

Smear Tactics: Israel Lobby Creates Anti-Iran PR “Astroturf” Group

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In the battle of wills between Iran and the west that has been waged for the past decade there are many players and interests. Some are self-evident including nations like Israel, Iran, the U.S. and others. But these legitimate players in this drama have created all sorts of phantoms in order to provide just that added bit of leverage in the public debate.

Israel has been especially active in this campaign, as I reported during my collaboration with Shama Leibowitz. We exposed conversations among Israeli diplomats who were [promoting a hostile view of Iran](#) that would be conducive eventually to striking it militarily. American Jews and Jewish organizations were willing partners in this project.

Now, Ben Doherty of [Electronic Intifada](#) and [I have exposed](#) yet another such strange project dreamed up by a PR firm run by a former IDF public affairs officer and funded by the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. The latter is the political and lobbying arm of the powerful New York Jewish community. Its director is Rabbi Michael Miller. On this project, he went into business with a PR firm “boutique” called [Thunder11](#), founded by Israel-American, [Marco Greenberg](#), who serves as its president. Greenberg was raised in California and attended UCLA. He made aliyah in the 1990s and joined the IDF, where he served in the army public affairs unit. No later than 2002 he had returned to the States, where he and his wife [became trustees](#) (page 19) of the AIPAC-affiliated think-tank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. This places him squarely inside the pro-Israel policy advocacy community. Aside from the JCRC, Thunder11’s clients include internet and social media firms like Conversocial, Media Friends, and Group Commerce.

Together they created a “group” on behalf of the JCRC called [Iran180](#). I put group in quotation marks since Iran180 is not a non-profit organization in any sense you or I would know it. It has no office, no board of directors, no fundraising, no members. It does have a single staff member, Chris DeVito, its “director of outreach.” But DeVito until a few days ago was listed on the website of another firm Greenberg founded, [Washington Square Research](#) (WSR), as an “account executive” (his listing was abruptly removed after Ben and I wrote our posts). WSR is supposedly a company that does research to support its clients and those of Thunder11. Greenberg’s partner in WSR is noted New York Israeli-American writer and NYU professor, [Liel Leibovitz](#).

Iran180 is what’s known in political PR circle as an “astroturf” organization. It exists in name only and serves the interests of parties who can’t be seen publicly to be supporting an issue. In the case of this group, the JCRC and others like the Anti-Defamation League, groups like the American Jewish Committee and UJA Federation of New York, joined together as [formal sponsors of the group](#). The JCRC is the only one that has conceded

financing the effort. But they determined that they needed an ostensibly independent group dedicated to the issue of Iranian human rights. One that had no “dog in the fight” between Israel and Iran.

Thus Iran180 was born as a supposed coalition of New York ethnic and women’s groups united behind the group’s slogan, “Human rights, not nuclear rights.” To be fair, the group has hosted largely serious discussions around these issues featuring Iranian journalists, LGBT, and human and labor rights activists. They’ve included such figures as the well-known Iranian-Jewish novelist [Roya Hakakian](#), author of the widely-admired [Journey from the Land of No](#).

This more serious aspect of Iran180’s mission is directed by DeVito, an articulate spokesperson with a Fletcher School of Diplomacy imprimatur and a specialization in Middle Eastern affairs (though his field was Arab studies, not Iran).

Iran180, however, leads a double life. On the one hand it attempts to be a serious human rights organization. But it has a Jekyll/Hyde identity as a rough-and-tumble agitprop street theater group featuring giant puppets acting the part of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and various other Middle Eastern tyrants like Bashar Assad and Muammar Gadhafi.

None of this would be out of bounds... until you examine the product of Iran180’s street theater. In 2011, it [hosted a float](#) at San Francisco’s Gay Pride parade in which Ahmadinejad was sodomized by a nuclear missile. During the same event, Ahmadinejad fellated said missile. Last year, during UN demonstrations coinciding with the Iranian leader’s UN General Assembly speech, the group featured a [gay Jewish wedding between Ahmadinejad and Assad](#) in which they stood under a [chuppah](#) and broke a wedding glass. In another scene, the lovebirds take a drive in a horse-drawn carriage and one strokes the naked belly of the other.

