

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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For the visiting lecturer in search of an ice-breaker some 30 years ago, the thigh-slapper about Elizabeth Taylor's spouse-of-the-week was hard to beat. "I know what's expected of me," the man is heard to say. "The challenge is how to make it interesting." Twenty months after the clamorous debut of John Mearsheimer's and Stephen Walt's 13,000-word article in *The London Review of Books*, and three since its much-amplified publication as a book, the reviewer of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is likely to feel the same way.

The authors' argument is familiar and simple. Organized supporters of Israel have helped Israel settle and colonize the Occupied Territories by persuading U.S. policymakers to look the other way, and keep the grants and arms deals coming. They've meanwhile encouraged them to pursue a variety of other counter-productive policies in the Middle East (e.g., the invasion of Iraq), that the policymakers might not otherwise have pursued. Their support for Israel has therefore been a net loss for the United States. Like a lot of simple arguments, it's comfortable and plausible in limits. It's also an impressive generator of heat. Think debating speech in connubial union with term paper. Think Michael Moore with footnotes.

Graduate students yet unborn may wonder about the fuss it inspired. But they're almost certain to find the publishing history, pre-history included, as interesting as the book. In fall 2002, *The Atlantic* approached the authors about a piece on U.S. foreign policy. No trace of the Israel Lobby appears in their shrewd critique of the Bush Administration's march to war with Iraq, published a few months later in *Foreign Policy*.¹ But its role and influence was evidently understood as part of their commission from *The Atlantic*. "We accepted... with reservations, because we knew this was a controversial subject, and that any article... was likely to provoke a harsh reaction," the authors report without further explanation in the book's preface (vii). The project wandered through various hands and revisions for the next two years. It was then killed unconditionally in early 2005.

Given the reaction that really did follow, and the book's claim to bust taboos on one of the most contentious special relationships in American and international experience, the grounds for rejection have been an understandable object of curiosity. According to the editor who wrote the letter, they were spelled out to the authors at length. But neither he nor they have made the letter public.

The actual publishing history began some ten months later, when a fortuitous connection to Mary-Kay Wilmers, the *London Review of Books's* editor and "mater familias of London's liberal intelligentsia," rescued the piece from oblivion. "Maybe it's because I am Jewish, but I think I am alert to anti-Semitism," Wilmers told *The Observer*. "And I do not think criticizing American foreign policy or Israel's way of... influencing it, is anti-Semitic."²

¹ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "An Unnecessary War," *Foreign Policy*, January 2003.

² Peter Beaumont, "Editor hits back over Israel row," *The Observer*, April 2, 2006.
<http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/news/story/0,1745030,00.html>.

From suspects usual and otherwise, including *Ha'aretz*, *The Independent* (of London), *The Financial Times*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, and David Duke, the onetime Louisiana legislator and Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, the echo was immediate and global.³ For some it seemed as liberating as anything since the 21st amendment. For others it was as toxic as anything since "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." But for virtually everyone, it activated hot buttons and elicited passion like nothing since Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" in 1989, Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations?" in 1993, or Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in 1996.

By July 2006, an 83-page PDF (Portable Document Format) version of the article on the Kennedy School website, preceded by cautionary label and a letter from the dean explaining the absence of a Kennedy School logo, had been downloaded 275,000 times.⁴ The same month, *Foreign Policy* turned the piece into a symposium, and *The Washington Post* turned the authors into a cover story.

About a year later, it underwent another makeover. This time it reappeared as a trade book with 355 pages of text, comprising a preface, 331 pages of "Nous accusons," and 20 of basically sensible but hardly startling policy proposals; 106 pages of endnotes, and a reported \$750,000 advance.⁵ Its publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, was one of New York's most venerable, with a list including *The New York Times's* Thomas A. Friedman as well as 22 Nobel laureates in literature.

