

The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy:
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, September 2007. Hardcover, \$25.00. ISBN: 978-0-374-17772-0.

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Introduction by Christopher L. Ball, H-Diplo

The *Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* has generated intense coverage and debate, as David Schoenbaum delineates in his review, most of it unfavorable or critical. This is the first book-length analysis by prominent academics of pro-Israel lobbying, especially the ethno-religious dimension, as Tony Smith notes.¹ At the same time, as Andrew Preston and Schoenbaum discuss, much of what Mearsheimer and Walt argue is conventional wisdom among academics studying U.S. foreign policy— a loose-knit set of Jewish and Christian organizations and individuals powerfully advance vehemently pro-Israel policies in the United States; few U.S. politicians openly criticize Israel and most avow steadfast support; Israel has received the highest levels of U.S. aid and on more favorable terms; and the U.S. administrations infrequently challenge Israel policies with much force, even when criticism would benefit U.S. standing with Arab states.

Why then the controversy over the book? None of the reviewers here smears the authors with the canard that their criticism of Israel or its advocates amounts to anti-Semitism (indeed, the chapter on the Israel lobby's dominance of the public discourse about policy toward Israel is the one area that receives no dissent from the reviewers). Is it the violation of the quasi-taboos in U.S. elite — but not academic — discourse of trenchant criticism of the Israel lobby or casting doubt on Israel's value to U.S. interests? Books critical of the lobby have been published before, as Preston and Schoenbaum note. Is it that the book advances an one-sidedly anti-Israel version of contemporary Mid-East history or Arab-Israeli relations, as Preston and Schoenbaum argue? Or is it the charge that but-for the Israel lobby's urging, the United States would not have invaded Iraq in 2003? All the reviewers criticize this argument, and Smith argues that anti-Semites could misappropriate it readily.² Or is it that Mearsheimer and Walt are myopic in their focus on the Israel lobby's influence on U.S. foreign policy to the extent that other interests, ideas, and actors are cast aside analytically, as all reviewers agree?

It is ironic that authors from a social science specialty that is often criticized for its arcane, abstruse and a-historic attributes should find themselves under attack for, in effect, being insufficiently scientific. Mearsheimer and Walt are aiming for a wider audience than fellow academics and policy wonks — the book is published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, not a

¹ Janice J. Terry, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Role of Lobbies and Special Interest Groups*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005) and Robert H. Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: U.S. Policy in the Middle East*. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976) examine more than pro-Israeli groups. See also the edited volume by Thomas Ambrosio, *Ethnic Identity Groups and U.S. Foreign Policy*. (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2002).

² A satiric illustration of this is Prof. Mearsheimer's [interview with Stephen Colbert](http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=104544) (http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/index.jhtml?ml_video=104544) on Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report." After Mearsheimer explains his nuanced and qualified position, Colbert replies: "What I'm hearing is—and tell me if I'm wrong—'Jews control our foreign policy.'" (Mearsheimer tells him he is wrong.)

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university or an academic-oriented commercial press.³ But it is on methodological grounds that Mearsheimer and Walt stumble in three ways. First, although they proffer alternative explanations and find them lacking, they do not seriously examine these alternatives. They present a strong case that Israel's strategic value to the United States is exaggerated, but Schoenbaum suggests an alternative strategic rationale. They downplay the influence of lobbying by Persian-Gulf-located OPEC states or by U.S.-based transnational oil firms (142-146) compared to pro-Israel lobbying but they never compare the magnitude of lobbying by these factions. Of course, oil firms prefer peace to a war in the Gulf in order to safely and cheaply ship oil, but the U.S. invasion of Iraq was unlikely to unleash the counter-shipping campaigns that characterized the Iran-Iraq war.⁴ Off-shore balancing by the United States, Mearsheimer and Walt's preferred U.S. strategy (338-341), is not likely to be favored by U.S. oil firms any more than by pro-Israeli groups; greater U.S. military presence in the region only makes it more likely that U.S. firms will receive more lucrative concessions by Arab states looking to curry favor.