Iran180 also [produced a rap video](#) in which Ahmadinejad defecates in a public toilet and throws white, blond-haired girls into piles of garbage. In other images, you see spittle oozing from Ahmadinejad’s mouth.

If you want to create a “serious” human rights group, why would you add this layer of sleazy, outré tactics to the mix? The answer: you’re going after two audiences. For the human rights aspect of the group’s work, you want to develop a reputation among Iranians and other human rights activists as a serious, professional organization.

But the street theater appeals to an entirely different demographic: the younger, social media-savvy, urban hip-hop culture. It’s this element of Iran180’s work which will attract media attention due to its outrageousness. Or as the pro-Israel advocacy group, [Jewish Council for Public Affairs put it](#) in a remarkably candid appraisal of the strategy behind the group:

...Rallies outside the UN have become a feature of Ahmadinejad’s visits to the US. But interest and impact have been waning. Seeing these rallies attract fewer attendees and even less press, the New York Jewish Community Relations Council decided to act and formed a new coalition called Iran 180.

...As important as the message of Iran 180 is, that was not enough to generate the desired attention. Visuals are key. Thus was born the giant 10 foot Ahmadinejad puppet. The

popularity and presence of this puppet made it a useful tool for Iran 180, creating more opportunities to spread their message. The press had a catchy photograph and Iran 180 had a hook. The puppet became a signature of Iran 180 events, landing on the front page of the New York Times, and opening up a realm of possibilities for new uses.

In short, a 10 foot puppet being sodomized might make it in on [TMZ](#). Roya Hakakian, not so much.

Former Human Rights Watch LGBT director Scott Long, [wrote a critique](#) of this sort of propaganda in his blog. Along with the *New Yorker's* Seymour Hersh, he sees such attempts at humiliation deriving from the seminal work, [The Arab Mind](#) by Raphael Patai, which argues that waging war against Arabs (or in the case of Iranians, Muslims) involves understanding their weaknesses; and that one of these is sex. Here is how Hersh critiqued Patai:

The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March, 2003, invasion of Iraq. ... [Patai's] book includes a twenty-five-page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested with shame and repression. "The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of the women . . . and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world," Patai wrote. ... The Patai book, an academic told me, was "the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior." In their discussions, he said, two themes emerged — "one, that Arabs only understand force and two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation."

If Marco Greenberg hasn't read Raphael Patai, he's learned at the knees of those who have. Everything about Iran180's theater campaign smacks of precisely the sort of sexual shame and degradation discussed here. This goes far beyond the realm of rough-and-tumble political street theater, which has a long and honorable tradition in this country going back to the days of the Yippies in the 1960s, if not earlier.

When I began researching this story, I decided to approach as many of Iran180's sponsoring groups and those who participated in their "legitimate" human rights panels to determine how they would react to the revelation of Iran180's seedy "secret life." I'd hoped they would either renounce Iran180 or at least distinguish clearly between the good it did and the bad. The response has been mixed, but largely disappointing. Most people — from one of Marco Greenberg's business partners to the Jewish sponsoring groups to the Iranian journalists who appeared on panels, have bifurcated Iran180 into the good, on the one hand, and the bad and the ugly on the other.

Rabbi Michael Miller, an ordained Orthodox rabbi (though he doesn't use his title in his role as lead political operative of the New York Jewish community), refused to do a phone interview with me and would only answer written questions. His e-mail response was full-throated and unconditional in praise of Iran180's tactics:

...Iran180's work...has been almost in all cases well received and respected. Mr. Greenberg and his staff at Thunder11 (including research provided by his subsidiary Washington Square) have provided enormous benefits to the organization from its creation in September 2010 to the present day.

We stand by the outstanding work Iran180 has done, and are a proud and active founding member and financial supporter of the coalition.

When I approached John Ruskay, CEO of UJA Federation of NY for comment, PR consultant Jane Rubenstein responded that Rabbi Miller was its point man on the issue and wouldn't make any further comment.

The public-relations staffer at the American Jewish Committee listened to my story and my request for comment from director David Harris. I never heard any response. In fact, a former associate communications director for AJC, Ben S. Cohen, has been [equally full-throated in his praise of Iran180](#) in articles for Huffington Post and the UK Israel-advocacy blog, Harry's Place. Cohen worked for the Committee at the time it began its association with Iran180. Abe Foxman of the Anti Defamation League never replied at all to either phone or e-mail messages seeking comment.

