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Credit: Jim Watson/AFP, Ingimage. Artwork by Anastasia Shub

**Opinion**

# Opinion | AIPAC Is Dying a Slow Death

An iconic political organization, losing contact with its base, is dying of a self-inflicted wound. Once the crucial amplifier of power and influence for the U.S.-Israel relationship, AIPAC has lost its touch



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AIPAC is slowly dying. It's true that no organization or institution is eternal, but rarely do we see the mortal wound self-inflicted at the height of one's success.

AIPAC's decision to indefinitely cancel its annual policy conference is one such act of self-immolation. This decision takes the word "public" out of AIPAC – the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. But without the "public" – Jewish and other Israel-loving Americans – no political organization dedicated to the hotly debated topic of U.S.-Israel relations can survive.

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Every mildly active member of the American Jewish community receives letters asking for generous donations to Jewish organizations that have enjoyed their fair share of glory. They've all contributed to the well-being of one Jewish community or another, or to a political cause dear to the Jewish people or Israel. You never send them money, though you wonder who sends those letters. What institutions stand behind their pleas? And what made today's activists not even aware of these groups' existence?

You quickly discover a very simple truth: They've lost the support of the people they faithfully represented. They've become mummified versions of living and breathing organisms. And when the spirit left the body, the only thing left was a carcass sending letters and receiving just enough



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Then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaking at the AIPAC Policy Conference in March 2020. Credit: Jose Luis Magana/AP

Each of these organizations has its own story of why its support base fled. Some groups stopped being relevant. Some never made any effort to stay relevant for new generations. The moment they lost touch with their supporters, the countdown to their demise began, but rarely, if ever, did the organization cut the cord with its supporters.

For decades AIPAC has remained the only true pro-Israel lobby group. The policy conference, usually held in the spring in Washington, was the hallmark of its activities. Thousands of participants (18,000 at the last conference in 2020) would flock to the capital to listen, talk and be inspired. For many participants the conference was akin to the ancient pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The confab was a unique place where you could befriend other like-minded Zionists, both Jewish and gentile. No other event in the United States, or for that matter around the world, offered such an opportunity.



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At the conference you would inhale the invigorating optimism and recharge emotionally and spiritually until the following year. You would see thousands of participants of very different backgrounds and political affiliations but united by one goal, Israel's welfare as a friend of the United States. This made you really understand the importance of AIPAC's work.



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**The Capitol Building. Meetings on the Hill provided a unique opportunity to display AIPAC's power.** Credit: Patrick Semansky/AP

The experience would inspire the participants to labor tirelessly to convince their friends and acquaintances to become active participants and come to the conference. The thousands in Washington would witness a great wonder: multitudes gathering in the superpower's capital to proclaim their unflagging support for a tiny friend in the Middle East.

But the cancellation of the conference also has a very political drawback. The event was a way for AIPAC to show the White House – and Congress just a few blocks away – that not only does it have financial means, it actually represents people. To be a successful lobby group, you have to involve the public. You have to be in a position to help the candidates financially. You have to help those candidates get elected. In a democracy, that means convincing people to vote a certain way.

The annual gathering left no doubt in the minds of Washington's political class that AIPAC possessed exactly that power and influence. One day of the conference was dedicated to visits to Capitol Hill; the participants would meet their representatives. It's one thing for an elected official to hear about his or her constituents' concerns about Israel. It's quite another to meet not one, not two, but a crowd of these constituents in person. Those meetings were immensely powerful; they provided a unique opportunity to display AIPAC's power.



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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the policy conference in 2018. Credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images/AFP

AIPAC is shifting its strategy to emphasize electing Israel-friendly candidates from both parties. That includes getting directly involved in the primaries. Given the polarization and churn in Congress, this approach makes a certain sense. AIPAC is also holding video conferences and small local in-person gatherings.

The organization cited many good motivations behind the cancellation of the policy conference: budgetary constraints, the increased political polarization in the United States, the post-COVID environment. These would all be good reasons if AIPAC were a business. But it isn't, and it has to be a lot more if it wants to persevere in the policy arena.

Tragically, it appears that the old guard, which really understands the politics of public endeavors – the folks connected with the people they represent – are stepping aside from leadership positions. The new generation of AIPAC leaders will likely run it as a business.

And to use the vocabulary of business, they may provide a better short-term return for large investors, but the most important stakeholder, the Jewish people, will come out the loser in the long term.



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