



PRESSURE GROUPS

The Chomsky/Blankfort Polemic

Reprinted from *Signs of the Times*
February 20, 2006

An interview with Jeffrey Blankfort

Silvia Cattori : Washington and Tel-Aviv are intensifying their threats against Iran. In your opinion, does Israel have a precise national interest in weakening, or destroying, numerous Arab neighbors and to what degree does it succeed in orienting US policy towards new aggression in the Middle East?

Jeffrey Blankfort : My position is, and I have written an article about it, that the war in Iraq was not a war for oil, but was a war conceived by the neo-cons and the pro-Israeli lobby in the United States to benefit Israel, and to elevate Israel to a very important position in the Middle East, as a part of a plan to achieve overall US global control. This is what was called for in the document of the "Project for a New American Century" or PNAC. And even though a number of prominent people – politicians as well as military people – have said that this was a war for Israel, the anti-war movement will not consider that at all.

And right at this moment, the only segment of the American society that is pushing the US administration to confront Iran, happens to be the Jewish establishment or the lobby, whose main focus for months – groups like AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, but also other Jewish organizations – has been to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons.

The left and the anti-war movement are so focused on blaming everything on US imperialism on one hand, and avoiding the provoking of what they fear will be "anti-Semitism" on the other, that they have gone further from putting any blame on Israel than have elements of the mainstream. And so, having paid no price for pushing the US into the war in Iraq – and not only this war, but the first Gulf war – they are preparing to do the same with Iran. There is no lobby like it.

S.C. : In other words, the US has become a satellite of Israel and acts in function with Israel's interests? Is this thesis not the opposite of that of Chomsky and of the left in general, for whom it is the US that uses Israel? That there is a convergence of interests between the US and Israel, and that Israel is simply the US's cop on the ground in exchange for services rendered by the US in the Middle East?

Jeffrey Blankfort : Yes, Chomsky tends to simplify US politics, blaming everything on the elites and whoever is in the White House while avoiding the role of Congress. Today, eleven members of the Senate are Jewish, that is 11 % of the 100 members while only 2 % of the American population is Jewish. He and his supporters, either directly or indirectly, raise the spectre of anti-Semitism, of provoking anti-Semitism, and what happens is that people keep their mouth shut. Now, Chomsky, who was a Zionist when he was younger– he lived in Israel, he has friends in Israel, was considering moving to Israel – admitted in 1974 that this might influence his perspective – and he wanted his readers to know that. He wrote this in 1974 and yet few people who read Chomsky today know that. They do not know that he was Zionist, that he considered living in Israel.

In fact, for years he did not speak about Israel while he was speaking out about the US in Central America and Vietnam. It was a mutual friend of ours, Dr. Israel Shahak, who convinced Chomsky that he should speak up against what Israel is doing to the Palestinians. It is interesting that the most important book that Chomsky wrote about the Israeli-Palestinian issue, *The Fateful Triangle*, begins actually with a defense of Israel, a defense in the sense that while acknowledging all the Israeli crimes against the Palestinians, he blames the US for allowing it to happen. Now, this defense, I would say, could be used by Pinochet in Chile or any dictator the US has supported around the world, to take the primary responsibility from them and place it on the US. And I don't buy this. And most people who understand the situation, don't buy it either when they come to look at it. A number of friends of

mine, who are friends of Chomsky, have come to agree with me. The problem is, I would say, as fellow academics, that they don't feel comfortable criticizing Chomsky, particularly since he is often attacked by the right wing.

He has defended many people who have been under attack and has thus gained their loyalty. He also has been a mentor to a number of academics, and ironically, Chomsky has been the doorway for so many people to become involved in politics. They read Chomsky, and they become excited about political work. And it is only later, if they are fortunate, that they discover that Chomsky not only opens the door, he closes it as well!

S.C. : Which would mean that Chomsky gives less importance to the pro-Israeli lobby than it has? Has Chomsky upheld unjust options for the Palestinians in order to preserve Israel, for which he has an emotional attachment? Is this a unique case or has Chomsky defended the indefensible?