Second, the evidence of lobbying success is more ambiguous than Mearsheimer and Walt allow. They treat non-binding Congressional resolutions as evidence of lobby influence on U.S. policy. While the ability to get Congress to pass such resolutions by large margins is a valid measure of lobbying effectiveness on Congressional resolutions, it is not a particularly useful measure of whether U.S. foreign policy substantively changes. Lobbyists' or Israeli statements in favor of one policy are attributed as causes of the adoption of that policy with little more than the utterance and its presumptive reception suggested as the casual mechanism. Scholars from the Realist school of international politics have never given much weight to discursive forms of power, but here Mearsheimer and Walt, both eminent Realists, appear to have undergone a major ontological shift: speech is power. The alternative is to take rhetoric as truth. As Preston notes, this is something Mearsheimer rejects in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2001). In *The Israel Lobby*, self-promoting statements of pro-Israel lobbyists are taken as evidence of influence. Self-excusing claims of politicians or campaign staff that lobby-promoted funding of their challengers caused their loss is accepted uncritically, as Schoenbaum notes in the case of Sen. Roger Jepsen's 1984 defeat.

Mearsheimer and Walt rely on counter-factual reasoning to bolster their evidentiary case but counter-factual thinking is notoriously difficult.⁵ The authors fail to establish the null hypothesis clearly — if the lobby had 'normal' or limited influence, what would U.S. policy be? The question is not "Does the lobby have no effect?" because no sensible academic

³ While Farrar owns the Hill and Wang imprint, which publishes academic works, like Melvyn Leffler's *For the Soul of Mankind* (2007), but it is not an academically oriented commercial press like Routledge (Informa) or W.W. Norton.

⁴ This is not to say that U.S. firms argued *for* the war; only that they had no need to argue *against* it.

⁵ Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds. *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996).

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believes that the lobby's influence is nil just as no one thinks that the Cuban-American or Armenian-American lobbies have no effect on U.S. policy. But by what degree does the lobby influence policy? Mearsheimer and Walt say that the lobby does not "control" U.S. foreign policy (5), but is its influence like a butterfly's kiss or a freight train? Schoenbaum argues that there are many cases where Israel and its backers lose out in policy battles. For example, do cases like the U.S. insistence that Egypt's Third Army ensnared in the Sinai in 1973 be spared as a fighting force, the 1981 U.S. decision to sell AWAC aircraft to Saudi Arabia, or U.S. refusals to grant clemency to Jonathan Pollard show that the lobby loses only in rare circumstances or that the United States prevails when it wants to?

Third, Mearsheimer and Walt display little appreciation of multiple causation as it affects U.S. policy-making toward Israel. Schoenbaum outlines Arab policies that arguably pushed the United States closer to Israel. Mearsheimer and Walt imply that the Israel lobby's influence is an artifact of the lack of equivalent counter-lobbying by pro-Arab groups (141). There are fewer Arab-Americans and certainly Palestinian-Americans than Jewish-Americans and Christian Zionists. In other words, even if influence *were* proportional to ethnic constituencies, the electoral gains for backing pro-Israel policies would be better than pro-Arab policies. The lobby is amplifying and intensifying electoral factors rather than generating them. As Preston points out, they overlook the role that deep-seated, popular religious sentiment, rather than elite-level Jewish or Christian lobbying, plays in generating moral support for Israel in the United States.

In this evidentiary context, consider U.S. military and economic aid to Israel. Israel is the largest recipient of such U.S. aid for the period of fiscal years 1946–2006, second only to Vietnam, which accounted for 6% of total spending versus Israel's 9.3%.⁶ Egypt is a close third to Vietnam, accounting for 5.7%. From FY1974 to FY2002, Israel was the largest recipient of U.S. aid every year. Since FY2003 Iraq has received the most each year, and in FY2006, the last year for which outlays are available, Afghanistan displaced Israel as the 2nd largest recipient.⁷