With their creeping barrages of hedges, qualifiers, anticipations, and preemptions, the authors made use of the extra space to distance themselves from the charges of anti-Semitism, Israel-bashing, and reductivism with extreme prejudice that had pursued them through the earlier versions. They were at particular pains to make clear that anti-Semitism is ancient, evil and still with us; that Israel too has legitimate security interests, and that the Israel Lobby, as they understand it, means neither more nor less than an organized group of Americans, some Jewish, many not, exercising their Constitutional rights of free speech and assembly to influence their elected representatives.

Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, and Paul Wolfowitz, all Jewish neo-conservatives and onetime senior Defense Department officials, nonetheless continue to appear in the index 16, 14 and 13 times respectively. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, on the other hand, appears in the index only five times, although he is not Jewish, his conservatism is not neo,

³ Viz. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Israel_Lobby_and_U.S._Foreign_Policy .

⁴ Viz. <http://middleeastwonks.blogspot.com/2006/04/mearsheimer-and-walt-controversy.html> for the E-mail of explanation from Kennedy School Dean David Ellwood.

⁵ Josef Joffe, "Das Komplott der Koscher Nostra," *Die Zeit*, September 6, 2007. <http://www.zeit.de/2007/37/Juedische-Lobby> .

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and he can be reasonably assumed to have been at least as responsible for the war in Iraq as any combination of the other three.

By late November 2007, the book version, in hard cover at \$26 retail, placed number 85 on Amazon's bestseller list, only a notch or two behind Ann Coulter on Democrats and Christopher Hitchens on God.⁶ Lexis-Nexis listings of commentary, reviews, and reaction in major Anglophone media stood at 277, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Danish and Dutch media links at 97, broadcast and TV transcripts at 48.

Barely returned from an extensive tour of the United States, including such A-list addresses as the National Press Club and Council on Foreign Relations, the authors were now reported preparing for Europe. There was even a T-shirt - "Made in the USA," its designer added proudly - with the message "Walt and Mearsheimer Rock,"⁷ Meanwhile, translations into 16 languages were in the works,⁸ or already in the bookstores, among them a German edition from Campus,⁹ a spin-off of the Frankfurt School, not previously known for an interest in the Realist school of international relations.

Even fellow professionals might share a sense of shock and awe at the transformation of two respected senior colleagues into the academy's answer to Brangelina. Frustration with a despised Administration, a singularly unpopular war, a famously difficult client and its seemingly endless conflict with its neighbors, the elemental human need for someone, something, anything, to blame when things go multiply wrong — any or all of these might explain the book's success. But assessing it as a guide to the world as it is, let alone a MapQuest for readers who'd like to see something good happen in the Middle East, is not as easy.

Is the authors' comparative advantage, to paraphrase a classic of the Lobby-bashing canon,¹⁰ that they dare to speak out? Maybe. But it's hardly as though they were the first to take on the subject.

In 1987, Edward Tivnan, a former reporter for *Time* and producer for ABC's news magazine "20/20," argued virtually the same case and advanced virtually the same prescriptions. His

⁶ http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/ref=pd_ts_pg_4?ie=UTF8&pg=4 (accessed November 23, 2007).

⁷ <http://www.cafepress.com/israellobby>

⁸ Rami G. Khouri, "The Israel Lobby Has Its Sights on Iran," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), October 31, 2007.

⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, *Die Israel Lobby* (Frankfurt, 2007).

¹⁰ Viz. Paul Findley, *They Dare to Speak Out* (Westport, CT, 1985).

