs’ favored candidates. Most PACs in this country promote a specific issue, and parcel out their financial support and endorsements to candidates accordingly. PACs typically examine voting records and candidates’ public statements, and ask candidates to complete lengthy questionnaires, to determine candidates’ views on virtually every piece of legislation related to a particular cause. For instance, pro-choice and pro-life PACs question candidates about their views on Constitutional amendments relating to abortion, abortion funding, parental consent, fetal crime laws, rights of conscience of medical personnel, the Mexico City policy, partial-birth abortion, contraceptive availability, sex education in schools, and a host of other related issues. PACs then direct their donations to candidates whose views closely align with the PACs’ issues agenda. Later, when it comes time for a Congressional vote, PACs may use candidates’ signed questionnaires to “hold their feet to the fire” if candidates suddenly change their minds as to where they stand on an issue.

If “pro-Israel” PACs operated like other PACs do, they would examine voting records and send out questionnaires to determine candidates’ views on a host of issues critical to Israeli and American security and sovereignty. A pro-Israel PAC which operated like other PACs would have candidates answer questions such as: Will you support legislation to keep Jerusalem as the united capital of Israel? Will you vote for resolutions supporting the right of Israelis to build wherever they wish in their own land? Will you vote for legislation to stop or at least condition U.S. funding to Palestinians on the Palestinian Authority’s compliance with its obligations to stop inciting terrorism? Will you vote for legislation to stop or at least condition Obama’s \$900 million of aid to Gaza on the freeing of Gilad Shalit and dismantling of rockets? Will you support legislation to maintain sanctions on Syria and Hamas, and oppose the Obama administration’s recent partial lifting of the sanctions on Syria and removal of all but one Hamas official from the Treasury Department terrorist list? What actions will you support regarding the Iranian nuclear threat? Will you support providing Israel with refueling planes needed to attack the Iranian nuclear facilities? Do you oppose dismantling Israeli settlements – which would displace hundreds of thousands of Jews from their homes and provide another Gaza-style launching pad for rockets aimed at Israel? Do you oppose the so-called Arab Peace Initiative which Obama is promoting - which calls for a return to the 1949 armistice borders, Palestinian “rights of return” which would overrun Israel, and a contiguous Palestinian state which would cut Israel in half, all in return for nothing?

However, in my experience, these questions are not asked by the “pro-Israel” PACs. Most of the supposedly pro Israel PACs operate quite differently than the rest of the PAC world. Instead of sending out questionnaires, and seeking out and supporting whichever candidate is better on the full

range of American and Israeli security issues, “pro-Israel” PACs have generally become what some folks have called “incumbency protection organizations.” Their big fear is “offending” an incumbent. Thus, with rare exceptions, even when a challenger is far better on critical security issues than the incumbent is, “pro-Israel” PACs often contribute to the incumbent, or at best, sometimes stay out of the fray.

Pro-Israel PACs also have neglected to examine the “money trail” to learn where their contributions ultimately end up. For instance, powerful incumbent Democratic Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who is the recipient of substantial mainstream pro-Israel PAC and PAC-encouraged donations, has contributed money from her well-off campaign war chest to eleven of the 54 Democratic Congresspersons who signed the infamous anti-Israel “open Gaza” letter (Bruce Braley, Andre Carson, Donna Edwards, Jim Himes, Mary Carolyn Kilpatrick, Mary Jo Kilroy, Eric Massa (recently resigned), Glenn Nye, Joe Sestak, Peter Welch, and John Yarmuth). Wasserman-Schultz also has also been using her campaign war chest to contribute heavily to Democratic challengers who have been trying to unseat some of Israel’s best friends in Congress (including Democrats challenging pro-Israel champions Ileana Ros-Letinen and the Diaz-Balart brothers) and forwards huge amounts from her war chest to Democratic committees which in turn send funds to other unfriendly Democrats. Wasserman-Schultz’s less-than-exemplary record on Israel (for instance, Wasserman-Schultz signed the infamous Ackerman-Boustany letter initiated by my opponent asking for more U.S. tax dollars to be sent to Palestinian leaders) also makes one wonder why she (and my opponent) are provided with pro-Israel funds in the first place.