Jeffrey Blankfort : For the most part. On most other subjects, he is more open. On this particular one, he won't even debate the issue. In 1991 we had an exchange that was published in a left newspaper in New York, the *National Guardian*, and a friend there wanted to set up a debate between Chomsky and myself on the issue of the Israel lobby at the Socialist Scholars Conference. Chomsky refused, writing "that it would not be useful." After his refusal, I asked a professor in California, Joel Beinin, whom I know, and who takes Chomsky's position, if he would debate me. His response was identical: "it would not be useful!"

S.C. : On Iran, which today is caught in a vise, is Chomsky, in your opinion, also minimizing the role of the lobby acting in favor of Israel in the United States ?

Jeffrey Blankfort : Regarding Iran, Chomsky and the others seem to be ignoring the campaign that the lobby is waging to get us into another war, one that will be far more catastrophic than the disaster that has taken place in Iraq. There is a coalition of the 12 leading Jewish women's organizations, representing a million Jewish women, calling itself "One Voice for Israel," that formed in 2002 in response to the bad publicity Israel received over the destruction of Jenin. Each year, in what it calls "Take-5," it gets its members to call the White House at the same time and then on another day, to do the same to Congress. Each time they have done it, they have tied up the Capitol switchboard. It is one of the ways in which they show their power.

This coming February 22nd, they will be phoning President Bush to express their opinion on what he should do about Iran, and its development of nuclear energy or weapons. This is a kind of operation that goes on all the time, but it is not even an issue or even known about by the anti-war movement, or by the left, and Professor Chomsky has written to me and others that he is not interested in the issue.

When two years ago, the same person who invited him to have a debate with me in 1991, asked Chomsky again if he would do it, he refused, dismissing my "preoccupation" with the lobby. He also writes that he refuses to read the article that I wrote about him. This is hardly the response of an intellectual. I find it interesting that he is willing to debate Alan Dershowitz, because that is fairly easy, but he won't debate someone on the left or at least on this issue. And that is where the debate should take place.

S.C. : Do you think that other countries have their equivalent of AIPAC?

Jeffrey Blankfort : AIPAC is very unusual because while it is a registered lobby for Israel, it does not have to register as a foreign lobby. And that gives it a unique situation in the country. In every hearing in the Congress that involves Middle East issues, you have staff members of AIPAC sitting in these committee hearings. No other lobbies, foreign lobbies, have this privilege. And they also write the legislation that Congress passes regarding the Middle East. For example, the recent Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act, which was passed a couple of years ago and which led to what we see in Lebanon and Syria today was written by AIPAC which later bragged about it. It is not a secret. The only people that pretend they don't know it is the Left. It's on AIPAC's website, it is in their publications. AIPAC also provides interns – young, bright Jewish college students to work in the offices of members of Congress. They go to a member of Congress and say: "We have this young person who is interested in working on Capitol Hill, they will come one year and they will work in your office." No member of Congress is about to refuse a volunteer.

Also AIPAC has a special foundation that provides free trips for members of Congress to Israel. Last year over a hundred members of Congress went to Israel, on a free trip, paid for by this foundation. Now there is a big debate about such trips in Congress paid for by various lobbies, but I do not believe that anything is going to happen there that would negatively affect AIPAC. Congress will make an exception when it comes to Israel. What is interesting is we have a country to the South of us called Mexico. Mexico is far more important to the United States, to our

economy, and also there are many more people of Mexican-American extraction than Jews.

