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Testing the "Israel Lobby" Thesis

Israel, Middle East, Arab-Israeli Relations

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As Israel's Ambassador to Washington in the mid-1990s, I worked closely with the now all too famous Israel lobby. But this was not the "Israel Lobby" described by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. At that time, the right wing of what they characterize as a "loose coalition" of pro-Israeli groups, organizations and individuals was dead set on undermining the peace policy conducted by the government of Yitzhak Rabin in concert with the Clinton Administration. Meanwhile, the left wing of this "loose coalition" had its own notion of Israel's and America's best interests, also considerably at variance with the view of the Rabin government. The neoconservative critics were neither friendly nor helpful to our policies, and we did not perceive by any stretch of the imagination the Tikkun Community to be our supporters, not even when Hillary Clinton was speaking to Rabbi Michael Lerner about "spirituality."

As it has turned out, I am not the only one who has had trouble recognizing the phenomenon Mearsheimer and Walt are describing. This trouble began for many with the publication of their essay in the London Review of Books in March 2006 and was revived after Farrar, Straus & Giroux published the book-length version of their argument late last year. The theory's detractors fall into three often overlapping groups: Those who do not recognize their description of the lobby; those who do not recognize their historical narrative, except as an extended summary of standard anti-Israel propaganda; and, most important, those who do not recognize the American policy process as it is presumed to operate in The Israel Lobby.

Taken together, the reception of the book and the authors' reaction to this reception form a larger subject than just the book itself. That is appropriate, perhaps, for a book with such an unusual birth. The Israel Lobby originated as a piece commissioned but then rejected by The Atlantic, only to end up in the London Review of Books, with a somewhat longer "working paper" available simultaneously on a Harvard University website. The essay thus generated much attention and controversy long before it became a book, in which the authors toned down some of their language and corrected some but not all of the original's many factual errors.

The book's publication was then accompanied by an "anti-book", Abe Foxman's refutation of the main arguments raised by the original essay. Both remain on the "top ten" foreign affairs hardcover best-seller list. It is fair to say, then, that if the authors merely wanted to revive and upgrade conversation about a subject that, contrary to their own protestations, has long been with us—at least since Congressman Paul Findley published *They Dare Speak Out* in 1985, George Ball wrote *The Passionate Attachment* in 1992,

and Senator J. William Fulbright referred to the Congress as “Israeli occupied territory”—then they have succeeded.

The most ambitious effort to commend The Israel Lobby and defend it against an alleged witch-hunt came from Scott McConnell in the December 2007 issue of the American Conservative. This is hardly surprising, since no one is more antagonistic to neoconservatives than the paleoconservatives represented by that publication, founded by none other than Patrick Buchanan, of “amen corner” fame. For McConnell, the “neocons” are “the highest stage” of that lobby, and it was their strategic positioning within the Bush Administration that enabled the lobby to push the United States to go to war in Iraq.

McConnell is full of praise, calling The Israel Lobby “an extraordinary accomplishment, completed with great speed—a dense, factually based brief of an argument that is often made, but rarely made well.” “The authors”, he tells us “have done their country a great service.” But McConnell’s piece, like this one, is not meant as a mere book review; it also seeks to deal with a whole “event”—the book’s publication, its reception and the supposed “witch hunt.” He therefore tries to parse some of the negative early reviews. Thus, for example, McConnell argues that Leslie Gelb’s New York Times review can be dismissed as landing “weak blows.”

No, it cannot. Like Mearsheimer and Walt themselves, McConnell moves in circles by contending that negative reviews or insufficient attention from the mainstream media do not reflect the book’s flaws, but are instead further proof of the lobby’s ability to intimidate and silence. The truth of the matter is that, insofar as the lobby ever tries to intimidate and silence, the effort usually causes more damage than it redresses. In any event, the power of the lobby to do that is very modest. Certainly it does not extend to bloggers or to the British, European and even Israeli media, where the book has won praise as well as criticism.

