

Iran deal sparks battle between two Jewish lobbies

by [Francine Kiefer](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Rep. Eliot Engel has seen the Iran ads on television: The somber “good deal or bad deal?” ad that urges Congress to reject the Iran nuclear agreement; and the promising “good deal” ad, that defends the agreement as a plus for American and Israeli security.

The surprise is not that there are contrasting viewpoints on such a controversial deal, but that the ads are backed by competing Jewish lobbies.

For decades, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, has been king of the Hill in Washington. Well-funded, it is considered the most powerful pro-Israel lobbying force on United States-Israel security issues. It strongly opposes the deal in favor of trying for a better one. Engel (D., New York), who is Jewish, is a longtime friend of AIPAC.

But now, there is also an opposing view. J Street—named for a missing street in Washington—is elbowing its way into the conversation. Founded in 2008 to support a two-state solution to the Palestinian problem, the liberal underdog has launched an intense effort to convince undecided Democrats to support a deal that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls a “mistake of historic proportions.”

The lobbying effort from both camps is shaping up to be the first big test of their competing Jewish-American worldviews on Capitol Hill. Republicans are firmly in line with AIPAC. But the scramble is on for Democrats, especially in the House, where they are seen as the firewall against GOP opposition. Many, such as Engel, have yet to say how they will vote.

More broadly, the lobbying points to splits within the American Jewish community itself.

J Street, which also describes itself as pro-Israel, argues that it represents the majority view of the Jewish community, which a Pew 2013 survey describes as

among “the most strongly liberal, Democratic groups in U.S. politics.” Two-thirds identify as Democrats or Democrat-leaning, and a survey released by J Street this week shows 60 percent of American Jews support the Iran deal.

A recent national poll of Jews by the L.A. *Jewish Journal* finds a plurality supporting the agreement. But it also reveals deep skepticism, with a majority of respondents saying the agreement makes Israel “more endangered.” Neither are they confident that Iran will be prevented from developing a nuclear weapon in ten years, as the agreement lays out.

AIPAC is riding that skepticism wave, and as the clear winner in the money race, it is reportedly spending \$20 million to \$40 million with other pro-Israel groups just on the ad campaign. J Street has raised a total of just \$2.5 million so far.

The fledgling lobby gives cover to lawmakers who don’t agree with “the far more powerful” AIPAC, said John Pitney, a congressional expert at Claremont McKenna College in California. It enables members “to point to a Jewish organization ... and say there isn’t a single Jewish point of view.”

For Engel’s part, he said, “I’ve had a much more close relationship over the years with AIPAC than I’ve had with any other pro-Israel group, but they’re all welcome to talk to me.”

The top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee told reporters Tuesday that he’s still studying the agreement, though most calls from his district are going against it and he personally finds it “troublesome” in several areas.

By contrast, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D., Illinois), who is endorsed by J Street, is leading an unofficial effort to count votes to make sure the Iran agreement survives. If the House and Senate pass a resolution disapproving of the deal, President Obama will veto it, meaning she and other supporters need to round up just over one-third of House members to prevent an override. (An override requires a two-thirds majority in both houses.)

“I’m hopeful that most of the Jewish members will at the very least sustain a veto of the president,” she said. The House has 18 Jewish Democrats, including the congresswoman. Earlier this month, most of them made it to the White House for an exclusive briefing for Jewish lawmakers on the deal by senior official Ben Rhodes.

In an interview, J Street's chief lobbyist, Dylan Williams, said the trend is moving toward enough Democrat support to preserve the deal. But "as in any Hill fight, you don't want to count your votes before they're cast." He described J Street's lobbying effort on the Iran agreement as its most intense effort by far, "a major test" for the young organization.

Williams characterizes AIPAC as part of the "old" elite, packed with neoconservatives who are out of step with American Jewish opinion but in lockstep with the conservative government of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

"This disconnect between where pro-Israel American Jews actually are, and where these self-selected leaders of Jewish community groups say they are, is a major issue in this debate," Williams said.

American Jews seem to back the Iran deal more than Americans generally, who either reject it (according to [a CNN poll](#)) or support it (according to the [Washington Post/ABC News](#)), depending on how the poll is worded.

J Street's efforts on the Iran deal include ad campaigns, visits to the Hill, and plans to mobilize its grass roots to speak at town hall meetings, Jewish community centers, and synagogues when key lawmakers return to their districts during the August recess.

This week, J Street is also bringing two high-level Israeli security experts to the Hill—Alon Pinkas, the former consul general for Israel in New York, and Gen. Amram Mitzna, the former leader of the Labor Party and former Israeli general in charge of the West Bank. Other Israeli "security validators" will be coming over soon.

Americans might not know it, but the "Israeli security establishment" supports the deal, Williams said—a point that Secretary of State John Kerry made at a Senate hearing last week.

But AIPAC has its own impressive list of notable quotables, ranging from the right to the left. "All Israeli officials who are currently responsible for Israel's security oppose the agreement," said an AIPAC source who didn't want to be named.

It will have its own supporters out in force at town halls and in meetings with senators and representatives in their districts. And in August, more than 40 lawmakers from both parties will travel to Israel to meet with Netanyahu ahead of

the September vote on the deal, *The Hill* reported. It is a biennial trip organized and funded by AIPAC.

According to the AIPAC source, “we are engaged in a major bipartisan educational and lobbying effort against the deal and for a better deal.”

J Street has the might of the majority on its side, Williams said.

But where Engel and other Democrats eventually stand is what matters most to President Obama.