



## Episode 642: The Israel Lobby: What It Does and How It Works

Guest: Grant Smith

**WOODS:** So you've got this book, and it's called *Big Israel*, and I just got done telling you, it's also a big book, although it really is only a little over 300 pages, but boy, do you pack a lot in this book. There is no fluff in here.

**SMITH:** No, it's got 41 charts —

**WOODS:** Yeah.

**SMITH:** — it's got full footnotes, and the idea is to really have everything solidly backed up with citations.

**WOODS:** Yeah, and you know, the thing is with a topic like this, you really have no choice, because you're already going to be assumed to be a bad guy just for writing a book about this, so you've got to make sure every T is crossed and every I is dotted. Why don't we in fact start right there, about this being one of the handful of topics in the U.S. that so many people want to run away from or are scared of. Even if they agree with you, they have a functioning brain so they know that what you're saying is obviously true, but they don't dare write you a blurb or talk to you in public or whatever. Just comment on that fact alone.

**SMITH:** Sure. Well, there's really no upside to getting into this topic —

**WOODS:** (laughing) Yeah, you're not making a bundle of dough, I assume, doing it.

**SMITH:** No, not trying to make a bundle of dough, either. It's really all about, you know, we've got these great beginnings on looking at some of the output, in terms of how does kind of a heavy concentration of interests in Israel affect foreign policy, and you have the Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer book about that, so you've got a lot of great stuff on output. Not too much on input, though, and personally, I don't feel — you could say it's like walking into a minefield with a pocket full of unpinned grenades, but I don't feel it's as controversial when you really drill down on facts and avoid any sort of anecdotal approach, which I'm afraid some of the beginning research on this, if you talk about books from Congressman Paul Findley back in the day, which was *They Dare to Speak Out*, talking about his experience and getting a lot of pushback when he wanted to do things in Congress, and some other books. If you really look at money, if

you look at the growth of various organizations, how they started out, what they're doing now, I think it decontraversializes it a little bit, and I think that people, particularly in this country, are going to be interested in a factual based look at 336 organizations and what they're doing to, as the book says, move America.

**WOODS:** There was a guy — now, you'll know the name, certainly. Some of my younger listeners might not — Joe Sobran —

**SMITH:** Oh, yeah.

**WOODS:** — who used to write for *National Review*, and then he was purged. Given that he was one of the last decent people, it was only a matter of time that he'd be purged. And he was purged in an essay by Bill Buckley, in which he was accused of being "obsessed with" and "cuckoo about" Israel. And this is something — now, I have a libertarian show here, and a lot of libertarians are getting attacked as anti-Semitic, because they focus so much on Israel. And I always thought that was a bizarre thing to say. The reason there's focus on Israel is that there is this tremendous pressure placed on the U.S. government to do certain things in foreign policy. If there were that much pressure from the government of Azerbaijan, there'd be a lot of interest in Azerbaijan.

**SMITH:** Absolutely.

**WOODS:** It's not because we have a particular animus toward Azerbaijanis.

**SMITH:** Right, right, and you have this whole drive right now for the declassification of these pages on possible Saudi involvement in 9/11. Saying that those pages should be released doesn't make you anti-Saudi either. Whether there is anyone who's pro-Saudi or not, who knows? But you know, I remember hearing a brilliant piece by Scott McConnell of *The American Conservative* at one of our conferences at the National Press Club, and he really brilliantly outlines the purging of many thinkers who were critics on this issue and how it really has dumbed down many magazines and many areas of debate, particularly some of the publications he worked in. So I agree. It's not healthy at all. But you see that people are weathering it. I mean, Steven Walt, realist foreign policy guy, and John Mearsheimer, they're still actively employed. We can still hear their voices, so I think that's a good sign.

**WOODS:** That's right. In fact, I can't remember if he said this — I think he said this on the air when I talked to Stephen Walt — I'll link to that episode on our show notes page for today. But he said, when I came to the conclusion that I was satisfied never to work in the U.S. government again, then I decided to write this book (laughing).

**SMITH:** Yeah, that's — I mean, that's a shame, because to the extent that anyone with a lot of talent should work in the U.S. government, I just think that it's a shame that someone feels that way.