The British press, excluding the Economist, has been sympathetic to the argument that the Israel lobby has hoodwinked U.S. policy in the Middle East and helped push the Bush Administration into Iraq in the service of Israeli, not American, interests. Then again, the British press, long before the Iraq war, was inclined to argue that U.S. support for Israel is largely responsible for Arab and Muslim hatred of America, and for the terrorist attacks produced by this hatred. Thus Geoffrey Wheatcroft, author of a well-received book on Israel and Zionism some years ago, writes in the September 29, 2007 Guardian:

Where Mearsheimer and Walt are on their strongest ground is in saying, as foreign-policy realists, that the Israeli alliance is very costly for the United States, and that’s where American supporters of Israel are on their weakest ground. Those supporters sometimes claim that the alliance is based on the affinity so many Americans supposedly feel for Israel, but at the same time they ‘bend over backward to help people understand that support for Israel is also in America’s strategic interests’, as Hyman Bookbinder of the American Jewish Committee put it.

Jonathan Mirsky, writing in the September 29, 2007 issue of the Spectator, agrees: “I have noted my points of disagreement, but this densely footnoted and courageous book deserves praise rather than abuse.”

Several of Mearsheimer and Walt's critics have lumped their book together with Jimmy Carter's anti-Israel tirade *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (2006). It is uncommon, on the other hand, to find anyone who will defend both, but Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski came close. In a brief comment (though not a review) in *Foreign Policy*, Brzezinski endorsed *The Israel Lobby* while at the same time praising the Carter Administration's "impartial" policy in the Middle East. Clearly, what most concerns Brzezinski are practical matters. He argues that during the past quarter century U.S. policy in the Middle East has shifted from the "relative impartiality" that delivered the Camp David Accords to the "adoption of the Israeli perspective in the Arab-Israeli Conflict." This, in his view, has not served U.S. interests.

Brzezinski's description is not entirely accurate. Anwar Sadat went to Jerusalem in November 1977 not because he sought to take advantage of the Carter Administration's even-handedness, but because he feared that Carter's "comprehensive" as opposed to "step-by-step" policies would give local rejectionists and the Soviet Union a veto over Egypt's desire to make peace. And as anyone will know who remembers President George H.W. Bush's famous plaint—that he was "just one guy" standing against the wrath of the Israel lobby over the granting of loan guarantees to help settle Soviet Jewish immigrants in Israel—not every administration since Carter's has been so pro-Israel. Nevertheless, it is true that during the last decade some U.S. officials recruited from AIPAC or pro-Israel research institutions preferred the Syrian track of the peace process to the Palestinian track, thus serving to reinforce the inclination to downplay the sense of urgency about tackling the Palestinian cauldron.

Brzezinski's praise is thus not baseless, but it is not complete, either. He identifies a bias in *The Israel Lobby's* historical narrative, observing that Mearsheimer and Walt could be labeled as "being in some respects anti-Israel." But he adds, in a very common trope, that "an anti-Israel bias is not the same as anti-Semitism." This had the sound of a well-practiced point.

Brzezinski was not speaking theoretically of anti-Semitism. Mearsheimer and Walt's original essay elicited far more criticism than even guarded praise, and some of it did raise charges of anti-Semitism. Some of that carried over into reviews of the book—thus the title given by the September 7, 2007 *Wall Street Journal* to Jeff Robbins' review, "Anti-Semitism and the Anti-Israel Lobby."

Robbins' criticism of *The Israel Lobby* is twofold. First, in his view the authors completely ignore the massive pro-Arab lobby, "funded in significant measure by foreign oil money", while at the same time "taking American Jews to task for participating in the American political process", as is their democratic right. Second, Robbins criticizes Mearsheimer and Walt for trying to inculcate themselves against charges of anti-Jewish bias by preemptively predicting that the Jewish lobby "will accuse them of it."

What Robbins fails to note is that this tactic has worked: Mearsheimer and Walt were accused of anti-Semitism, and their preemptive prediction worked well enough that those making such accusations came off the worse for so doing. They could only argue their case indirectly, saying that the book was anti-Semitic in effect if not by intention, for no one could adduce evidence of the authors' malign intent toward Jews as a group (as distinct from their attitude toward the Jewish State). That's because there was and is none.

