

R_{ev}iew:

THE ISRAEL LOBBY AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

BY
JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER, & STEPHEN M.
WALT

BASEL HAMDAN

When Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt published their study, “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” the uproar that followed came as no surprise. Questioning the special relationship and criticizing Israel so forcefully are rare occurrences by establishment figures, so the hysterical responses by supporters of Israel’s actions were expected. Comparisons were made to former Ku Klux Klan member and white supremacist David Duke and Harvard University Law Professor Alan Dershowitz claimed that some of their information was extracted from neo-Nazi websites. New York Congressman Eliot Engel stated, “Given what happened in the Holocaust, it’s shameful that people would write reports like this,” and the charge of anti-Semitism was ubiquitous.¹ The most valuable critiques that deserve further inquiry, however, came from scholars who themselves are highly critical of Israeli policy and U.S. support of it. Noam Chomsky, Joseph Massad, Stephen Zunes and others on the political left took issue with the conclusions made by Mearsheimer/Walt, two titans of the realist school of international affairs.

As realists, Mearsheimer and Walt’s main foreign policy concerns are national security interests and military capabilities. In

¹ Michael Massing. “The Storm over the Israel Lobby” *New York Review of Books* (June 8, 2006): 2-3.

their controversial paper, and later in their more comprehensive book, their argument is simple: the United States provides Israel with an extraordinary amount of diplomatic, military and financial support, the costs of this support outweighs the benefits, and the activities of the Israel lobby are the principal reason for this U.S. stance.² They acknowledge that Israel served as a useful asset during the Cold War to an extent, as a balance to Soviet allies such as Syria and Iraq, as well as an ally against the threat of Egypt’s Nasser and his popular Arab nationalist movement. They also argue that the benefits of Israel during the Cold War are overstated, as Soviet aid to these countries was partly a response to U.S. aid to Israel, that the U.S. favoring Israel contributed to the inability to reach a peace agreement, and that it has fueled regional anti-Americanism which has steadily built over the past few decades.³

With the Cold War now over, the arguments for the U.S.’s overwhelming support for Israel are dubious. Rather than being an ally in the war on terror, Mearsheimer and Walt see Israel as a strategic liability that increases the terror threat to the U.S. The Israeli occupation of Arab territories has fueled anger in the region and is often cited by groups committing acts of violence. Furthermore, the special relationship hinders the U.S. diplomatically, with the U.S. often alone in vetoing U.N resolutions critical of Israel. The effort to halt nuclear proliferation is also hindered due to the U.S. blind eye on Israel’s nuclear arsenal. The so-called moral case for supporting Israel does not satisfy Mearsheimer and Walt either, as Israeli aggression, occupation and settlement activity often puts its morality in question.

² John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007): 14.

³ *Ibid.*: 50-53.

Finally, incidents like the “Lavon affair,” in which Israeli agents attempted to bomb U.S. offices in Egypt in 1954 and the Jonathan Pollard espionage scandal in the 1980’s are serious breaches of trust by what the authors call a “dubious ally.”⁴ Despite these factors the special relationship only grows stronger, and the reason for this, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, is largely due to domestic politics and the political power of the Israel lobby.

It is critical to discuss what comprises the lobby in the Mearsheimer/Walt study. They define it as a “loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction.”⁵ The most prominent of the organizations is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), who tied the AARP as the 2nd most powerful lobbying organization in Washington in a 2005 ranking by the *National Journal*, behind the National Rifle Association.⁶ Other organizations such as the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations (CPMJO), the Zionist Organization of America, and Christians United for Israel, too, are prominent elements of the lobby. However, it is not simply lobbying organizations that encompass this lobby, but individuals in the media and media outlets, politicians, and academics, both Jewish and Gentile, who are part of the network. Evangelical Christian Zionists such as Pat Robertson, John Hagee and former House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-TX) promote a zealous brand of Zionism, and the most prominent foreign policy think- tanks tend to have as one-sided a view of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the mainstream media (the topic of section 4.3).⁷

⁴ Ibid.: 58-62, 70-72, 75-77, 110.

⁵ Mearsheimer and Walt: 5.

⁶ Ibid.: 14-15.

⁷ Ibid.: 14-21.