There are thousands of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who work here and are responsible for growing and picking the farm produce in the United States. And yet we don't have Congressional delegations going to Mexico, we don't have Congress talking about the importance of Mexico. If they go to Mexico, they go for a vacation, and yet here the focus is on Israel simply because of two things: money and intimidation. The Democratic Party has for years relied on wealthy Jewish donors for the majority of its contributions. AIPAC itself does not give money. AIPAC coordinates where the money should go, so if you are a wealthy Jewish donor and you want to do something to help Israel's cause, AIPAC will let you know where to give it. Also, around the country, there are now about three dozen political action committees or PACs that exist only to give money to candidates who support Israel. None of them are identified by a name that has anything to do with Israel; so here in California we have something called the Northern Californians for Good Government'. You have in St. Louis, Missouri, the St. Louisans for Good Government. The biggest one is called the National PAC, NPAC. Then you have the Hudson Valley Political Action committee, Desert Caucus, et cetera.

If you look at the name of these committees, you have no idea what they are for, whereas the other lobbies identify themselves by their special interest. Why not Jewish supporters of Israel? But even more important for Democrats, and for some Republicans, is the money contributed by individual Jews. For example, in 2002, an Egyptian-born Israeli, named Haim Saban, who came to the United States and made billions of dollars with a Saturday morning children's program, gave \$12.3 million dollars to the Democratic party, which was only about a million and a half dollars less than the arm manufacturers political action committees gave to both political parties.

Now, this is just one man. And also Haim Saban, who founded the Saban Institute at the Brookings Institute which deals with Israeli issues, is also a big supporter AIPAC, and he funds events in Washington where AIPAC trains college students for pro-Israel advocacy. University campuses are a main battleground for the Jewish forces lobbying for Israel they have come together as the Israel Campus Coalition, 28 organizations, including AIPAC with Israel at the top of their agenda.

Today, a main lobby focus is to get to the colleges campuses to stop divestment programs directed towards Israel. They also are trying to influence the next generation of community leaders who are in the universities at the moment to act in Israel's behalf.

S.C. : To help the Palestinians get justice, those who support them – or who at least pretend to – must speak the truth. However, it seems as if, even in their own camp, this truth is suffocated. Do you think that in the US, as in Europe, this solidarity has failed because it is led by people who are there to put breaks on any criticism of Israel? Do you think Chomsky's influence is exercised in this way?

Jeffrey Blankfort : The pro-Palestinian movement has been totally ineffectual here for a couple of reasons. One is they refuse to recognize the role the lobby plays. That's like going out to play a football game, but you don't go to the stadium, you go a shopping mall instead. If you are not on the field where the game is played you are not going to win.

So here is the most powerful lobby in the United States, which the Palestinian solidarity movement has ignored with the exception of an occasional picket of AIPAC. One of the reasons is it has been influenced by certain ideological Marxist groups that are still living in another day and age where lobbies did not play a part. I have been told by political activists that to talk about the lobby is not Marxist, or talk about the lobby is not socialist. And my response is that it exists, it's real, and that is what's important. Also, there are many self-styled Jewish anti-Zionists in the leadership positions in the movement who claim that to blame the lobby is to provoke anti-Semitism. In this, they are what I call, "Jewish exceptionalists" who bar any criticism from acts that Jews do collectively, such as lobbying for Israel which makes them, in practice, scarcely distinguishable from Zionists

And what happens is I hear all of these people dismissing the lobby and quoting Chomsky verbatim without even mentioning his name.

His influence on them is so critical, so powerful, that they internalize Chomsky. And so what happens is you have a movement that refuses to recognize the major opponent of the Palestinians on American soil.

Chomsky came out against divestment at MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he teaches, and where he was able to water down a divestment resolution. Then he came out two weeks later and attacked the

whole divestment issue. He is against sanctions against Israel, he is against divestment, he has not revealed any kind of agenda that would change things other than having people 'write letters to the editor'.

He never mentions Congress, he never mentions the Appropriation committees. If he mentions aid to Congress, he won't say you have to stop it. He will mention it like it a fact of life, like it's raining or it's sunny. I wrote to him about this and he was not very friendly when he wrote back.