Roya Hakakian appears to be living in a comfortable moral cocoon:

...The panel...was simply wonderful. If mal-intentioned forces...masterminded it, they must have been terribly disappointed by the end, for it was an utterly informed and informative conversation by a serious group to whom Iran is not a meal ticket but a passion.

...[What] we, as Iranians, need the most these days are similar opportunities that bring us all together and allow us to bask in each other's presence so that we can listen and understand each other. Tearing us apart from each other has been the most evil act that has been done to us for decades now and our healing can only begin at open forums in which we can freely speak in the absence of Tehran's propaganda.

In an interview, Greenberg's partner in WSR, [Israeli-American Liel Leibovitz](#) has several well-received non-fiction books to his credit and is a [senior writer](#) for *Tablet*, a Jewish-interest online magazine [funded by the two right-wing pro-Israel foundations](#). He initially refused a phone interview as well. After sending him my written questions, he eventually relented. In our conversation, he too sought to distinguish between the "good" Iran180 with which he was affiliated; and the "other" which Greenberg was responsible for. He argued that WSR was a pure research organization, not involved in politics or even public relations. The NYU professor claimed his only involvement with the human rights group was to prepare two "studies" of college student opinion on repressive regimes and internet censorship.

As for the street theater, Leibovitz argued that this was the purview of Thunder11 and something he knew almost nothing about. When I suggested that attempting to pursue legitimate research on behalf of an organization with as tenuous a hold on morality or reality as Iran180 might tarnish his own reputation, he responded that it was "disingenuous," for example, to claim that preparing a serious piece of scholarly research for a corporation that was otherwise engaged in sleazy behavior was in and of itself morally tainted.

I also suggested to him that while he might be able to make the distinction between Thunder11 as the down-and-dirty partner who created Iran180's street theater antics and WSR, which helped the group pursue its serious human rights agenda, the public might not be able to follow such fine distinctions. "The more you explain the issues to me, the more I understand that this might be a valid impression," Leibovitz conceded.

The Israeli-American writer prided himself on being a critic of Israeli policy. In fact, he's

made a point of telling Israeli interviewers that he wants little or nothing to do with Israel as presently politically constituted. He's also told me that he strongly disagrees with his partner Marco Greenberg's views about Israel. He respectfully, he says, tries to keep his relationship with his friend free of political antagonism.

If you maintain such an ethical position regarding Israel how do you reconcile being involved in such hasbara — pro-Israel propaganda — all the while criticizing Israeli racism and settler fundamentalism, as Leibovitz does? In a sense, this is a conundrum that all liberal Zionists face. But the NYU professor faces it more dramatically because he is a partner in an enterprise that advances some of the very ideas he claims to despise. To put it most baldly, he writes studies for a project that brings the Middle East just that much closer to war. If it happens, will he be thinking about the role he played and compromises he made?

There were a few individuals who do seem troubled by what they learned. Martin Schwartz, director of the Jewish Labor Committee told me that he "didn't endorse all the activities of Iran180" and that the street theater "crosses the line" and was not "in good taste."

New York Times reporter Anne Barnard, who actually reported from Iran for the *Boston Globe* back in the days when many newspapers had foreign bureaus, and moderated an Iran180 human rights panel, wrote this:

As for the panel discussion itself, my only purpose in moderating it was to add to public discussion and debate. The panelists expressed their own views, offering nuanced and varied perspectives about Iran that some in the audience might not otherwise have heard. Some audience members and organizers expressed surprise — and a few expressed dismay — after learning from the panel that many activists inside Iran are skeptical of outside intervention and fear that external pressure on Iran's nuclear program could set back human rights efforts inside the country.