While there are other more moderate groups that are also “pro-Israel” such as American’s for Peace Now, the most influential, organized and financially endowed components that make up the Israel lobby are those which tend to support the hard-line, expansionist Likud Party policies of Israel. This is despite the fact that polls show “the bulk of U.S. Jewry...is more favorably disposed to making concessions to the Palestinians.”⁸ The disparate nature of this lobby means they are not in lock-step on all political issues including details of U.S./Israeli policy itself; but in times of crisis, whether Republican, Democrat, liberal, conservative, or anything else, they can be counted on to advocate the hard-line Israeli side of the argument, depict Israel in a positive light, and portray Israel’s counterparts negatively.

It must be noted that Mearsheimer and Walt do not characterize the Israel lobby’s actions or existence as illegitimate in any way. They do not portray it as a cabal or “Jewish conspiracy” and reject these comparisons. They liken the Israel lobby to other lobbying groups such as the National Rifle Association, the AARP and other ethnic lobby groups such as the Cuban-American and Armenian-American lobbies. These groups participate in interest group politics, which the authors write, “is as American as apple pie.”⁹

The reason for noting this is that much of the vigorous criticism leveled at Mearsheimer and Walt have ignored critical details like this, and have attempted to dispute their work by misrepresenting it. Johns Hopkins University Professor Eliot Cohen alleged bigotry and anti-Semitism and claimed that Mearsheimer and Walt were impugning the loyalty and patriotism of American Jews and accusing Jews of “having occult powers” and “participating in secret combinations that

⁸ Mearsheimer and Walt: 14.

⁹ Ibid.: 11-14.

manipulate institutions and governments;” they have done neither one nor the other.¹⁰

In the *New Republic*, Stanford University Professor Josef Joffe made the comparison to the anti-Semitic screed the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in an article titled “Walt And Mearsheimer: Anti-American.” He also writes that he has known and worked with these scholars for years and doesn’t believe that they “have it out for the Jews;” but he then goes on to accuse them of “Jew-baiting”, among other charges.¹¹

Shortly after the publication of the Mearsheimer/Walt working paper, Alan Dershowitz released a harsh 44-page response on the Harvard Kennedy School website where “The Israel Lobby” appeared. He not only misstates and exaggerates the claims made Mearsheimer and Walt, but includes either dishonest or sloppy mistakes. The very first paragraph lists purported claims made by Mearsheimer/Walt, and in the following passage in the Dershowitz piece, he puts phrases in quotations that come from the Mearsheimer/Walt paper: “Jewish ‘congressional staffers’ exploit their roles and betray the trust of their bosses by ‘look[ing] at certain issues in terms of their Jewishness,’ rather than in terms of their Americanism.”¹² The citation of the Mearsheimer/Walt paper goes to the following passage, which shows that it is not Mearsheimer and Walt accusing congressional staffers of “look[ing] at certain issues in terms of their Jewishness,” but rather, Mearsheimer/Walt quoting the former head of AIPAC acknowledging this:

“Pro-Israel congressional staffers are another source of the Lobby’s power. As

¹⁰ Eliot Cohen. “Yes, It’s Anti-Semitic” *Washington Post* (April 5, 2006).

¹¹ Josef Joffe. “Mearsheimer and Walt: Anti-American” *The New Republic* (April 6, 2006).

¹² Alan Dershowitz. “Debunking the Newest – and Oldest – Jewish Conspiracy: A Reply to the Mearsheimer-Walt ‘Working Paper’” (April 2006).

Morris Amitay, a former head of AIPAC, once admitted, “There are a lot of guys at the working level up here [on Capitol Hill] ... who happen to be Jewish, who are willing ... to look at certain issues in terms of their Jewishness These are all guys who are in a position to make the decision in these areas for those senators You can get an awful lot done just at the staff level.”¹³

So Dershowitz has put the phrase “congressional staffers” in quotations because this is a phrase used by Mearsheimer/Walt, but then put the “Jewishness” phrase in quotes as if they are Mearsheimer/Walt’s words, when they are in fact Morris Amitay’s. Attributing that harsh and accusatory phrase to Mearsheimer and Walt makes it seem as if they are attacking Jewish congressional staffers’ judgment, loyalty and trustworthiness, when they are simply reporting what a former executive director of AIPAC said.