Mearsheimer and Walt do not seem particularly to care about Jews one way or the other. They care about American foreign policy, which, as we know from their other works, they believe should be guided by a restrained, "off-shore balancing" approach. That is not what guides U.S. foreign policy in either Democratic or Republican administrations, however. Since the authors cannot believe that anyone could disagree with them on the merits, they seek other explanations for failing to convince the powers that be. They identify the Middle East as the source that beckons U.S. power and prestige beyond the bounds of safe shelter, they see the Israel-Palestine conflict at the epicenter of that source, and they see domestic U.S. lobbying politics at the center of that center. They may be right or wrong analytically (I think they are mostly wrong), but this is their motive, which has nothing to do with liking or disliking Jews.

In one of the few reviews to get at the realist core of Mearsheimer and Walt's argument, William Grimes, writing in the September 6, 2007 New York Times, defines The Israel Lobby as a "prosecutorial brief against Israel and its supporters" that describes a virtual rogue state, empowered by American wealth and might, that blocks peace at every turn, threatens its cowering neighbors with impunity, crushes the national aspirations of the Palestinians and, whenever the opportunity arises, bites the hand that feeds it.

Grimes agrees with some of the authors' arguments, but concludes shrewdly that the general tone of hostility to Israel grates on the nerves, however, along with an unignorable impression that hardheaded political realism can be subjected to its own peculiar fantasies. Israel is not simply one country among many, for example, just as Britain is not. Americans feel strong ties of history, religion, culture and, yes, sentiment, that the authors recognize, but only in an airy, abstract way.

Indeed, a genuine, accurate historical narrative of U.S.-Israeli relations cannot be exclusively realist; that oversimplifies a more complex reality. Tim Rutten's review in the September 11, 2007 Los Angeles Times focuses precisely on that complex reality:

Anyone familiar with the tortuous history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have a hard time recognizing the history Mearsheimer and Walt rehearse. Every hoary old Israeli atrocity tale is trotted out, and the long story of Palestinian terrorism is rendered entirely as a reaction to Israeli oppression. The failure of every peace negotiation is attributed to Israeli deviousness under the shield of the American Israeli lobby. There is nothing here of Palestinian corruption, division and duplicity or even of this unhappy people's inability to provide a reliable secular partner with whom peace can be negotiated.

Rutten is on target, despite the fact that, to most newspaper readers, the intricacies of the history boil down to an inconclusive "he said/she said" kind of argument.

That is less likely to be the case, however, with Mearsheimer and Walt's central contention: that the Israel lobby, acting as the Likud Party's proxy, drove the United States into attacking Saddam Hussein. Here the authors are on the shakiest of ground; even their approach belies the weakness of the argument. Readers are treated to an explication of the religious affiliations of various Bush Administration officials and others, even Howard Dean, that reads as though it was inspired by the Nuremberg Laws. Left unmentioned is the fact that the figure most responsible for pushing the attack on Iraq, Vice President Dick Cheney, is neither Jewish nor ideologically neoconservative. He is a card-carrying member of the

petroleum-industry elite, yet names like Halliburton and ExxonMobil never make their way onto these pages.

The United States attacked Iraq because key Administration figures, panicked and disconsolate over the September 11 atrocities and anthrax scare, were misled by some still-unsettled combination of bad and manipulated intelligence into thinking that another attack, probably one using weapons of mass destruction (Cheney most feared bioweapons) was imminent. Misread snippets of intelligence suggested that Iraq might be involved, and the American people, as rattled as their leaders, were prepared to give the Administration the benefit of the doubt under the circumstances.

