

Billionsaire Republicans and Professional Islamophobes: The Pro-Israel Lobby in Brussels

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Global Research, May 21, 2016

[Ceasefire](#)

Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

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Since Palestinian civil society announced the call in 2005 for an international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, similar to the one that helped end apartheid in South Africa, an array of pro-Israel organisations have been established in Brussels to influence European policy on Israel-Palestine. Most of the discussion of the 'Israel lobby' centres on its activities in Washington. But are there similar groups active in Brussels? For more than two years we have been researching that question. It turns out that there is indeed a burgeoning Israel lobby in Brussels.

As with corporate lobbyists, the organisations that make up the pro-Israel lobby in Brussels are not very transparent – the EU's scant disclosure requirements for lobby groups involve a voluntary transparency register and do not require them to publish their list of donors. However, the European Parliament did [pass](#) a law in 2014 calling upon the European Commission to make the register mandatory by 2017. Thus far, there are several pro-Israel groups that have still not registered.

Nevertheless, our research, based on an extensive analysis of Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax documents, available [online](#), did uncover that many of these organisations are heavily dependent on American donors, mostly right-wing conservatives; top Republican donors who also support Islamophobic causes and – significantly – groups expanding Israel's settlement project. This second finding is especially relevant considering the immense influence of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. Perhaps most strikingly, however, while the pro-Israel lobby in Washington is largely a bipartisan effort, the one operating in Brussels is overwhelmingly Republican.

Before the 2005 BDS call, there were only a small number of pro-Israel groups focused on lobbying EU institutions. These included the European Coalition for Israel, a Christian Zionist group that is opposed to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and the AJC Transatlantic Institute, the Brussels branch of the American Jewish Committee. The more influential of these two organisations is the latter.

According to its financial records, the American Jewish Committee allocated almost \$5 million to its Brussels offshoot between 2005 and 2013. The largest known donor of the AJC, by far, is the Klarman Family Foundation, run by American billionaire Seth Klarman. *Forbes* currently [estimates](#) the businessman-turned-philanthropist's worth to be about \$1.35 billion. For its part, *Forward* [describes](#) Klarman as a 'wealthy American Jewish investor...following in the footsteps of Sheldon Adelson and Ron Lauder [president of the World Jewish Congress and an ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] in acting on his belief that coverage of Israel within Israel itself is unbalanced and unjustifiably hostile — and

that he can do something about it.' *Forward* also reports that Klarman is a Republican donor; indeed, he is ranked as the [30th](#) top Republican spender in this year's presidential election.



Martin Shultz, president of the European Parliament, meets with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu during his 2014 visit to Israel. (source: Guardian.co.uk)

Between 2010 and 2012, the Klarman Family Foundation donated \$125,000 to the Friends of Ir David, and in 2010 it gave \$150,000 to the Central Fund of Israel, both pro-settler groups. Nevertheless, Klarman told *Forward* that he opposes Israeli settlements. 'We think it was a bad policy from the beginning and continues to be a bad policy,' he said. Klarman's foundation also funds the Pennsylvania-based Middle East Forum, which controversially [funded](#) anti-Muslim Dutch politician Geert Wilders' legal defence, in 2010 and 2011, against charges of inciting racial hatred in the Netherlands. The Center for American Progress has [argued](#) that both the forum and its founder, Daniel Pipes, are part of a network of 'misinformation experts' that 'peddle hate and fear of Muslims and Islam'.

Today, there are at least seven more influential pro-Israel organisations in Brussels, several of which are sustained - similar to the AJC Transatlantic Institute - by American donors who support right-wing and Islamophobic causes, as well as Israel's illegal settlement project. These include the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD), an offshoot of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) in Washington. Clifford May, former communications director at the Republican National Committee, [is](#) the FDD president, and R. James Woolsey, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, [is](#) currently its chairperson. Eli Clifton, of the *Salon* news website, has [called](#) the Foundation for Defense of Democracies 'Washington's premiere hawkish think tank,' reporting that it is heavily funded by Republican donors, including Paul E. Singer and Sheldon Adelson. Our research shows that in 2009, it provided a direct grant of \$478,829 to EFD, in addition to a payment to the Brussels-based foundation's director, Roberta Bonazzi, for 'networking and research' activities.

Although the EFD itself does not publish its list of donors, its US-based tax-exempt charity, Friends of the EFD, is required by law to report to the IRS. We found that Singer is also a main contributor, his charities giving a total of \$1 million between 2009 and 2013. Singer [is](#) currently the third largest political donor in the United States, [giving](#) more than

\$10 million to the Republicans through various super PACs. Another major donor to Friends of the EFD is American billionaire and philanthropist Bernard Marcus, incidentally the 29th largest political donor in this election cycle, also to the Republicans.

Klarman, Singer and Marcus all fund the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), co-founded in 1998 by Yigal Carmon, a former Israeli military intelligence officer, and Meyrav Wurmser, an Israeli-born American political scientist, to provide free English language translations of Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Pashto and Turkish media reports. The Center for American Progress has [called](#) MEMRI 'the Islamophobia network's go-to place for selective translations of Islamist rhetoric abroad'. One of its advisors is Steve Emerson, a media 'terrorism expert' who in January 2015 falsely told *Fox News* that Birmingham is a 'Muslim-only city' where non-Muslims 'don't go'. The subsequent public outcry [forced](#) him to apologise.

Other US-funded organisations in the pro-Israel lobby in Brussels include the Israel Allies Foundation, a Christian Zionist initiative led by Israeli settler activist Binyamin Elon; leader of the now defunct right-wing Moledet party. Elon lives in Beit El, a settlement in the occupied West Bank. [According](#) to *Salon*, he has a 'reputation as one of the least tractable and most radically right of Israel's political leaders'. California-based bingo multimillionaire Irving Moskowitz and his family's foundations are top donors to the Israel Allies Foundation's American fundraising arm. Moskowitz has been [buying](#) property in occupied east Jerusalem for decades and recently acquired Palestinian farmland in the occupied West Bank for a new settlement, a move [condemned](#) by American officials. His foundations have also [donated](#) millions to Republican causes.

Another member of the pro-Israel Brussels lobby is the European Leadership Network, founded in 2007 by Larry J. Hochberg and Israeli Raanan Eliaz. Hochberg is an American businessman and philanthropist, a former chairperson of the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces, and a national officer for AIPAC, who continues to finance and [serve](#) as a board member of StandWithUs. His eponymous Hochberg Family Foundation also funds the American Jewish Committee, Middle East Forum and European Foundation for Democracy, amongst other key Islamophobic causes. It has also given to the pro-settler One Israel Fund.

While Hochberg's political donations [are](#) more bipartisan than those made by the other major donors detailed above, his support for Islamophobia and the settlements is difficult to ignore. The latter especially so at a time when public opinion across Europe is firmly against Israel's occupation of Palestine, and a number of European governments have officially voiced their intention to recognise an independent Palestinian state.

Our research on the Israel lobby in Brussels suggests the need for much greater transparency in political lobbying at the European Union. We argue that EU institutions must require all lobby groups to disclose where they get their money from, as well as how much they spend; as well as close current loopholes allowing lobby groups to avoid registering their interests and affiliations.

This article is based on a new Public Interest Investigations/Spinwatch report [The Israel Lobby and the European Union](#), published by EuroPal Forum. Download [here](#).

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