⁶ My calculations based on data from the U.S. Agency for International Development's on-line "greenbook" at <http://quesdb.usaid.gov/gbk/>. This measures the outlays, or actual expenditure, both in constant and current-year dollars, rather than authorizations, which set the ceiling on appropriations, and appropriations, which set the amount an administration may spend. My calculations include grants and concessional loans, but exclude non-concessional loans, like those provided by the Export-Import Bank. It does not include loan guarantees, which USAID accounts for separately. The U.S. liability, or subsidy cost, for outstanding Israeli loan guarantees was \$1.17 billion as of 30 Sep. 2006. See http://www.usaid.gov/policy/par06/fs_0315_note06.html

⁷ Mearsheimer and Walt write that Israel remains the top recipient (26), missing the FY2003 change. This error may be due to the considerable lag in reporting aid *outlays* and the Bush administrations use of supplemental appropriations requests to fund Afghanistan and Iraq reconstruction and military aid rather than regular, annual requests.

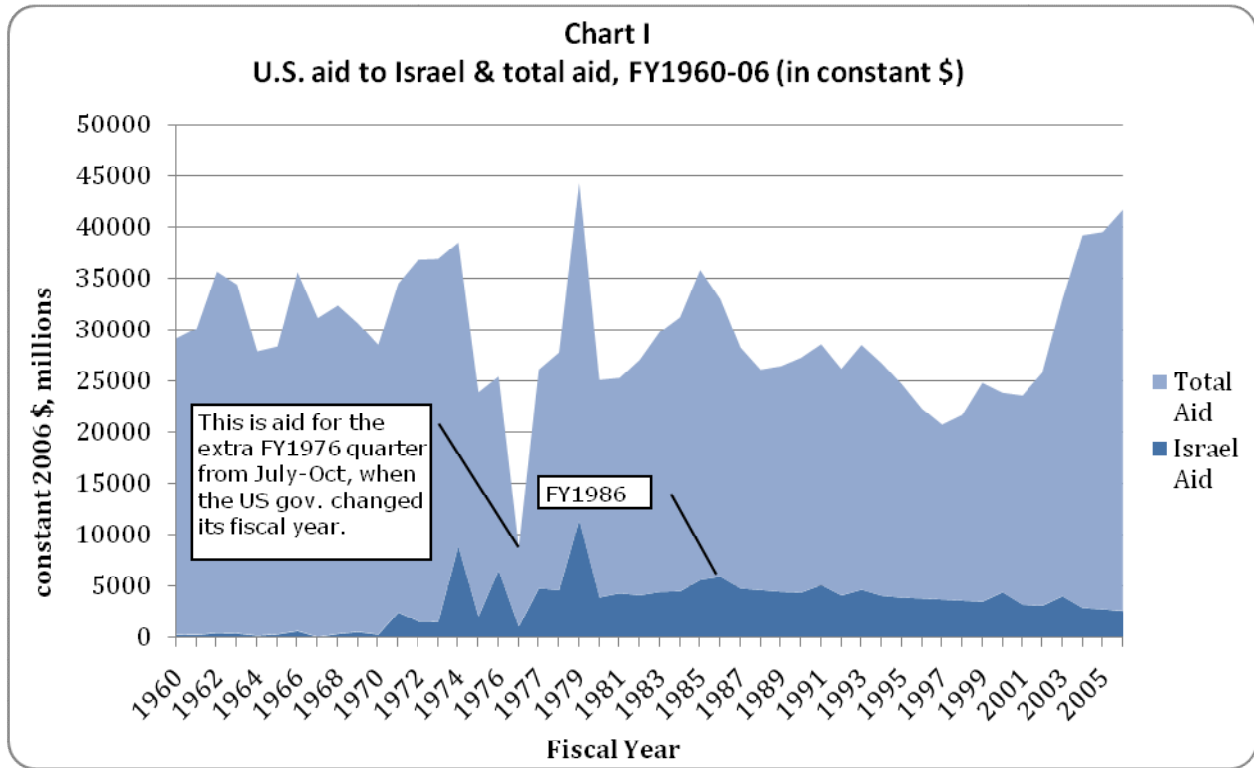
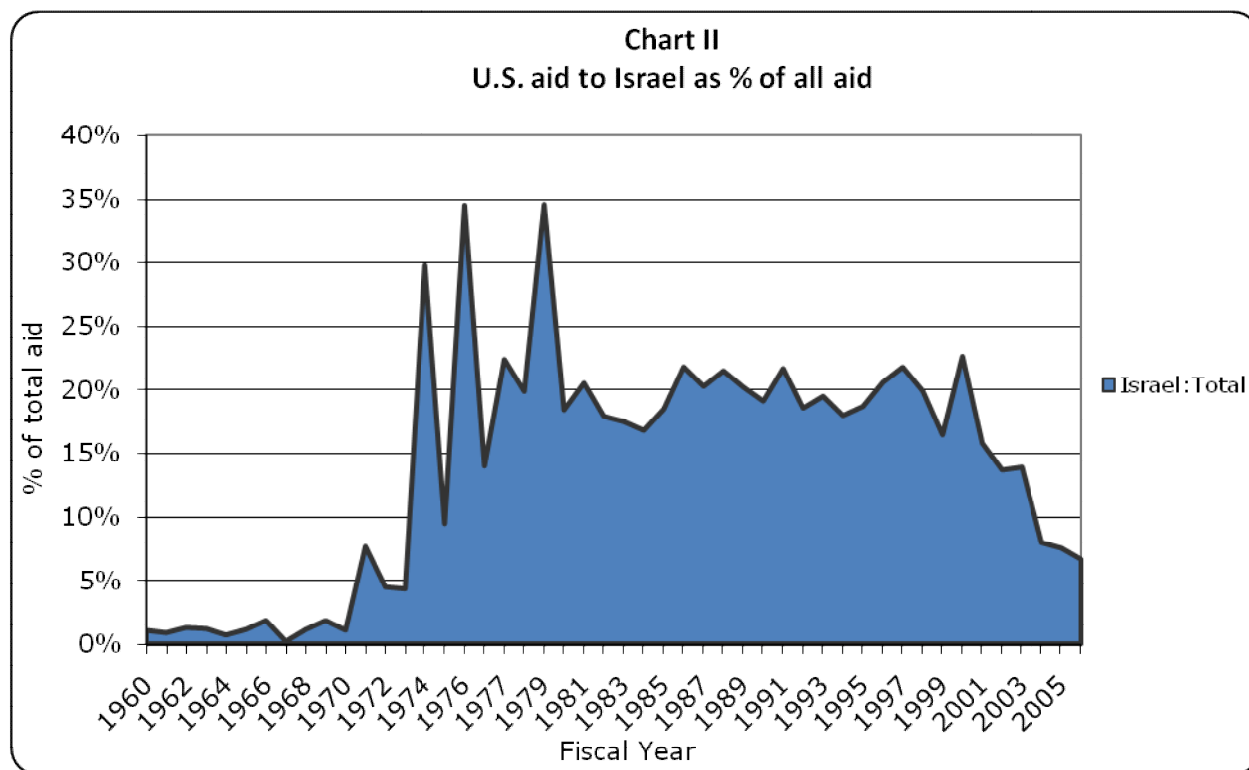


Chart I shows aid to Israel versus total U.S. aid in constant (inflation-adjusted) terms, and Chart II show this aid as percentage of total expenditure. Why does U.S. aid jump starting in FY1971 (July 1970-June 1971) in absolute and relative terms?⁸ Should we attribute this to a sudden success of the Israel lobby, or to strategic decisions under the Nixon administration? Why does aid decline after FY2000 (ending 30 Sep. 2000) both in relative and absolute terms (except for a brief rise in FY2003)? Aid is at its lowest absolute level since FY1975 and lowest share since FY1974. Is the Israel lobby losing its sway or have U.S. priorities changed?