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book, twice reviewed in *The New York Times*, was published by Simon & Schuster, a landmark of the book trade since 1924.¹¹

In 1992, former Under Secretary of State George Ball, an enviable stylist and actual foreign policy pro, as well as a Democratic elder statesman, argued virtually the same case and advanced virtually the same prescriptions in a book under contract to W.W. Norton, a New York publisher at least as upscale as Farrar, Straus and Giroux.¹²

In 2002, the year before the Iraq war, Michael Lind, a media-savvy former editor of *The National Interest*, and a regular by-line in *The New Yorker*, *New Republic*, and *Harper's*, trampled out another vintage from the same grapes of wrath, this time in *Prospect*, a British monthly at least as upscale as *The London Review*.¹³

Yet Tivnan, Lind, even Ball scarcely made a ripple. So how account for Mearsheimer's and Walt's crashing waves? Is it their insight into a region whose people, to quote a character in a story by Saki, "unfortunately make more history than they can consume locally"?¹⁴ Unlike Robert Fisk, *The Independent's* celebrated man in the Middle East, neither author has ever been known as an Israel-basher. But unlike Fisk, a resident of Beirut with decades of credible field experience, neither has made his career as an Old Middle East Hand either.

If they know the four Arab-authored, *UN Arab Human Development Reports*, it certainly doesn't show.¹⁵ Published in 936 aggregate pages between 2002 and 2005, the reports spell out with masterly authority the world-class deficits, dysfunctions and discontents in literacy, political participation, economic development and gender equality that point, in effect, to a slow motion regional meltdown. A look at them while their own work was still in progress might have done wonders for Mearsheimer's and Walt's sense of cause, effect, perspective, proportion, and priority in what might reasonably be called the world's biggest little conflict. It might also have moved their book's center of gravity.

A couple of citations in a more familiar IR idiom make the same point in a couple of sentences.

Islam, or rather a perversion of it, may exercise a vital influence on political decisions in the Near East if the area's basic intellectual and social crisis continues to deepen and no timely modern secular

¹¹ Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby* (New York 1987), cf. Walter Goodman, *New York Times*, April 30, 1987, Bernard Gwertzman, *New York Times*, May 17, 1987.

¹² George and Douglas Ball, *The Passionate Attachment* (New York, 1992).

¹³ William Lind, "The Israel Lobby," *Prospect*, April 2002, "Israel Lobby, Part 3," *Prospect*, October 2002.

¹⁴ Saki (H.H. Munro), "The Jestings of Arlington Stringham" in *The Short Stories of Saki* (New York, 1945), 150.

¹⁵ *The Arab Human Development Report*, United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Arab States, New York, 2002-2005.

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solution appears. Then emotional rejection of all the West stands for may become the negative content of Islam, and a totalitarian nihilism the Near East's primary defense mechanism.¹⁶

So wrote the U.S. State Department's INR in — read it and weep — 1952.

Contrary to the Israeli account, [Arafat's] behaviour since the start of the intifada has reflected not the existence of a prior strategy based on the use of force, but the absence of any strategy...

Whatever the material contribution of successive Israeli governments to the collapse of the Oslo framework or Israel's moral and legal responsibility for its own behaviour since autumn 2000, Arafat is guilty of strategic misjudgement, with consequences for the Palestinians of potentially historic proportions.¹⁷

So wrote Yezid Sayigh, author of the standard work on Palestinian nationalism in — read it and weep again — Fall 2001.¹⁸

Skewed by realities unmentioned or unanticipated by the authors, their sense of Realism is another soft spot. Colleagues who remember Mearsheimer's case for a German nuclear bomb no German even wanted in the early 1990s might wonder why he shows so little understanding for Israelis, who wanted — and with French, not U.S. aid — presumably got, a nuclear bomb in the late 1950s.

Colleagues with more experience in the area might hear other overtones the authors miss. In 1970, for a practical case, Israel, backed up by the U.S., proved to be Jordan's last best line of defense when Palestinians tried to hijack the kingdom. In 1981, when Israel bombed Osirak a.k.a. Tammuz 1, the French-built Iraqi reactor, little more was heard from Israel's neighbors than pro forma tut tuts. In 1982, the region was thunderously silent when the Palestine Liberation Organization shipped out of Lebanon for Tunis. Only recently, with Iranian centrifuges believed to be humming just over the horizon, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, Tunisia, Yemen, Indonesia, even Syria, as well as Egypt and Jordan, joined Israelis and – some – Palestinians in Annapolis. Do they know something that Walt and Mearsheimer missed?

