Amid Iran Talks, AIPAC Quietly Courts Progressives
Long accused of leaning to the right, pro-Israel group began upping its outreach to liberals in recent years

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March 9, 2015

WASHINGTON (JTA) — At the AIPAC conference, a sea of 16,000 Israel supporters spent their time talking Iran policy amid the swirling controversy over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech to Congress.

To the sidelines fell discussion of the Israeli elections, the peace process and Israeli innovation — as well as another quieter aim of the three-day forum: courting progressives.

Sprinkled through the dense program were several well-attended sessions devoted to presenting Israel’s deep connection to progressive values. In plenary sessions and breakout panels, speaker after speaker described AIPAC’s mission as being in alignment with the history of civil rights and social justice.

“Friendship. Courage. Commitment. These are the characteristics that I was taught to value,” AIPAC National Council member Rashida Winfrey, a Selma, Ala., native with deep roots in the civil rights movement, said from the main stage on March 1 following a clip of marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. “Today I stand with those who support Israel as I know they stood with me.”

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, long accused of leaning to the right and concerned about stagnant support for Israel on the left, has quietly upped its outreach to liberals in recent years.

Marilyn Rosenthal, a former deputy political director with the lobby, was named national director for progressive engagement in 2014.

And yet, much of that effort was invisible to the media covering the AIPAC policy conference March 1-3.

A number of sessions that celebrated progressive values were open to the press, such as the struggles against sexism and for gay rights.

At one panel, titled “Proud and Pro-Israel,” longtime gay rights activist Winnie Stachelberg of the Center for American Progress highlighted the history of Jewish support for marriage equality and employment nondiscrimination.
But at several points, AIPAC shut the door to reporters.

One session, titled “The Progressive Case for Israel,” ran three times at the conference
and was closed to media.

Also off the record was a panel — “Israel and the Progressive Mind” — featuring Haaretz writer Ari Shavit, whose book “My Promised Land” re-examines several of Israel’s founding myths and whose presence conference-goers pointed to as evidence of a new openness.

At one closed panel, Barney Frank, the longtime former congressman from Massachusetts, questioned settlement policy and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s decision to address Congress without first checking with the White House or congressional Democrats.

“It was one of the first times I heard any substantive debates,” said Rabbi David Paskin of Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., who attended the Frank session and describes himself as a “pro-gay rights, pro-women’s rights, pro-immigration reform” progressive.

“Congressman Frank said something quite powerful: If Israel’s greatest supporters can’t criticize her, then we lose credibility to others.”

AIPAC declined to respond to repeated requests for comment on its progressive outreach effort and why these panels were closed to the media.

But interviews with attendees revealed that talk about the Palestinians exposed a rift between those who believe it is time for AIPAC to address questions of Palestinian rights and those who feel such issues are outside the lobby’s purview.

Rabbi Gil Steinlauf of this city’s Adas Israel confessed to some ambivalence about attending the conference. One speaker, he recalled, said that we are “called by God [to] do what is right for Israel.”

“When I think about doing right for Israel, I also think of justice for Palestinians and a real accountability for all kinds of policies and actions on the part of the current Israeli government that are hurting chances for peace profoundly,” Steinlauf said. Rabbi Daniel Cohen of South Orange, N.J., who participated in a recent AIPAC trip to Israel for progressive rabbis and serves as a volunteer AIPAC ambassador, called the notion that it’s contradictory to be both a progressive and an AIPAC activist a “false narrative.”

But Cohen, who points to his own long commitment to gay rights, poverty relief and the environment, says AIPAC’s mission is solely to strengthen the US-Israel alliance. The future of the West Bank and Israel’s relationship to the Palestinians fall outside the organization’s mandate.

“Organizations have the right to define their mission and purpose in the way that they choose to define it,” Cohen said.
“It is the democratic nation of Israel that has to determine what to do there” — in the West Bank and Gaza — “hopefully with a Palestinian Authority that really wants peace. But it is undemocratic for someone living here to dictate policy there.” Without mentioning J Street, the self-described “pro-Israel, pro-peace” lobby seen as an alternative to AIPAC, Cohen acknowledged that other Israel policy groups disagree with AIPAC’s policy of avoiding such issues.

“You can say that approach is wrong,” Cohen said. “Then this is not the pro-Israel lobby for you.”

Joel Braunold, the US director of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, an umbrella group for organizations working on Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, participated in two open panels addressing coexistence projects.

Braunold said he did not moderate his message for AIPAC. He took Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman to task for threatening Israel’s Arab citizens during a live prime-time television debate in Israel last week. His audience, Braunold said, was mostly receptive to warnings by his fellow panelists about Jewish extremism.

Matt Duss, the president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace and a writer for a number of progressive publications, said it was good that AIPAC recognized that it had a problem with progressives.

“But they need to understand it’s not a perception problem but a reality problem,” Duss said.

“It is great to talk about LGBT rights, social welfare and other progressive issues. Israel is a great society in many respects. But you cannot use those things to paper over the fact that Israel continues the occupation, continues to expand settlements and continues to control the lives of millions of Palestinians to whom it owes no accountability.”

“The question is whether AIPAC is really willing to grapple with these issues. And I see no evidence of that yet.