**WOODS:** Yeah, yeah.

**SMITH:** But he probably he is right.

**WOODS:** All right, let's dive into the book. You talk about a concept that, I guess you coined the term, "Israel affinity organizations" —

**SMITH:** Right.

**WOODS:** And this is a helpful term, because I think a lot of people who know the subject only casually would think we're only dealing with AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and it goes so much farther than that.

**SMITH:** Right. I basically divided them up into four groups, and the concept that I'm putting forward organizationally is that there are Israel affinity organizations, which have a top objective of advancing Israel by activities in the United States, and that they're basically organized into those that try to obtain subsidies and pass them to Israel; those that are lobbying-oriented, or rather advocacy organizations; a third category of fundraising and local political actions, trying to push state governments to do things; and then finally, just education organizations that are very interested in educating Americans, but I would say that many of them are also putting out a lot of disinformation that really has changed what Americans think they know.

**WOODS:** Let's talk about that. You have a section in the book, a chapter on education, and this is, by education you really mean opinion forming, an attempt to influence opinion in America.

**SMITH:** Right.

**WOODS:** What form does this take?

**SMITH:** Well, it takes the form of socializing people into a certain set of beliefs, so this can take the form of bringing in, as has been the case, a lot of very pro-Israel speakers in to deliver lectures in colleges and universities, even K through 12 education increasingly. Really presenting textbooks and information that take sort of a very pro-Israel view of situations. It takes a whole host of educational organizations that are making the argument for the need for strong American support for Israel, whether it's museums or libraries and that sort of thing. And just generating a lot of articles and information that have as a beginning point the idea that the U.S. should be strongly and unconditionally supporting Israel. So within the United States' discourse, this is not uncommon. There are a lot of organizations that I've listed in the appendix that I would put in the education category. It's not the biggest segment of what I would call collectively the lobby, but it's a large and important segment.

**WOODS:** Now, granted that no one can actually shut people up literally on at least most topics, at the same time, are there ways that these different groups use to at least intimidate people into voluntarily more or less silencing themselves?

**SMITH:** Oh yeah. I would not say that those are educational organizations. I'd put those in the advocacy segment of my dichotomy here, and clearly organizations such as Myths and Facts, there's another organization called FLAME, Facts and Logic about the Middle East, and others that are very actively going after and trying to mold what appears in mainstream media. And so they don't typically bother with a blog or a small circulation publication, but they can be relentlessly going after *The New York Times*, C-SPAN in case they have a guest they don't like or a program they don't like, and really just generally making the life of the editor and the writers miserable, so that they come to the view that it's just better off perhaps not writing some stories rather than taking a critical stance that they know will get them in trouble with these media watch organizations.

**WOODS:** Can you tell us something about the organization called J Street, that's, I mean, newish, and how it's different from other Jewish organizations, and if in your view — like, what is your opinion of it?

**SMITH:** Well, my opinion at the beginning, along with a great deal of other watchers, was that, hey, here comes an organizations that seems younger, savvier, it's led by a guy who is clearly pro-Israel, had family in Tel Aviv for a long time but he moved before the state was formed. But yet it's going to sort of challenge some of the very hard line pro-settlement attitudes and maybe even hold a bit of pressure on the unconditional aid that flows from the U.S. As I've written in the book, it turns out that the organization is probably not quite living up to its original billing as being an organization that's going to offer a lot of contra and juxtaposition to some of the mainline organizations like AIPAC. They clearly don't have the amount of money, and what you see is that a lot of the younger, sort of more activist participants have bailed out and gone to Jewish Voice for Peace and other organizations, kind of disappointed that when it came down to things, they were very good on the Iran nuclear deal in terms of wanting that rather than a war with Iran, but they're not seeing enough difference with some of the mainline advocacy organizations that are up there. And I think their revenues have suffered a bit because of it. So I've included them as kind of part of this Israel lobby in my book.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that was what surprised me, was to see it classified that way, and that was only because I hadn't followed them. I knew they existed, but I hadn't known about I guess what close watchers would have known, which is that they didn't quite turn out to be what they had been cracked up to be at the start.