For readers familiar with the literature as well as the territory, the scholarship too is likely to come up short. A reference to Roger Jepsen (sic), a nominal victim of the Israel Lobby, is just the kind of error that suggests that there might be more, even many more, errors where this one comes from (157-158). A first-term Republican Senator from Iowa, a state with a Jewish population of possibly 5,000 in a total of a little under three million, Jepsen had many problems when he decided to run for re-election in 1984. He claimed constitutional privilege when stopped for driving solo in the carpool lane from Virginia to

¹⁶ "Problems and Attitudes in the Arab World: Their Implications for U.S. Psychological Strategy," Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State, May 19, 1952.

¹⁷ Yezid Sayigh, "Arafat and the Anatomy of a Revolt," *Survival*, Autumn 2001.

¹⁸ Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State* (Oxford, 1997).

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Washington. He admitted membership in a private spa later shut down for prostitution. His rural constituents were suffering from a farm depression caused by huge federal deficits, and resulting high interest rates. It was true that Jepsen had voted to sell advanced surveillance aircraft to the Saudis. But it was at President Reagan's insistence. Reagan carried Iowa by 53 percent to 46. Jepsen lost his seat by 55 percent to 43.

"The essay itself, mostly a very average 'realist' and centrist critique of the influence of Israel, contains much that is true and a little that is original," Christopher Hitchens noted in Slate. "But what is original is not true and what is true is not original."¹⁹

Hitchens's point is hard to quarrel with. It may also be the book's central weakness, save for the still bigger question of whether it does anything to change minds that need changing, or only gets their owners' backs up, and brings them out swinging.

The authors acknowledge, correctly, that the supposed elephant in the parlor has trumpeted for all to hear since at least the 1940s. They acknowledge, again correctly, that its impact was minimal, at least at the White House level, for the first full generation of Israeli statehood.

Yet even a brief reference (52-53) to the once-famous Soviet-Egyptian arms deal of 1955 is enough to move a latter-day Ronald Reagan to a hearty "There you go again." If Egypt — and Syria too — approached the Russians, it was not, as the authors imply, because of America's support for Israel. It was because America, in cooperation with Britain and France, had imposed an arms embargo on the whole region, Israel included. Egypt, a loser in the 1948-49 war with Israel, addressed its arms problem by approaching the Soviet Union. Israel addressed its problem by signing on with Britain and France to invade Egypt. It incidentally put itself on a collision course with the United States. In 1990-91, in everybody's interest, American deployed troops in Israel for the only time ever to keep Israel out of the war with Iraq. Is it too much to imagine that a little more, not less, support for Israel in 1955 might have kept Israel out of the misbegotten Suez expedition a year later?

U.S. abstinence continued up to fateful 1967, when a critical mass of inter-Arab politics and Soviet grand strategy caused Israelis to dig mass graves in public parks in anticipation of the worst case.²⁰ With an assist from Arab League conferees in Khartoum, who unanimously said no to negotiations, recognition and peace, hesitation in Washington did its part to let Israelis occupy and eventually settle the West Bank, previously annexed by Jordan, and Gaza, previously administered by Egypt. In 1973, American intervention

¹⁹ Christopher Hitchens, "Overstating Jewish Power," Slate, March 27, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2138741/>.

²⁰ Viz. Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*, London and New York 1970, Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *Foxbats Over Dimona*, New Haven 2007.

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stopped Israel from destroying another Egyptian army. Is it too much to imagine that a little more, not less, attention to Israel in 1967 might have shortened or minimized the occupation, and preempted the creeping colonization of the territories that has since been allowed to morph into an existential crisis for both Israelis and Palestinians?