The best, and most entertaining, criticism of Mearsheimer and Walt on this score was written by Harvey Sicherman, a former aide to three Secretaries of State, shortly after the original essay appeared. Walt and Mearsheimer, wrote Sicherman, “depict Israel and the Lobby as desperate to get the United States into war against Saddam” for several years before September 11, 2001, but admit that the lobby failed both to persuade President Clinton to make war and President Bush to do so before 9/11. Then Sicherman quotes Mearsheimer and Walt from the London Review essay as follows: “They needed help to achieve their aim. That help arrived with 9/11. Specifically, the events of that day led Bush and Cheney to reverse course and become strong proponents of a preventative war.” Sicherman continues:

So you see, the war was “due in large part to the Lobby’s influence” except that the influence failed until 9/11 changed the President’s mind, that is, his concept of what the national interest required. Elementary logic demands this conclusion: the Iraq war should be put on Osama bin Laden’s account, not AIPAC’s or Israel’s. The authors, however, seem so anxious to make their case for the Lobby’s baleful influence that they have unmade it themselves. A blunder of this kind would flunk a freshman.¹

The Economist, too, in its customary succinct and understated fashion, determined (on September 29, 2007) that the book’s main thesis “that the Israel lobby was critical in persuading George Bush to invade Iraq doesn’t quite stand up.” The argument, it added, “feels like an attempt to absolve America of responsibility for a decision it took by and for itself.”

Perhaps the most powerful attack on the book and its authors came from the pen of Jeffrey Goldberg in the October 8, 2007 New Republic. Tongue in cheek, Goldberg replaced the term anti-Semitism with “Judeocentrism”, the exaggeration of the Jewish role in all things, a variation of the term Jewcentricity coined by Adam Garfinkle in these pages a year before.² America, Goldberg recounts, has a long tradition of Judeocentrism and places the two authors squarely within it. Their book, he says, “represents the most sustained attack, the most mainstream attack, against the political enfranchisement of American Jews since the era of Father Coughlin.”

Goldberg then proceeds to criticize Mearsheimer and Walt for poor methodology and for distorting the full length of Israel’s history in order to deny it any moral value. After detailing his own criticism of several aspects of AIPAC’s work, Goldberg, too, takes on the twin claims that Israel and the Israeli lobby pushed the United States into the Iraq war, and that September 11 happened primarily because of U.S. support for Israel. On the former point, Goldberg argues along the same lines as Sicherman and the Economist.

On the second, however, Goldberg soon detours in favor of other themes, one of which circles back to Judeocentrism: Mearsheimer and Walt's apparently unwitting deployment of double standards. The authors attribute "some" anti-Semitism in Europe to provocation by "Israel's behavior toward the Palestinians", though they admit that "some of it is straightforwardly racist." Goldberg then proceeds:

This is a bizarre and foul passage, its foulness easily clarified by a simple act of substitution. Imagine Farrar, Straus and Giroux publishing the following sentence: "We would not deny that there is some racial prejudice among whites, some of it provoked by the misbehavior of African-Americans, and some of it straightforwardly racist." Mearsheimer and Walt are the sort of scholars who think that, if you wish to understand racism study blacks, and if you wish to understand anti-Semitism study Jews. They are chillingly unaware that such views are complicit with the prejudice they claim to abhor.

Lastly, Goldberg examines the third basic criticism leveled by most reviewers: that Mearsheimer and Walt seem to have no idea how U.S. foreign policy is actually made. Goldberg plies this theme by recalling how he once asked Donald Rumsfeld what he made of the contention that neoconservatives manipulated the Bush Administration into attacking Iraq. "I suppose the implication is that the president and the vice-president and myself and Colin Powell just fell off a turnip truck to take these jobs", Rumsfeld answered. Goldberg concludes that Mearsheimer and Walt "seem to think that William Kristol is the commander in chief."

Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations and a former Assistant Secretary of State, has made a similar argument. After acknowledging that the book raised serious issues, and that its points deserved answers instead of paroxysms of name-calling, Gelb focused on "their puzzlingly shoddy scholarship", especially the very strange decision to write "on this sensitive topic without doing extensive interviews with the lobbyists and the lobbied." Had they done so, they might have come to realize that "the real play-callers behind the war were President George Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. They hardly have a history of being in the pockets of the Jewish lobby (more like the oil lobby's), and they aren't remotely neoconservatives."