Not all of the critical responses to Mearsheimer and Walt were this hysterical. In the *Washington Post*, Richard Cohen said that it was “unremarkable, a bit sloppy and one-sided.”¹⁴ However, he levels his harshest criticisms at those smearing them, such as the Eliot Cohen piece which was on the *Post* op-ed page weeks earlier. He called the attack offensive, and criticized some for resorting to guilt-by-association (to David Duke), as well as McCarthyism, all while duly noting his differences with the two realists.

Foreign Affairs published a review by Walter Russell Mead which is very critical of the book, but assess it in a sober manner. Mead views this work as a departure from their normal “structural realism” which tends to diminish the importance of domestic politics in favor of “political realism,” which he thinks is a relief, especially from the offensive

¹³ Mearsheimer and Walt: 17.

¹⁴ Richard Cohen. “No, It’s Not Anti-Semitic” *Washington Post* (April 25, 2006).

realism espoused by John Mearsheimer. However, Mead does not hold a favorable view of the book as their definition of what the lobby is remains unclear and too vague. He also calls it sloppy, which he believes was caused by the rush to publish it. His biggest criticism is that he believes the authors fall short on their stated goal of sparking and contributing to a debate on this issue. He credits them for writing about such a controversial subject and says that no issue should be taboo or too sensitive for U.S. foreign policy students, but their poor definition of the lobby and description of the U.S. political system, in Mead's view, will impede the debate.¹⁵ This is an interesting line of argument considering that he makes it in a 4,000 word review of their book in a prominent foreign policy journal, which also published a positive review of the Mearsheimer/Walt working paper on the Israel lobby by L. Carl Brown one year earlier.¹⁶

The paper and book by Mearsheimer/Walt were welcomed by many who are critical of Israel's behavior and supportive of Palestinian rights. However, while welcoming an open debate on the subject of U.S.-Israeli relations and policies, some notable scholars on the political left took issue with the conclusion that the Israel lobby is the principle factor for U.S. policy in the Middle East. First, there is very little mention of oil in their paper, and a few dismissive pages about the oil factor in the book. Second, the defense industry is not factored in by Mearsheimer/Walt, though some argue they hold much more political sway than any other lobby does. Finally, a common thread through

all of critiques mentioned below is that blaming illegal or immoral U.S. policies on the Israel lobby serves as a scapegoat for American policymakers, and they counter the argument by pointing to policies deemed illegal or immoral in other parts of the world not advocated by the Israel or any other ethnic lobby.

The most detailed critique came from Professor Stephen Zunes whose rejection of the realist school was at the center of his evaluation. He condemns Mearsheimer, Walt and the realists for belittling international law, human rights, morality, the U.N., nongovernmental organizations, and basing their theories on security calculations and military might.¹⁷ Furthermore, the notion that the U.S. would support an Israeli government that practiced repressive and colonial policies due to the lobby is discredited by U.S. support of other foreign regimes with similar behavior. He states, "The unfortunate reality is that the U.S. government is perfectly capable of supporting right-wing allies in efforts to invade, repress, and colonize weaker neighbors without a well-organized ethnic minority somehow forcing Congress or the administration to do so."¹⁸

The Middle East is a strategically vital region in world affairs and as such, a stable base for projecting U.S. power in the region makes Israel a valuable asset to America in an imperial and hegemonic sense. With this in mind, Zunes claims that the special interest most adamantly pushing U.S. support for the Israeli government is the arms industry. He states, "the military-industrial complex has a considerable stake in encouraging massive arms shipments to Israel and other Middle Eastern U.S. allies and can exert enormous pressure on members of Congress who do not

¹⁵ Walter Russell Mead. "Jerusalem Syndrome: Decoding 'The Israel Lobby'" *Foreign Affairs* (November/December, 2007).

¹⁶ L. Carl Brown. "Book Review: The Israel Lobby" *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2006).

¹⁷ Stephen Zunes. "The Israel Lobby: How powerful is it really?" *Mother Jones* (May 18, 2006): 1-2.

