

Israel lobby funded a third of Conservative MPs

From Declassified - John McEvoy

Tory politicians have accepted over £430,000 from Israel lobby groups and made 187 trips to the country.



Suella Braverman received largest contribution for her visit to Israel this year

Some 126 of the Tory party's 344 MPs have accepted funding from pro-Israel lobby groups, *Declassified* has found.

The revelation comes as Rishi Sunak calls a general election in which his unequivocal backing of Israel could cost the party votes. The value of the donations or hospitality amounts to over £430,000, with the organisations paying for sitting Conservative MPs to visit Israel on 187 occasions.

Some of those trips also involved visits to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and a small number were co-sponsored by groups which do not form part of the Israel lobby.

The main funder is Conservative Friends of Israel, a parliamentary group which does not disclose its own sources of funding. Other notable donors include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Australia-Israel Cultural Exchange, and the European Leadership Network. Thirteen Tory politicians have accepted over £50,000 in total to travel to Israel since 7 October, including for “solidarity” missions.

Friends of Israel

Conservative Friends of Israel (CFI) is a pro-Israel lobby group set up in 1974 by Michael Fidler, a Tory politician described in one biography as having political views “reminiscent of the philosophy of Enoch Powell”. The organisation has long standing links with the Israeli state, and is “beginning to resemble the Westminster outpost for Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing Likud coalition”, according to veteran journalist Peter Osborne. Around 80 percent of Tory MPs are members of CFI. Over the past decade, it has taken more MPs

on overseas trips than any other political donor in Britain. Publicly available data reviewed by *Declassified* shows that CFI has funded 118 sitting Tory MPs to travel to Israel on 160 occasions, providing over £330,000 towards the visits.

Those MPs include deputy prime minister Oliver Dowden, home secretary James Cleverly, and justice secretary Alex Chalk, prior to their appointment to the cabinet. Some 22 of those CFI-led visits have been subsidised by the Israeli foreign ministry to the tune of over £8,000 in total. The Israeli state has also independently funded trips for Nadhim Zahawi and Kwasi Kwarteng, two former UK chancellors, as well as John Whittingdale MP, then the shadow secretary of state for the environment.

Past CFI delegations have involved tours of factories run by Israel's largest arms firm, Elbit Systems. When journalist David Cronin asked whether the lobby group was funded by Elbit Systems in 2011, a CFI spokesperson said: "I don't have to give you those details".

Solidarity missions

CFI's lobbying activities have intensified since 7 October. The group has led two "special solidarity" delegations to Israel amid the Gaza genocide, involving six MPs – Stephen Crabb, Theresa Villiers, Robert Jenrick, Michael Ellis, Nicola Richards, and Greg Smith.

In Israel, the MPs were hosted by president Isaac Herzog, whose statement in October 2023 – that the "entire nation" of Gaza was responsible for Hamas' attack on Israel – was cited by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as plausible evidence of incitement to genocide.

CFI also funds parliamentary candidates to visit Israel even before they become elected. Prior to the 2019 general election, CFI brought a delegation of prospective parliamentary candidates to Israel, seven of whom – Siobhan Baillie, Miriam Cates, Dehenna Davison, Peter Gibson, Tom Hunt, Robert Langan, and Matthew Vickers – are now MPs. In February 2024, one month after Israel was put under investigation by the ICJ for genocide, CFI led another trip to Israel for four more prospective MPs, Alexander Clarkson, Katie Lam, Ben Obese-Jecty, and Bradley Thomas.

CFI's lobbying efforts are not limited to funding trips to Israel. The organisation also prepares briefing material for MPs, enjoying "superb access to Downing Street, Westminster, and Whitehall", and hosts an annual banquet which functions as a public display of support for Israel.

Prime minister Rishi Sunak addressed their latest banquet in January, calling CFI "an integral part of our party"

AIPAC

Other notable pro-Israel lobby organisations which have funded Tory MPs include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Jewish National Fund (JNF), and the National Jewish Assembly (NJA).

The total value of their donations is over £42,000. AIPAC is a pro-Israel organisation based in Washington, and one of the most powerful lobbying forces in US politics.

Michael Gove, who has led the charge to ban British public bodies from boycotting Israel, accepted £3,086 from AIPAC to attend and speak at its conference in Washington in 2017.

James Morris MP attended an AIPAC conference in 2011, funded by its sister organisation the American Israel Education Foundation, while Henry Smith MP was funded directly by AIPAC to attend its conference the next year.