Gelb then excels precisely at the point Goldberg left off. He agrees that America's close ties with Israel "compound" its problems with Arabs and Muslims, but rejects the claim that they cause them: "Israel does not harm American security interests to anywhere near the degree that Mearsheimer and Walt claim it does." Rather, Gelb points out,

The main source of anti-Americanism and anti-American terrorism is America's deep ties with highly unpopular regimes in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. . . . America's central strategic problem in the region . . . is that we need our corrupt, inept and unpopular Arab allies because the likely alternative to them is far worse.

These allies may insist that it is really Israel that causes America's problems with Islamist terrorists, but they do so before credulous Westerners only to draw attention away from their own, far more significant role.

Mearsheimer and Walt, Gelb points out, say nothing of this, just as they overlook the role of other important, hardly less powerful actors on the American political scene: Saudi Arabia and the oil companies. How else to explain how the Israel lobby failed repeatedly to prevent the sale of sophisticated U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, and failed to prevent every U.S. administration since Nixon's from essentially taking the Arab/Palestinian view about the ultimate disposition of the West Bank and Gaza? But as Gelb points out, Mearsheimer and Walt do not have to explain these facts for the simple reason that they never mention them.

Finally, Walter Russell Mead's critique of *The Israel Lobby* in the November/December issue of *Foreign Affairs* gets at the consequences of all this. Mead commends the authors for starting "a much needed conversation on a controversial and combustible topic." But his faint praise soon gives way to a description of the book as simplistic, loose and rhetorical with a disagreeably disingenuous tone. It fails to define the "lobby" clearly, writes Mead, and its use of evidence is, in what has to be taken as a generous comment, "uneven."

On substantive issues Mead believes that Mearsheimer and Walt underestimate Israel's enduring strategic value to the United States and, more important to the matter at hand, overestimate the importance of Jewish political power and money. As a result, Mead concludes, *The Israel Lobby*, "will have the opposite of its desired effect: impeding new thinking about U.S. policy in the Middle East rather than advancing the debate. . . . [W]ritten in haste, the book will be repented at leisure."

I share the thrust of Gelb's and Mead's criticisms but wish to extend them a bit in three directions: methodology, historical accuracy and the longer-term effects of *The Israel Lobby* phenomenon.

As an historian of Arab-Israeli relations, I am left breathless by the manner in which Mearsheimer and Walt have ransacked the "revisionist school" of Israel's history, and done so in a way that suggests to those not knowledgeable in the field that it is now the accepted, majority view in the academy. Revisionist Israeli history judges most decisions taken by most Israeli governments in the harshest possible way. It is not even remotely a majority view in Israel, or anywhere else serious historians work. To present this view and no other as the correct one is roughly comparable to presuming that Noam Chomsky and Michael Moore represent mainstream American views on U.S. politics and history.

Indeed, one such revisionist historian cited in *The Israel Lobby*, Benny Morris, has already defended himself against the misuses to which Mearsheimer and Walt put his work. Writing in the May 8, 2006 *New Republic*, Morris wrote:

Like many pro-Arab propagandists at work today, Mearsheimer and Walt often cite my own books, sometimes quoting directly from them, in apparent corroboration of their arguments. Yet their work is a travesty of the history that I have studied and written for the past two decades. Their work is riddled with shoddiness and defiled by mendacity.

If Morris himself sees fit to criticize Mearsheimer and Walt in such terms, I need say no more.

As to matters of fact—and I focus here on chapter 9, “Taking Aim at Syria”, as a student and practitioner of Israel’s relationship with that country—it is ludicrous for Mearsheimer and Walt to blame the Israel lobby for the current Bush Administration’s hostility to Syria and to President Bashar al-Asad. The President’s personal antipathy and his Administration’s hostility are fuelled by several sources: Syria’s support for the Sunni insurrection in Iraq, its efforts to undermine the Seniora government in Lebanon, its alliance with Iran, and its harboring of and support for terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which undermine secular, pragmatic trends in Palestinian politics. Washington needs no help from the Israel lobby to have a problem with Damascus. I can assure Mearsheimer and Walt, too, that when George W. Bush and Nicolas Sarkozy recently stated “they have had it with Bashar al-Asad” over his murderous interference in Lebanon, they required no coaching from the Israeli government or its supporters.