**SMITH:** Well, they left a lot of space for a younger organization to come in and say, look, we really do not approve of this ongoing settlement activity, we really do not approve of some of the mainline positions you're taking when you take up with AIPAC, and so they left themselves exposed. But on the other hand, they're doing a huge event here in Washington. They're having the vice president come and talk and so they do — you know, I think other observers' enthusiasm for them as a juxtaposition of AIPAC waxes and wanes, but for the most part, mainly due, again, to this formation of a younger, faster-moving organization that's moving geometrically, it looks as though they kind of didn't fulfill their promise.

**WOODS:** Tell me about your "Chapter Eight: Coordination and Suppression."

**SMITH:** (laughing) We're going by chapters now. Well, "Coordination and Suppression"

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**WOODS:** Well, you have a title like that, I've got to ask.

**SMITH:** (laughing) All right, let me flip to my own book here, because it's — "Coordination and Suppression" is basically about how some of these organizations are out there really working day and night to make sure that some of the main drivers behind AIPAC are in the line. What a lot of people don't realize when they look at AIPAC is that it is the designated driver for Congress. I mean, if you look at its organizing documents, what you see is that it was set up to really consolidate the power of a number of other organizations that are automatic members of AIPAC and be able to say, look, we're really representing the establishment of all these organizations in their lobbying.

So the coordination that happens also of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which functions out of the sort of supermarket of financial institutions connected with Israel, the Jewish Agency, the Conference of Presidents, and others in a location in New York is really to try to make sure that when an issue comes up, again, such as the Iran nuclear deal, that they're all basically singing off the same sheet. And this goes from the federations that fund a lot of these organizations locally to the Conference of Presidents to the other members, the large organizations such as the ADL certainly, the American Jewish Committee, which does a lot of overseas work — t's been referred to as sort of the State Department of the lobby — make sure that they're all singing off the same song sheet, so to speak. So you know, the lobbying priorities that come up, you can't have a lot of rogue organizations singing off key, so the idea of this coordination is there.

Now, sometimes some organizations begin to sing off key and begin to criticize, and one of the case studies in the final report was really about how the Center for American Progress, which is a Democratic think-tank, had a number of authors who were justifiably pointing to major Israel lobby funding donors as being involved in making some very unfounded and harmful, they called it, Islamophobic programs targeting Muslims in America. There had to be a cleaning of house, and all of the authors, the main authors of that report were subsequently jettisoned from CAP.

The other case study in the book was the coordination and suppression of Rula Jebreal. You have this other organization headed by Josh Block, who's a former AIPAC spokesman. When he found out that Rula Jebreal, who was this MSNBC, very interesting analyst of the Middle East, was going to be on *Voice of America*, got in there, was in contact with the producer to get her out and try and put in a Washington Institute for Near East Policy voice, who, although he was Arab-Palestinian, etc., etc., would sing the appropriate notes concerning the region from the AIPAC think-tank, which is WINEP. So the case studies in the book about coordination and suppression really have to do with the coordination of all these different organizations and the

suppression of voices that are either inside and have to be jettisoned or outside and have to be suppressed.

**WOODS:** What's so interesting about everything you've just said is that when I then look at your chapter about American public opinion, the trend in American public opinion is away from all the sort of Likudnik, extremely hawkish, pro-Israel positions, in spite of all the things you just said.

**SMITH:** Yeah, that's really interesting. I mean, there's no doubt about it that, particularly Gallup polls, where I guess through the luck of the alphabet Iran comes before Israel, Israel factors really well in general favorability ratings among Americans, but if you begin to ask questions falling into the, "I'm going to give you some data, please respond to this," you tell them how much the aid is and how much it is relative — you know, American foreign aid to Israel — how much it is relative to other countries, then you find out most people are actually opposed to it. You know, it's an interesting juxtaposition when you look at, yeah, they're favorable, but they're really not all that much in favor of paying for billions and billions in foreign aid. So you find that.

You also find, however, that Americans are stunningly misinformed about a lot of things. I mean, back in the run up to this deal with Iran, you found, one of our polls through Google Consumer Research, statistically significant, found back in 2014 that almost 59% of Americans believed in 2014 that Iran already had nuclear weapons.

