



Union des Patrons et des professionnels Juifs de France

FORWARD

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News

Israeli Envoy Vexed by Role Of U.S. Jews In France

By MARC PERELMAN

The growing involvement of American Jewish groups in nascent pro-Israel lobbying efforts in France is fueling concerns of a possible backlash among some French Jewish leaders and Israeli officials.

In a letter to the Israeli Foreign Ministry two months ago, Israel's ambassador to France, Nissim Zvili, warned about the potential negative consequences if American Jewish groups are perceived as seeking to influence French politics, the Forward has learned.

Several French Jewish leaders are echoing Zvili's concerns that any perception of American Jewish money bankrolling politicians in France at a time when anti-American and anti-Israel feelings are in vogue would eventually harm French Jews.

Zvili, who was responding to a query from the Foreign Ministry following news reports about such initiatives, stressed the need to take into consideration the stark differences of mentality and political structures between France and the United States, according to a source at the embassy. In his letter, Zvili also wrote that reports of intervention by American groups are making French Jewish leaders uncomfortable and could have a very negative impact on public opinion.

Citing a commonly heard fear in French Jewish circles, the embassy source said: "American Jewish money funding a French electoral campaign would be a catastrophe."

Zvili, the source said, has urged Israel to tell American Jewish groups to proceed carefully. The source indicated that the message was approved in Jerusalem and likely passed on to American Jewish groups.

Calls to the Foreign Ministry officials overseeing the issue were not returned.

Much of the controversy has centered on an agreement reached last year between the AJCongress and a vocal pro-Israel group called the Union of French Jewish Employers and Professionals, known by its

French acronym, UPJF. Concerns are also being voiced about the European activities of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Washington pro-Israel lobbying organization, which has developed ties with Jewish groups in France and other European countries to encourage the development of American-style lobbying.

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The American Jewish Committee also has stepped up its role in Europe in the past year, but it appears to have avoided the sort of controversy surrounding the other two American groups.

Under the agreement between the AJCongress and UPJF, the American group will provide its French partner with advocacy training and advice, as well as financial support.

David Twersky, the director of the AJCongress's newly formed Council for World Jewry, confirmed the funding but declined to disclose its amount. So did Herve Giaoui, UPJF's chairman.

The willingness of UPJF to support political candidates and engage in political activism has triggered repeated spats with the main French Jewish representative body, known by its French acronym, CRIF. Roger Cukierman, CRIF's president, has criticized the AJCongress's agreement with UPJF. Now, UPJF's political activities are fueling speculation in some circles that the new agreement would bring the AJCongress into that arena.

"What you have here is a noxious mix of foreign money, political lobbying and hawkish views," said Patrick Klugman, the former head of the French Jewish student union and a board member of CRIF. "This will end up going against the interests of the Jewish community."

But both the AJCongress and UPJF stressed that the cooperation agreement between the two groups ruled out any role in French politics.

Twersky forcefully denied any suggestion that American Jewish monies were being injected into French politics, stressing that the agreement between the AJCongress and UPJF explicitly rules out political action as part of their shared activities and exclusively focuses on efforts to fight antisemitism and anti-Israeli perceptions. Giaoui said the American money would only serve to finance pro-Israel advertising campaigns and, therefore, he was not concerned about the potential perception of American Jewish meddling in French affairs.

Twersky also stressed that UPJF was moving to empower French Jews in a way that umbrella groups such as CRIF could not.

"Political action is deemed the sole responsibility of UPJF," Twersky said, adding that he advised the group not to take sides politically.

Examination of UPJF statements appears to show a pattern of support for right-leaning candidates, reflecting what numerous observers, including some officials of Israel's Labor party, say is a greater sensitivity on the French right than on the left to issues of antisemitism.

In a June 24 letter to its members detailing the group's position on the issue of support to political candidates, UPJF said it was "convinced that it is imperative to become involved in the political life of our country, be it at the local, national or European levels."

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The June UPJF letter was meant to explain the organization's decision to support the candidacy of Patrick Gaubert, a well-known Jewish anti-racist leader, at a recent European Parliament election, as well as that of Laurent Dominati, in a French parliamentary election in Paris. In addition, the group has expressed strong support for presidential hopeful Nicolas Sarkozy. One of the group's founders, Nicole Guedj, is now a junior minister in the government. All four politicians are members of the conservative UMP party of President Jacques Chirac.