What, then, is the ultimate significance of the publication of *The Israel Lobby*? One can make a case that it is very significant. There is, after all, the huge advance by a major publisher, the 275,000 downloads from the Kennedy School’s website, the book’s best-seller status, the extensive promotional tour in the United States and Europe, the extravagant media coverage. All this, and a bit of wishful thinking thrown in for leavening, has led the American Conservative’s Scott McConnell to suppose that *The Israel Lobby* will be around for a long time, perhaps longer than AIPAC itself. He compares the book to *The Gulag Archipelago* and quotes other enthusiasts who invoke *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

This is so much nonsense. *The Israel Lobby* lacks the moral force, creative insight, intellectual rigor or emotional appeal of any of these books. Rather than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* it should be compared to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and even then it does not come out so well. For all its flaws, *Orientalism* was full of power and had a major impact academically, intellectually and politically. *The Israel Lobby* will pale in comparison because the only way it can become an esteemed classic is if its underlying thesis is correct: that a domestic political lobby drives U.S. policy in the Middle East. If that were true, then the ruckus raised by *The Israeli Lobby* would establish the book as a classic. But it isn’t true. Domestic politics and lobbying do matter when it comes to matters of tone and timing, but as Aaron David Miller, a veteran American peace-process diplomat, puts it in his forthcoming *The Much Too Promised Land*, “I can’t remember a single decision of consequence American peace process advisers made, or one we didn’t, that was directly tied to some lobbyist’s call, letter, or pressure tactic.”

Nonetheless, the larger phenomenon of *The Israel Lobby* should give Israel and its friends pause. They should rethink the way Israel’s cause is perceived and advocated, and more profoundly, the foundations on which the U.S.-Israeli “special relationship” should rest in coming years. It is true, as Leslie Gelb and others suggest, that it is harder to make a realist case for the U.S.-Israeli relationship today than it was during the Cold War. At that time, Israel’s role as a strategic asset was clear, if not to off-shore balancers like Mearsheimer and Walt, then to every American President since John F. Kennedy. Israel and the United States had the same enemies—the Soviet Union and its radical Arab allies—with the conservative Arab regimes stuck awkwardly in the middle. Today things are altogether more muddled, so a more plausible case can be made that Israel is a drag on U.S. security interests and that radical Muslims only hate and attack America because of its support for Israel. We may understand, along with Gelb, that

repressive Arab regimes help al-Qaeda recruitment more than anything Israel does, but it remains true that the fixation of Arab streets and palaces alike on Israel, no matter its sources or logic, is a psychological fact that cannot be wished away.

Clearly, the end of the Cold War and the rise of new challenges require fresh thinking about the strategic dimension of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. By defending every aspect of the special relationship when the rationales for them no longer exist, the Israel lobby risks overloading what political realities can bear. There will always be those like Mearsheimer and Walt, as there have been since 1947–48, when the State of Israel came into being, who will argue that U.S. support for Israel and its policies harms U.S. national interests. Israel's response must focus not only on refuting this charge but on formulating policies that will render Israel, in deed as well as in rhetoric, a valuable partner of the United States.

An opportunity to do precisely that is in the offing, for the next U.S. administration will no doubt formulate a revised comprehensive policy toward the Middle East. An Israel engaged in a peace process orchestrated by the United States and working together with Washington and its other Middle Eastern allies against radical foes will be an important strategic asset in the post-Cold War Middle East. The specific challenge for Israel and its American friends will be their ability to demonstrate how Israel can serve as a strategic asset in the Iranian and Syrian context as it once did against the Soviet Union and its radical allies in the region. The wider strategic canvas, not the vicissitudes of U.S. domestic politics, will as always make the difference.

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1. Sichertman, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Working Paper that Does Not Work", Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Note, March 28, 2006.
2. "The Madness of Jewcentricity" (November/December 2006). In this essay Garfinkle wrote that conspiracy theories charging neoconservatives with hijacking American foreign policy "bear a cousinly relation to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and, without mentioning Mearsheimer and Walt by name, "with para-conspiracy theories about the hypertrophic powers of the 'Israel lobby'."