⁸ The U.S. government changed its fiscal year system from a July 1 to June 30 schedule to an Oct. 1 to Sep. 30 schedule in 1976. This required that FY1976 have an extra quarter to cover the June-Oct. 1976 period, which is reported separately from the 12-month regular FY1976.

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None of these methodological issues are unique to *The Israel Lobby*; they plague many studies of interest-group lobbying. This is not just due to the idiographic approach of the studies; most quantitative work by political scientists on lobbying tends to focus on the behavior of lobbyists rather than their actual effectiveness because of these difficulties. But Mearsheimer and Walt evade the issue rather than confront it.

Their argument that the Israel lobby's influence was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the U.S. decision to invade Iraq in 2003 is the most prominent, causally tricky claim. Preston and Smith point out that many liberal internationalists also advocated or supported invading Iraq and that administration officials who were not pro-Israeli neo-conservatives (Bush, Rice, Rumsfeld) decided to invade. From their perches in the Pentagon, the neo-con hawks had insufficient authority to push the policy to fruition, even with lobby support. The lobby, as Smith suggests, followed rather than led the war policy on Iraq.

It is a further irony that Mearsheimer and Walt might have avoided many of the criticisms leveled against them had they focused on why Israel was more a strategic liability than an asset instead of trying to explain how the Israel lobby perpetuates this condition. As Preston explains, these Realist scholars were associated with the position that domestic factors are secondary in explaining foreign policy. Why are they so important here? Walt was "eclectic" in his *Taming American Power* (W.W. Norton, 2005) when he allowed that "social groups within states may exert independent influences on foreign policy" but he was explicitly not attempting a theoretical synthesis of this position with Realism (19).

Walt's discussion of the Israel lobby in *Taming* generated little of the controversy that this book does, even though it makes many of the same arguments (202-210). Mearsheimer used his offensive-Realist theory to explain foreign policy in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; he was not claiming that the study of foreign policy is different from explaining patterns in international politics.⁹ Is United States policy toward Israel to be considered an anomalous case? Or, more consistent with Mearsheimer's *Tragedy*, is the United States safe to pursue imprudent policies so long as no single state is able to dominate the Middle East?

Mearsheimer and Walt deny that U.S. and long-term Israeli national interests are served well under current policies—a position with which I largely agree. Their conception of the countries' interests is shaped in part by their Realist assumptions, but Realism as a general approach to international relations has little to say about what the national interest is beyond what it is not. A state has an interest in enhancing its power, which it can achieve by allying with other, less-powerful states against more powerful ones, arming itself, and expanding its territory, wealth, or population. The national interest, however, is not a sub-national, other-national, or supra-national interest. It is not dictated by moral concerns either. Put differently, it is fortunate if Israel's interest or pro-Israeli American's moral commitments coincide with U.S. national interests, but a Realist would neither expect this nor equate them. This does not mean that most American realists are anti-Israeli, but that their support for Israel rests on a-Realist, moral grounds rather than strategic ones, as Mearsheimer and Walt note (58).

It may be that Mearsheimer and Walt's attack on the *moral* case to support Israel vehemently is what inspires much of the controversy. They undercut non-realist reasons for strong U.S. support for Israel, such as Liberal commitments to Jewish nationalism or democratic affinity. Israel is to be treated as a 'normal' state, but, as Preston discusses, what this means in Israel's strategic context is not entirely clear. Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the United States should aid Israel if its survival were threatened, but having weakened the moral and strategic reasons to do so, it is unclear on what basis such help would be justified, aside from a generic Liberal Internationalist argument against wars of territorial conquest. Indeed, they never use the word "defend" in this context, leaving some ambiguity over what U.S. policy *should* be. Israel's advocates may well fear the inferences others might draw from *The Israel Lobby* more than the implications Mearsheimer and Walt intended.

Christopher L. Ball is the book review editor and a list editor for *H-Diplo*. He has taught on international politics and U.S. foreign policy at New York University, the University of Iowa, Johns Hopkins University, and Iowa State University.

⁹ This argument was made by Kenneth Waltz in his *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 71-72.