Other funded attendees of AIPAC events include Jonathan Djanogly MP and former UK home secretary Priti Patel. Their travel was paid for by the Henry Jackson Society, a London-based think tank with opaque funders and close [links](#) to Israel.

The JNF is a quasi-governmental organisation which has supported illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine. It has been [described](#) by historian Ilan Pappé as a “colonialist agency of ethnic cleansing”.

Matthew Offord MP has accepted £2,799 from JNF UK to travel to Israel on two occasions.

The NJA, meanwhile, is chaired by Gary Mond, who was [asked](#) to step down from the Board of Deputies of British Jews after liking Islamophobic posts on Facebook. One of the NJA’s core objectives is “supporting Israel”.

Since 7 October, it has sent two “solidarity missions” to Israel, and contributed £27,801 to former UK home secretary Suella Braverman’s recent trip to Tel Aviv. Following her trip, Braverman [said](#) that Israel’s killing of three British aid workers in Gaza should not be a reason for “Britain to soften its support for Israel”. Braverman added that she was “certain that Israel is nowhere near breaking international law”, six weeks before the International Criminal Court announced arrest applications for prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and defence minister Yoav Gallant.

ELNET and AICE

Two of the other key organisations that fund Tory MPs’ trips to Israel include the European Leadership Network (ELNET) and the Australia-Israel Cultural Exchange (AICE). ELNET was [formed](#) in 2007 to “counter the widespread criticism of Israel in Europe”.

The organisation's British wing is directed by former Labour MP and Labour Friends of Israel chair, Joan Ryan, while much of its operations are run from its office in Tel Aviv, headed by Emmanuel Navon. In February, Navon described Israel's planned offensive into Rafah as "necessary" and suggested that EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell "need not worry about Gaza civilians".

ELNET has funded six Tory MPs to visit Israel since 7 October, including Shaun Bailey, Lisa Cameron, Antony Higginbotham, Tom Hunt, Matthew Offord, and Andrew Percy. The organisation also paid for former defence secretary Liam Fox to attend the US-Europe-Israel Strategic Dialogue in Washington in 2022.

The total cost of these delegations was £22,776.

AICE was established in 2003 by the then Israeli foreign minister, Netanyahu, and his Australian counterpart. Four Tory MPs – John Howell, Jack Lopresti, Andrew Percy, and Will Quince – have accepted over £18,000 from AICE to travel to Israel on ten occasions.

Lopresti is also the only British politician to have also accepted a donation from Israel's largest arms firm, Elbit Systems. In addition to this, he helped to open Elbit's "research, development and manufacturing hub" in Bristol alongside the Israeli ambassador to the UK, Tzipi Hotovely, in 2023. More recently, Lopresti has been calling for politicians to distance themselves from campaign group Palestine Action.

Yet there has been little media attention on Lopresti's association with Elbit Systems, Palestine Action's main target, whose drone was used to kill three UK aid workers in April.

Other Tory MPs have accepted funding from European Friends of Israel and the Israel Allies Foundation.

Individual donors

The above data does not include donations from individuals linked to pro-Israel lobby organisations. Nor does it include donations to the Conservative Party itself from pro-Israel lobby organisations or individuals.

However, this area also deserves attention. In 2009, Peter Osborne reported in a Channel 4 *Dispatches* documentary that individuals linked to CFI had funded the Conservative Party to the tune of £10m. A number of these individuals, such as Trevor Pears, Michael Lewis, David Meller, and Lord Kalms, have also donated to senior Tory figures. That includes David Cameron, the unelected foreign secretary, who accepted £20,000 from Pears during his bid to become Tory party leader in 2005. Cameron also accepted hospitality from the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs three years later.

Grant Shapps, the current defence secretary, accepted £4,990 from Meller in July 2023, and an undisclosed amount from Lewis in 2005.

Other recipients of funding from Meller, Kalms, or Lewis include the former prime minister, Liz Truss, former shadow home secretary, David Davis, former defence secretary, Liam Fox, and Michael Gove.

The Israel lobby's impact

The lobby is far from the only factor which conditions support for Israel in Britain. The US government, which staunchly backs Israel, holds considerable sway over British foreign policy. Some British politicians are committed Zionists, and would support Israel whether or not they received funding from the Israel lobby.

A small number of Tory MPs who have accepted Israel lobby funding, moreover, have gone on to oppose some of the Israeli government's policies. That includes former UK foreign secretary William Hague, who mildly criticised Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006 as "disproportionate".