As the authors again acknowledge, the U.S.-Israeli relationship underwent a sea change in the decade that followed. In 1970, President Nixon declared it in America's interest to make Israel a Cold War proxy, cost what it might. In 1979, President Carter declared it in America's interest that Israel and Egypt make peace, cost what it might. Largely unchallenged, the legacy of both decisions remains an article of faith, and a mortgage with no determinable date of retirement.

What Mearsheimer and Walt consistently neglect to mention is that there might be more to the story. From Eisenhower to Clinton, U.S. presidents have gone toe-to-toe with the Lobby and won. Anwar el-Sadat, an Egyptian president who visited Israel, addressed the Knesset, and smoked his pipe at Barbara Walters and Walter Cronkite, won too. Arrayed in a three-piece suit instead of a uniform, he rolled up both Israeli occupiers and the Israel Lobby where all possible combinations of Soviet arms and Arab armies had failed, regained all territory lost in 1967, and laid claim to an annual American aid package that, like Israel's, continues to this day.

No one can say for certain whether the same would have worked for Yasir Arafat, or that what worked for Gandhi in India, Martin Luther King in Dixie, Mandela in South Africa, or Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel in Iron Curtain Europe, would also have worked in Palestine. But this is only in part because it's hard to prove a negative. The crucial part (see Yezid Sayigh) is that Palestinians never seriously tried it. Instead, from the 1930s on, they opted for leaders who lined up successively with Hitler, the Soviet Union, and Saddam Hussein. By 1982 it had got them to Tunis, by 2006 to the threshold of civil war.

It's true that Israeli settlers were allowed to colonize Palestinian land after 1967. They were even encouraged after the election of Menahem Begin a decade later. But it's at least as true that Israeli voters elected three negotiation-minded prime ministers, two by landslide majorities, between 1984 and 1999.

If none returned for a second term, the fault was not entirely theirs. In 2000, the post-Camp David intifada effectively elected Ariel Sharon, the candidate Palestinians most loved to hate. Over the next four years, Palestinian suicide bombers targeted seders, pizzerias, discos, beachfront restaurants, and university cafeterias. To most people's surprise, the violence turned even Sharon into a born-again pragmatist. Persuaded for the first time since 1967 that settlement might make them less safe, Israelis agreed in 2005 to withdraw from Gaza. A half year later they reelected Sharon.

Soon afterward, Israeli soldiers were killed and kidnapped on land Israel had voluntarily withdrawn from. Since then, Israeli civilians across the border from Gaza have been under

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regular bombardment. The experience has not made easier to sell more withdrawals. Freely elected to govern Gaza in 2006, Hamas is now a contender for control of the West Bank too.

For those who haven't got the message, Article 22 of its charter still stands. It explains how "the enemies" with their "control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations and others" were behind "the French Revolution, the Communist Revolution," and World War I, "sabotaging societies and achieving Zionist interests" through secret societies they formed, "such as Freemasons, Rotary Clubs, the Lions and others."²¹

"Alas," the late and venerated Edward Said sighed not long before his death, "one can already see in Palestine's potential statehood the lineaments of a marriage between the chaos of Lebanon and the tyranny of Iraq."²² Neither the suicide bombers, Hamas, the world view behind Article 22, nor Said's deepening pessimism are conspicuous in the authors' argument either. But with adversaries and obstacles like these, does a book on the Lobby suffice — is a Lobby even needed — to explain why majorities of Americans over decades have inclined to keep their distance, curse both houses, continue to support Israel or at least give it the benefit of their doubt?

So back to the questions that really matter. Have the authors done all they can to nudge and guide Americans, including the Lobby and its constituents, from the dismal Here to a happier There? Or have they only rediscovered the wheel, and told us again what's been public knowledge for years about one of the many obstacles along the route? Is their version of tough love likely to make Israelis play better with other children? Or is it only likely to make them hang on all the harder to the status quo?

²¹ The complete text can be found at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/mideast/hamas.htm>.

²² Quoted by Lisa Anderson, presidential address, Middle East Studies Association, November 7, 2003.