**WOODS:** Ugh.

**SMITH:** That's how much hype was out there floating around. You know, yeah. And so you just, it causes despair. And a lot of other things that are very much in sync with what the lobby in general would like Americans to believe are out there. One of the recent polls that we did in four countries was just asking, you know, fundamental questions about property rights. Basically the poll was, March of this year, "Which of the following do you believe to be true?" We asked, "Do Israelis occupy Palestinian lands, or do Palestinians occupy Israeli lands?" Between the U.K., Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., the U.S. was really the only country where the plurality, 49.2%, believed that Palestinians were occupying Israeli lands.

**WOODS:** You have to be kidding me.

**SMITH:** No, I'm afraid not, Tom. So we're out of sync. We're out of sync in terms —

**WOODS:** Ya think (laughing)?

**SMITH:** — with basic facts. Yeah. And if you don't have basic facts, you know —

**WOODS:** How can you make any decisions?

**SMITH:** How can you make any decisions?

**WOODS:** Yeah, no, it's crazy. Now, on the other hand, we've talked about American public opinion. I want to talk about a more specific strain of American public opinion. I wrote a book with Basic Books. It was an anthology of anti-war writing in U.S. history, and my coeditor was Murray Polner of the Jewish Peace Fellowship, and I asked him when I had him on the show, well, why is it that everybody acts as if the "Jewish" view on foreign policy is the view being pushed by the Israel lobby, whereas if I polled American Jews, I'd get a very different answer.

**SMITH:** Right.

**WOODS:** And yet, I'm anti-Semitic, so-called, for taking the exact opinion that most American Jews themselves take.

**SMITH:** Yeah, that's probably the biggest canard that the lobby's been advancing. And unfortunately, the mainstream media also pretty much buys that, hook, line, and sinker, at least they pretend to. But I mean, you're right. The Pew survey that was out in 2014 basically says that if you look at these claims that somehow these organizations are representative of the American Jewish population, that's absolutely not the case. You find that only 82% — well, 82% of Jewish Americans don't belong to any of these organizations, so they've got about 12% that are members. Most are not attached at all to Israel. Only about, it's something like 70% are somewhat or not at all attached, 57% have never gone there, 44% think settlement building is a bad idea.

So in terms of the continual claims and the conflation, I think that's probably the scariest thing. For people who don't even like to get in to discussions on religion and politics and don't like to talk about Christian evangelicals or Catholics or any of these denominations, they really probably don't want to get in to a discussion of, hey, can you tell me, Mr. Israel Lobby Organization Representative, how many members do you actually have. I mean, what are we talking about here?

But our estimate in the book based on this Pew survey and multiplying it times the adult population is you've got about just less than a million, 774,000 adults, who are even members of these organizations. And to say, as unfortunately the ADL, AIPAC, American Jewish Committee, and Conference of Presidents implied when they were out there posing the Iran nuclear deal that this was a reflection of generalized American Jewish support, that's just not true, because the general American support was 53%; 59% of Jewish Americans supported the deal, so they were clearly taking their cues and representing something else.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that to me, they can't — I don't know how they deal with that. I think they just ignore it. Now —

**SMITH:** I don't think they're challenged on it. I think that's the major problem.

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's true. It's not brought up. It's just taken for granted that you represent Jewish opinion. Now, I know it's not in the book, but I just have to ask your

opinion on the whole Donald Trump phenomenon. Now, I didn't see his speech to AIPAC, but I'm told that it was the typical pandering speech that we might expect.

**SMITH:** Right.

**WOODS:** But there's something a little bit more complicated about Trump. And I forget who it was. It might have been Scott McConnell. Somebody over at *The American Conservative* made the point that every single time he wins a caucus or a primary, it is another nail in the lobby's coffin, because here's a guy who has, yeah, I mean, sometimes he says pro-Israel things, but on the other hand, he says things that are absolutely forbidden, and he's getting away with it again and again.