The consequences of the pro-Israel PACs’ “incumbency policy” are extremely detrimental. Challengers who truly care about U.S. and Israeli security are left “high and dry” without sufficient funds to win races, since many individual donors who care about Israel and security issues take their cue from the PACs. Meanwhile, incumbents who will receive support from pro-Israel PACs regardless of what they do have little incentive (or no incentive) to take strong pro-Israel pro-security stands. It is tragic that some of the money provided by donors who want to support strong pro-Israel candidates ends up helping the other side. I’m sure that many of these donors would be horrified if they fully understood what has been happening.

As a candidate for Congress in 2008 and now again in 2010, I’ve come up against this unfortunate incumbency protection policy. People involved with supposed pro-Israel PACs have admitted to me that I am far better on Israel and American security issues than my opponent. (Among other things, my opponent recently accused Israelis of perpetrating “pogroms” against Palestinians, criticizes Israel’s life-saving checkpoints, opposes settlements, initiated letters to give Palestinian leaders our U.S. tax dollars, and ran around my district and the country saying that Obama would be good for Israel.) Nonetheless, the head of one pro-Israel PAC told me that the only way he would contribute to my campaign would be if my opponent was “caught [expletive]ing a goat!” However, lest I feel discriminated against, pro-Israel organizations have assured me that they also don’t support other pro-Israel challengers who are fighting to replace other less-than-stellar incumbents.

To add to these difficulties, an individual who is active with one of the pro-Israel PACs told me that AIPAC officials pressure his PAC to donate to not-so-terrific incumbents, and start screaming when his PAC wants to contribute to better, pro-Israel challengers. (AIPAC is not itself a PAC, but appears to exert a lot of influence on the PACs to fund incumbents.) AIPAC has the power to be a tremendous force for good, and needs to carefully examine how its officials are wielding that power. An incumbency policy contradicts AIPAC’s entire stated pro-Israel purpose.

On the bright side, there is one positive exception – the Republican Jewish Coalition PAC, which carefully scrutinizes records and is willing to give to non-incumbents. Also, some pro-Israel PACs may be rethinking their policies. However, the urgently needed significant change still appears to be a way off. The public needs to be made aware of this problem, and pressure the PACs to adopt sensible pro-Israel policies in this era of enormous danger to Jews around the world.

Significantly, on the other side of the fence, the PACs that promote Arab and Palestinian causes are very careful to use their PAC money solely (and effectively) to promote their own agenda. The far left J-Street PAC contributes to whoever supports its pro-Palestinian positions. The recipients of J-Street PAC's largesse include Muslim Congressman Keith Ellison and Congresswoman Betty McCollum (both of whom have spearheaded numerous legislative efforts against Israel), and other Congresspersons and challengers who favor twisting Israel's arms to make concessions that endanger the survival of America's best ally in the Middle East. Zogby's Arab American Leadership Council PAC also directs its contributions to those (including Ellison and McCollum) who promote the pro-Arab, anti-Israel cause. The J-Street PAC and Zogby's PAC give to both incumbents and challengers, and have helped to elect unfriendly-to-Israel challengers. Sixteen recipients of J-Street PAC 2008 contributions and fourteen recipients of Arab American Leadership Council PAC 2008 contributions signed the recent infamous letter by 54 Democratic congresspersons which demanded that Israel open up the Gaza border to permit dual use materials (*i.e.*, materials which can be used to enhance weapons capabilities) into Gaza – knowing full well that the materials will fall into the hands of Hamas.

The real pro-Israel PACs need to learn from the rest of the PAC world. And until the pro-Israel PACs start using the donations which they are entrusted with to most effectively promote Israeli and American security, individual donors should consider examining candidates' records on their own and contributing directly to strong individual pro-Israel candidates instead of through PACs.

Elizabeth ("Liz") Berney, Esq. was the endorsed Republican candidate for Congress in the 5th Congressional District of New York in 2008 (northeast Queens and northern Nassau County, Long Island), and is running again in 2010. She may be reached at LizBerneyforCongress@gmail.com.