Barnard was also shocked to learn that one of the Iranian sponsoring groups behind Iran180 is affiliated with the terrorist group, [Mujahideen-e Khalq](#) (MEK). The [Progressive Iranian-American Iranian Committee](#) was co-founded by Hassan Daiouleslam, who two independent national Iranian-American leaders (one of whom was once an MEK follower) told me is an executive committee member of the ["MEK cult"](#) and one of its [key representatives in the U.S.](#)

About Iran180's MEK connection, the *NY Times* journalist said:

Before agreeing to moderate the panel, I specifically asked the Iran180 organizers if their group had any connection to the MeK, and they said they had "no connection." Had I known of any connections between Iran180 and the MeK, I would not have agreed to moderate a panel at their event.

Not all of those who've spoken at Iran180 events have been as reputable as Hakakian and Barnard. On International Human Rights Day, Iran180 [hosted a panel](#) that included Pastor Robert Stearns, a leading Christian Zionist and regional director of John Hagee's Christians United for Israel. Stearns also holds the highly controversial view (among many of us) that Jews are fair-game for proselytizing.

Iranian-Americans I've consulted inform me about the political affiliations of some of the

Iranian guests. Among the Iran180 speakers were Shabnam Assadollahi, who received an Iran180 Hero Award. He is a Canadian-Iranian “human rights activist” allied with Hassan Daiouleslam and noted Islamophobe, [Amil Imani](#). Another Hero Award winner was Homayoun Mobasserri, currently the director of the reputed human rights group, Neda for a Free Iran. He appears to have been a naval officer under the Shah, meaning he is a likely monarchist with clear monarchist sympathies. Another, Ali Alfoneh, is an Iranian neocon who works at the American Enterprise Institute.

As far as Iran180, its press releases, and website are concerned, all of these individuals have pure human rights as their sole agenda. Nowhere does the group offer any indication of these individuals’ ideological or political allegiances. This is just another example of the hocus pocus in which this group engages.

One of the group’s primary political partners in its human rights work is [United Against a Nuclear Iran](#). Unlike Iran180, it appears to be a more serious political advocacy group. But its mission and leaders are [purely out of the right-wing pro-Israel neocon playbook](#). Its director is Mark Wallace, a Bush administration official. Among those most prominent in its work are Dennis Ross, James Woolsey, Meir Dagan, Irwin Cotler, and Walter Russel Mead, all known for their hawkish pro-Israel views regarding Iran. Such collaboration between the two groups further identifies Iran180 as a creature of the pro-Israel neocon community, sharing its policy objectives and world view.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with creating a legitimate group campaigning for Iranian human rights. Iran is a country that leaves much to be desired in terms of its record on these issues. But there are no shortcuts to doing such political work. You can’t invent groups, roll them out in a month and command the respect of anyone who’s serious around these issues. In fact, what’s likely to happen is your effort will blow up in your face and damage not only your own reputation, but that of anyone who has been affiliated with you. That means all the guest speakers, the legitimate Iranian activists, the LGBT campaigners. It also means that once this sleaze is uncovered by the Iranian regime itself, it will be used to whip up further frenzy against Israel and the U.S. It could even be used against Iranian gays themselves.

Have Marco Greenberg or Rabbi Miller given any thought to the moral consequences of their mischief? Or were they looking to score a couple of cheap propagandist points on the road to Armageddon against Iran? My problem with propagandists like them is that they don’t care a whit for human rights or for Iranians. These are the old Republican wedge issues that advance a far broader agenda. What could that be?

Returning to the beginning of this report: there is only one way Israel or the U.S. can attack Iran: if opinion in these countries is so hostile that Americans are prepared for such an attack when it comes. This will give Israel the freest set of military options, which it always prefers when waging war against its enemies. The more hatred it can drum up against figures like Ahmadinejad, the more likely Americans will not only not oppose a strike, but even welcome one.

I am not arguing that there’s a smoking gun pointing at the Israeli government directing this madness. But the pro-Israel lobby in this country often doesn’t need specific direction from Israel in order to act on such initiatives. Groups like the JCRC and the AJC are capable of developing their own proactive responses. At times, campaigns by groups such as AIPAC go far beyond the stance of whatever Israeli government might then be in power.

As of now, this story is known only to the readers of *Electronic Intifada*, [Tikun Olam](#) (my blog), Scott Long's [Paper Bird](#), and now Antiwar.com. So far the ripples have been small. But it deserves a tsunami of public awareness. Only then will the groups and individuals who brought the world the political abortion called Iran180 be held to account for their actions.

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