**SMITH:** Yeah. The guy I heard saying that loudly over at Anti-War was Justin Raimondo, and he basically was making the same point, was that he was kind of showing that when someone stands up and says, I want to be even-handed, as Trump did, I'm a dealmaker, you can't really say that you're going to unconditionally support one side and expect to be able to make a deal. You know, the real estate guy talking about land deals. He managed to get away with that, and he didn't lose support among Christian evangelicals. He didn't lose support among the people who were following him, and really did reveal that you can, if you have a certain trajectory and resources behind you, you can resist the mantras that you're supposed to spout. But of course then he did make his AIPAC speech, suspiciously using teleprompters and following a closer, tighter script. But I do find that fascinating, and at our conference on March 18 at the National Press Club, that was probably one of the more interesting analyses, was really about how does this happen and what does it reveal about the strength of the lobby.

**WOODS:** Now, your subtitle is "How Israel's Lobby Moves America."

**SMITH:** Right.

**WOODS:** When you say "America," do you mean government officials, or do you mean the American public?

**SMITH:** Well, in this case the real argument is that federal agencies — whether it's the Department of Energy and the State Department, which actually have crafted a gag order forbidding any government employer or contractor from admitting the obvious, which is that Israel has nuclear weapons, or the Treasury Department, which continually dodges questions about whether tax deductible donations are going into illegal settlements, which the government says it opposes — there's a lot of pushing and moving government federal agencies, basically. So the core argument of the book is not so much that Americans are being moved as that they're being tugged along by unrepresentative and we would even argue almost criminally negligent federal agencies, whether it's the Department of Justice, Treasury, even the CIA, even the State Department, even the Department of Energy, who, whenever there comes a conflict of interest or a crisis, whether it's espionage, nuclear theft, tax questions, etc., etc., they basically cover it up, run away, ignore, obfuscate. And in the cases of



the IRS, even try and destroy their own ability to enforce their own regulations. So the entities being moved and, what's in the final chapter, urging Americans to challenge those federal agencies to push back on them, is really what's being moved in this case.

**WOODS:** Take a couple minutes to tell us about your institute.

**SMITH:** Yeah, the Institute for Research of Middle Eastern Policy is a 501(c)(3) I've set up. I spent half of my life in the private sector. Started out doing market research at American Express financial advisors, did a stint at a business school in Latin America, had a lot of experience researching markets for Yankee Group Research, the whole porter analysis, and I really wanted to get back into something I had done in the late '80s, which was looking at lobbies and their impacts on governments. I'd done some work as part of a Minnesota Citizens League commission looking at lobbying.

So just back in 2001, when I was as confused as everybody who I considered to be important about the rush for war in Iraq, I decided to bring some of those research and analysis skills and focus them on the forces propelling America into these horrific incursions into the Middle East, and I have not been lacking for subject matter since. So we function on a relatively small donor base, in terms of dollar amounts, but we've done some big things. This is about the eighth book about the lobby. We do an annual conference. The website's IRMEP.org. We also put out a podcast, email alerts, such and so forth. And we're really trying to focus on this issue, not so much as just strictly looking at foreign policy, but as a domestic issue that really needs to be examined closely.

**WOODS:** Have you yourself suffered in any way at the hands of any of these organizations? Have they targeted you in any way?

**SMITH:** Um, not in any way that really impacts me. I don't want to — there are some funny things that happens to anybody who comes into this space, but I'm just going to say there've been some funny things that have happened, but I kind of keep those in my back pocket.

**WOODS:** Okay, fair enough, got it. All right, so I'm going to link to your site, which is IRMEP.org, is that what you just said?

**SMITH:** Yeah, it's IRMEP.org. If anyone wants to take a look at some of the presentations made at our last big conference, 400 people in Washington, that's IsraelsInfluence.org, get a wide range of opinions on how this impacts America. And then the book is *Big Israel*, and that's on sale at Amazon.com in paperback, and we should have a Kindle version out by June.

**WOODS:** Okay, so I'm going to link to both your website and to the book at TomWoods.com/642. Well, Grant, it's been a pleasure to get to know you for the first time, and good luck with the book.

**SMITH:** Well, I hope to be on again some time. I appreciate the opportunity.