Giaoui, the UPJF chairman, noted that the group also had supported a communist candidate, as well as Francois Zimeray, a Socialist former member of the European Parliament who has taken strong pro-Israel stances. However, he acknowledged that the group's tendency was right leaning, adding that this was reflective of a political shift in the Jewish community.

Giaoui said the group was openly encouraging Jews to donate funds to pro-Israel candidates as a way for the Jewish community to regain its political clout.

Observers noted that political financing in France is curtailed severely by law, which only allows limited donations by individuals, and that politicians tend to spend less money than their American counterparts. Moreover, the president charts the country's foreign policy with very limited input from legislators, rendering the funding of pro-Israel candidates at parliamentary or local elections less useful.

Despite these obstacles to influencing government policy, UPJF's willingness to endorse candidates and urge individuals to fund them has struck a chord among a segment of French Jews.

"It is time for European Jewish communities to take their responsibilities in terms of political action. We have to accept to play a more political role," said Zimeray, the former European legislator who last year set up his own pro-Israel advocacy group in Brussels.

Zimeray said he would push such an agenda at CRIF, where he was just appointed as the head of the political committee. Other CRIF officials said the institution has to remain neutral because of its position as the official interlocutor between France's government and its Jewish community.

Zimeray's organization, called Medbridge, is essentially trying to promote Israel's image by using its network of relationships among European politicians.

Zimeray said he did not receive financial backing from American Jewish groups but that he welcomed such financing on specific projects. For instance, he received some money from the AJCommittee for a trip that brought more than 200 members of the European Parliament to Israel and Jordan last year.

However, in a clear allusion to Aipac, he warned against replicating U.S. lobbying models in Europe.

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"Some American Jewish groups just behave as if Europe was not different," he said. "This is just a recipe for a catastrophe."

Aipac has been actively building relationships with a variety of Jewish organizations in Paris and in Brussels, including another recently launched Brussels-based pro-Israel advocacy group called the European Middle East Forum, which was set up in 2002 by two French businessmen, Marc Grossman and Ronny Bruckner.

An official with the European Middle East Forum said that Aipac provided expertise but not financial support to the new group. The official added that the group's funding comes essentially from private European donors, although "one or two" private American donors contribute to its \$2.2 million annual budget.

"We absolutely do not want to be the European arm of an American organization," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The official added that the new group, which recently has opened branches in the six European countries with the largest Jewish communities, was focused on issuing policy memos and on organizing trips and meetings to improve Israel's image in the eyes of European decision-makers.

The European Middle East Forum is encouraging its members to support political candidates with, among other things, financial donations, but is careful not to take positions as an organization.

"We are perceived as a Jewish lobby. It doesn't go down well. but so be it," the official said.

Aipac's willingness to engage a variety of Jewish groups has created some tension with CRIF, which by law and tradition is considered the main voice of French Jewry.

Last year, CRIF officials were baffled when UPJF was the only French Jewish group invited to the Aipac annual conference. Although several Jewish groups were invited this year, including CRIF, the tension still was palpable.

During a one-day training seminar with European Jewish leaders held on the sidelines of the conference, Cukierman left the room after his request for more speaking time was rebuffed by organizers, according to two people who were present. They said the organizers had allotted more time for the presentation by the European Middle East Forum.

Aipac officials did not return calls for comments.

One American-based group that seems to have avoided criticism while expanding its European operations is the AJCommittee. In addition to funding trips to Israel in coordination with local Jewish groups such as the one organized by Medbridge, the AJCommittee opened a

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trans-Atlantic institute in Brussels and is providing technical support through its network of European bureaus, the most recent of which was opened in Paris.

David Harris, the AJCommittee's executive director, said the organization was careful not to impinge on local Jewish turf. For example, he said, it has made a point of bringing European Jewish leaders to its meetings with European officials and of signing partnership agreements with umbrella organizations rather than individual groups.

"We would not want to operate that way," Harris said. "U.S.-style lobbying has to be adapted to the local conditions, and we Americans should keep in mind what 'savoir-faire' and 'nuance' mean."

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