In 1988-95 I published a magazine called the *Middle East Labor Bulletin* which Chomsky subscribed to. In the magazine I had a special section on the Israel lobby and Congress, in which I revealed the names of the Congress people who were in bed with the lobby and I published the sources, most of which came from the Jewish press. So anyone reading the magazine would have had ample proof about control by the lobby of Congress. I recently reread some of the issues published twelve years ago, and they could have been written today, so he can't play ignorant. I just believe his early Zionist leanings and his fears for the future of Jews is so great that it's like he's a child refusing to face the truth. It is unfortunate.

Chomsky is what we call here in this country, a gatekeeper. He is also a gatekeeper on another critical subject, the events of 9/11, dismissing the many questions that have been raised about the official narrative of the Bush administration on the attack on the World Trade Centre. Chomsky says there is no basis to question Mr. Bush's 9/11 story. So most of the criticism that he is getting is from people who have been doing research on 9/11, while he continues to say the story that the Bush administration has told is the truth. So the role he pushes today on the international stage is, as far as I am concerned, a reactionary one.

He says a lot of very positive things much of which I agree with, and again, I know many people who say they were introduced to the political world by Chomsky. He has clearly turned people on. But today, it may be a dialectical situation, now he turns people off, or in the wrong direction.

S.C. : Is your thesis on Chomsky, that he ignores the influence of AIPAC and other similar institutions in US wars in the Middle East, and has a negative impact on solidarity movements, shared by many other intellectuals?

Jeffrey Blankfort: I am in a minority, but I do have an extensive mailing list, I do have a radio program, actually I have two radio programs, and one radio program happens to be in an area which is not Israeli occupied territory and where I can talk about the lobby, I can talk about Israel the way I am talking about it now. The Zionists tried to get me off the air but they were not effective.

One of the ways they intimidate people is through the various Jewish organizations. Each has taken on a different role to play. One important one is the Anti-Defamation League, whose main job is to defame, intimidate and spy on people who are critical of Israel. I was one of them who was spied on.

Its agent infiltrated our organization, the Labor Committee on the Middle East of which I was the co-founder in 1987. Then we learned that they were spying on hundreds of organizations across the political spectrum and thousands of individuals – twelve thousand individuals, six hundred organizations.

I was able to get my ADL files to find out that they had spied on me illegally, and I sued them.

I went out to court with two other activists and after ten years they agreed to settle without me having to sign a confidentiality agreement. So I always talk about this organization.

The person who spied on me for the ADL, was also working for South African intelligence. We had a big anti-apartheid movement in this country. Basically, Israel, the Israel lobby and South Africa were on the same page, very close allies. They were allies socially, culturally and militarily. This is something that unfortunately the anti-apartheid movement also refused to deal with because of Zionist pressure.

I would say the problem with building a real political movement in the United States is blocked by Zionists and their refusal, like Chomsky, to openly deal with Zionism and its role in this country.

Back in 1988, when in the early months of the first Intifada, the anti-intervention movement refused to support a demand that Israel end its occupation of Palestinian land, a Native American leader told me that the problem with the American movement was that there are too many Liberal Zionists in it. And this is the truth.

I never use his name, because if I publish it, he will then be attacked as being anti-Semitic.

I have been attacked as a self-hating Jew, as an anti-Semite, but it does not matter to me because I consider the accusation of anti-Semitism to be the first refuge of scoundrels. Patriotism is the last refuge, anti-Semitism is the first. In this country it has been used to silence so many people. And this is one of the reasons I am against specifically Jewish organizations wanting to lead the fight for Palestine. What happens is that there are many anti-Zionist Jews, or who claim to be anti-Zionist, who say "we, as anti-Zionist Jews, should provide the leadership so that other people will see that not all the Jews are for Israel".

And I am totally against that because all Americans pay their taxes and thus support Israel. And this is an American issue. And by putting it out that Jews are the leaders, that Jews, anti Zionists Jews are doing this, what it says to non-Jews is: they can do this because they are Jewish. It has been tried, so far it has been a failure.

So when I speak, I speak not as a Jew, but as a human being. That's why when I first went to the Middle East in 1970, to Lebanon and Jordan, I did not tell people I was Jewish. I did not go there as a Jew, I went there as a journalist.