¹⁸ Zunes (2006): 3-4.

support a weapons-proliferation agenda.” The lobbying budgets of arms industry titans such as Lockheed Martin, General Electric, Raytheon, and others dwarfs that of the Israel lobby, and “the arms industry contributes more than \$7 million each election cycle to Congressional campaigns, twice that of pro-Israel groups.”¹⁹ Zunes sees the massive amounts of military aid to Israel not as a sign of the power of the Israel lobby, but of the power of strategic and economic interests; a case-in-point is that after Israel proved its military capabilities and strategic value after the 1967 war, U.S. aid inflated by 450 percent.²⁰ As military threats to Israel have fluctuated at different times in its history, U.S. military aid has not fluctuated with it. It has continued to lavish its client with enormous aid “insuring qualitative Israeli military superiority,” making it its largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid.²¹

Echoing Zunes’ arguments is Columbia University professor Joseph Massad, who is of Palestinian descent. What is intriguing about Massad’s disagreement with Mearsheimer/Walt is his own confrontation with the Israel lobby who have targeted him. He states:

*“Is the pro- Israel lobby extremely powerful in the United States? As someone who has been facing the full brunt of their power for the last three years through their formidable influence on my own university and their attempts to get me fired, I answer with a resounding yes. Are they primarily responsible for US policies towards the Palestinians and the Arab world? Absolutely not.”*²²

The power of AIPAC and other elements of the lobby is part-in-parcel of their accord with U.S. imperial ideology. Massad points to the

U.S. policies in such nations as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Zaire, and Indonesia to show that it is not the lobby that directs U.S. policy in the Middle East, but U.S. policy the empowers the lobby in Washington D.C. The Israel lobby, according to Massad, is responsible for “the details and intensity” of U.S. Middle East policy, “but not the direction, content, or impact of such policies.”²³

Noam Chomsky credits the two realists for taking a stand guaranteed to draw a vicious response, but points his finger at what he views as a more compelling determinant for U.S. Middle East policy- oil. This is why the Middle East is a critical region in international affairs and is a much more compelling issue for U.S. policymakers and has been prior to the birth of the state of Israel. The failure to incorporate the role of oil and the energy corporations leaves their theory unpersuasive. Furthermore, the idea that controversial U.S. policies are determined by a powerful lobby absolves America of its actions and “leaves the U.S. government untouched on its high pinnacle of nobility.”²⁴

A fair reading of “The Israel Lobby” along with the work of their critics will lead to a more nuanced view of what actually determines U.S. policy in the Middle East and in Israel/Palestine. As one scholar noted, this debate should not be viewed in an “either-or” framework.²⁵ The key factor behind U.S. policies in the region is not *either* U.S. strategic and economic interests *or* the lobby; rather, the two go hand-in-hand. Over the years, both Israel and the U.S. have had an interest in keeping Arab countries subordinate, therefore the lobby’s interests and

¹⁹ Ibid.: 11.

²⁰ Ibid.: 5.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joseph Massad. “Blaming the Lobby” *Al-Ahram Weekly* (March 23 – 29, 2006): 4.

²³ Ibid.: 4.

²⁴ Noam Chomsky. “The Israel Lobby?” *ZNET* (March 28, 2006).

²⁵ Norman Finkelstein. “The Israel Lobby” *Counterpunch* (May 1, 2006).

the U.S. “national interest” (in an imperial and hegemonic sense), regularly converge. Dissent and criticism from whether the U.S.-Israeli special relationship is actually in the national interest has not had a fair hearing in the U.S. media or the U.S. Congress, and this is the main objective of the Israel lobby and one in which they have largely succeeded.

The Mearsheimer/Walt narrow focus on the Israel lobby as the principal factor determining U.S. policy should not come as a surprise. As realists, hegemony and global dominance are what states desire in their worldview, so the “military-industrial complex” and oil interests are not reflexively targeted by them, as they are by Zunes, Chomsky and others. Their criticism of the special relationship and the Israel lobby stems from their consideration of security interests, as opposed to any legal or moral rationale. The leftists, conversely, are more consistent and morally conscious when it comes to their advocacy for the rights of Palestinians and the end of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. Their commitment to these causes is commendable and they need to be brought to the public’s attention. A dismissive view of the Israel lobby’s role, however, prevents them from appreciating the importance of the Mearsheimer/Walt study. The two realist scholars may not be motivated by the goodness of their hearts, but when establishment figures dare to speak out against powerful interests, they should be commended. More significantly, in order for important and dissenting voices to be heard by larger audiences, certain taboos need to be broken, and Mearsheimer and Walt have contributed greatly to this effort.