It was not important to be South African to oppose apartheid, it was not necessary to be a Nicaraguan to oppose the Contras, or to be Vietnamese to oppose the Vietnam war. What does being Jewish have to do with opposing what the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians. In fact, Jews should be very careful about the leadership role. It is not the place for Jews, for people who identify as Jews. The irony is that the people who are most quoted, who speak most on this issue in the US are all Jews who are ultimately protective of Israel.

Chomsky, of course, is the most important one. They criticize Israel, you see, because that's important, you have to do that, but they deflect the main responsibility on to the US and thus while not absolving Israel, shield it from punishment such as sanctions, boycotts and divestment.

S.C. : You just said that you were accused of anti-Semitism. Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, for example, was recently accused by the French dailies *Liberation* and *Le Monde* of having uttered "anti-Semitic" remarks. Do you not think that this accusation has become more difficult to exploit in the face of a public opinion that has discovered that it has been manipulated for political ends?

Jeffrey Blankfort : Well, they see it, but they are afraid to speak of it. Because the price for criticizing Jews, as Jews, is big in the US. But also, as you see, in France, in Germany, in Canada, and so on, Austria. You can criticize any other national group, but to criticize Jews collectively, not Jews as Jews, but the Jewish establishment is to jeopardize your career.

So even if, privately, people say one thing, they won't say it publicly. I occasionally help to get progressive Palestinians and Israelis interviewed by the media in the San Francisco area. It used to be more open, I would say, on mainstream radio than it is today. Back in 1984, I was able to place an Israeli soldier, a reservist, who refused to serve in Lebanon, on the biggest radio talk show in San Francisco. He told the truth about the Lebanon war, that the Palestinians were not shelling Lebanon, and in the second hour of the program, which was broadcast to a national audience, someone, with a strong accent, called and asked "who is responsible for putting this communist on the air?" The talk show host said that he was, but in fact it was the producer who had arranged for my friend to be on the air. Very soon afterward, that talk show host, who was the most popular radio programmer in San Francisco, was replaced by a Zionist who is there to this day and who is such a Zionist that every year, when they have an Israeli Day celebration in San Francisco, he is the master of ceremonies. On the airwaves, on the major networks, you will find either among the owners or the more important decision making positions, people who are clearly Zionists. The head of CBS news, Leslie Moonves, for example, is the great-nephew of David Ben Gurion.

Most people cannot or don't want to believe it when I speak of Jewish influence in the media. I read the Jewish press, and they have information on that subject that does not get published in the mainstream press. This is basically where I get most of my information, and I have found it to be credible. One paper that is particularly useful is the *Forward*, a Jewish weekly that is like the *Wall Street Journal* for Jews, because it has a lot of good information that you don't find in any other publication.

What is most interesting is that most of the people I know, who are fighting for the Palestinians in the US, never read the Jewish press. And to me, if you don't do that, you are not serious. Because we cannot do anything in this country about what is happening in Palestine directly. But what we can do in the United States is work to weaken Israel's support here, to expose the Israel lobby and undermine Israel's position in the United States. When we weaken Israel's support, we strengthen the Palestinian position.

SC : Aren't a number of people, touched by the misery of the Palestinians and the Iraqis, more and more conscious that the media lies?

Jeffrey Blankfort : Well, of course, the newspapers are lying, but while there is more information on the internet, that, too, even from our side, is not always reliable and we have to be careful not just to believe something we read there because it is what we want to believe.

The Bay Area, used to have seven or eight newspapers. Now there are barely two and a half. And they have become more like English tabloids, they are competing with television. Unlike Europe, the quality of television here is very poor, and people have become addicted to it. And they are also addicted to portable musical instruments like CD and MP3 players, and now there is the iPod. It is not very promising and also the political arena here doesn't give much opportunity to play. We have two parties that, essentially, are the same, two wings of the capitalist party. One pacifies the people, that's the Democrats, and the other eliminates them, that's the Republicans. They argue or pretend to about domestic issues, but when it comes to Israel they lock arms together. So for example you may have women in Congress fighting for the right to have an abortion. They join with the most right wing, anti-women members of Congress in the Senate when it comes to supporting Israel. This is never commented on or discussed within the left! It is very depressing because I don't see much change although there were a couple of protests at local AIPAC meetings, but there is no clear connection made between the lobby and Congress and what is going on in Israel-Palestine. And I don't see much improvement taking place. So, I cannot even say what can happen that will change it. At some point, there will be a change. I don't know how it's going to come around, how it's going to come about. But I don't see at the moment any bright prospect for the future.

S.C. : If the orientation of the media doesn't change, and if the influence of the pro-Israeli lobby continues apace in the States without ever being denounced by the left, don't you think that will give Israel a free hand to continue to foment wars against Iran, Syria, and Palestine?

Jeffrey Blankfort : The neo-cons who are almost exclusively Jewish and the Israel lobby got the US into the war in Iraq. The father of the President, the first George Bush was against it, the oil companies were against it. And despite the fact that the war is going so badly, they did not have to pay a political price because only a few isolated columnists, and but a few from the left, and none representing the anti-war movement in this country, wrote articles about that. So now, the same forces are now pushing for a US confrontation with Iran, although I don't think that will happen, simply because the United States is bogged down in Iraq. Besides, should the US attack Iran, the troops that the US has trained in Iraq who are very pro-Iranian and connected to the two parties the SCIRI and the Dawa that were founded in Iran in 1982 and fought on the side of Iran against Saddam, will certainly respond and Iraq will explode even more than it already has. That is why I don't think the US is going to do it, even though everybody over here seems to think so. But if the US does attack Iran, that is the ultimate proof that the Zionist lobby has total control over US policy, and I don't think it is at that point now. What is happening is interesting: Bush is weak at the moment, Republicans are deserting him, he has lost votes in Congress, he will get his Supreme Court Justice, Alito, approved but AIPAC has criticized him for being soft on Iran; AIPAC has criticized him publicly for not pushing Iran before the Security Council, even though AIPAC knows that if the US brought Iran before the Security Council they will not get the vote against Iran. There is considerable speculation that Israel will attack Iran, even if the US is hesitant, because this is an election year and Israel knows and the lobby knows that anything Israel does at such times will be applauded by Congress and we may end up with the same result in Iraq.

It's interesting that newspapers note as do newscasters on the air, that no criticism is likely to be made of Israel by the president or members of Congress during an election year but they never explain why. The left, led by Chomsky, pretends to be unaware that the question even exists. The irony is, if you read the mainstream press, you will find more about what is going on in terms of the lobby, than if you read the left press, such as it is. The newspaper, *The Forward*, is a more important newspaper to read because it tells what's going on with the lobby, and more recently the investigation into AIPAC which the left, again, pays no attention to. Others ask, if AIPAC is so strong, why would they investigate AIPAC? My response is there are people in Washington, in the intelligence department, in the intelligence agencies who, for their own reasons, are very much worried about the Israelization of US foreign policy. And these people in Washington, or people who used to work in Washington, have had a long term fight against the Israel lobby. The left, again, is not a participant in this, unfortunately. And this is why you have people who know what Israel is doing in Washington, what the lobby is doing in Washington and they want to stop it.

S.C. : To come back to that which separates you from Chomsky on the Palestinian question, could we say that you

want the Palestinians to win while Chomsky doesn't want the Israelis to lose?

Jeffrey Blankfort : I wouldn't put it exactly that way but I do believe that the Palestinians have the priority to decide what happens in Israel and Palestine and that Chomsky is more concerned about the future of Israel and the welfare of Jews. He opposes a one-state solution and I believe single state is the only answer but I don't argue here for that because we are not the ones to determine that. But I do give the priority to the Palestinians and he gives it to the Israelis. And that's the difference between us.