BOOK REVIEW:

Israeli Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy

By John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt Farrar, Straus and Giroux, September 2007 496 pages, \$25.00 Reviewed by Mahmood Ahmad



"The U.S. national interest should be the primary object of American foreign policy. For the past several decades, however, and especially since the Six Day War in 1967, the centerpiece of U.S. Middle East policy has been its relationship with Israel. The combination of unwavering U.S. support for Israel and the related effort to spread democracy throughout the region has inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardized U.S. security. . . the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the region is due almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics, and especially to the activities of the "Israel Lobby." Other special interest groups have managed to skew U.S. foreign policy in directions they favored, but no lobby has managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the national interest would otherwise American suggest, simultaneously convincing Americans that U.S. and Israeli interests are essentially identical."

Since the founding of a Jewish homeland in 1948, America's unique friendship with Israel has weathered war and crises. It is now drawing more public scrutiny than it has in a generation.

Israel–United States relations have evolved from an initial United States policy of sympathy and support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in 1947 to an unusual partnership that links a small but militarily powerful Israel with the United States, with the U.S. superpower trying to balance competing interests in the Middle East. To the United States, Israel is a major non-NATO ally and its closest ally in the Greater Middle East. Israel is such an ally to the United States that

Israel is considered to be "America's Best Friend" by President George W. Bush.²

On May 14, 1948, the United States, under President Truman, became the first country to extend de facto recognition to the State of Israel. Past American presidents, encouraged by active support from civic groups, labor unions, political parties, and members of the American and world Jewish communities, supported the concept, alluded to in Britain's 1917 Balfour Declaration, of a Jewish homeland.

The decision was still contentious, however, with significant disagreement between Truman and the State Department about how to handle the situation. Truman was a supporter of the Zionist movement, while Secretary of State George Marshall feared U.S. backing of a Jewish state would harm relations with the Muslim world, limit access to Middle Eastern oil, and destabilize the region. On May 12, 1948, in the Oval Office, Marshall told Truman he would vote against him in the next election if the U.S. recognized Israel.³ In the end, Truman, recognized the state of Israel 11 minutes after it declared itself a nation.⁴ De jure recognition came on January 31, 1949.

Since then Israel remain an important factor in U. S. policy in the Middle East, and Congress has placed considerable importance on the maintenance of a close and supportive relationship. The main vehicle for expressing support for Israel has been foreign aid; Israel now receives on average about 3 billion in direct foreign assistance each year,⁵ an amount that is roughly one-sixth of Americas direct foreign assistance budget. As of 2005, direct U.S. economic and military assistance to Israel amounted to nearly 154 billion, a policy that has served to cause a widening rift between the Arab population and the United States

United States also provides Israel with consistent diplomatic support. Since 1982, the US has vetoed 32 Security Council resolutions critical of Israel, more than the total number of vetoes cast by all the other Security Council members. It blocks the efforts of Arab states to put Israel's nuclear arsenal on the IAEA's agenda. The US comes to the rescue in wartime and takes Israel's side when negotiating peace. The Nixon administration protected it from the threat of Soviet intervention and re-supplied it during the October War.

Some in the United States question the levels of aid and general commitment to Israel, and argue that a U. S. bias toward Israel operates at the expense of improved U. S. relations with various Arab states.⁶ Others maintain that democratic Israel is a strategic ally, and that U. S. relations with Israel strengthens the U. S. presence in the Middle East.⁷

For the past several decades, and especially since the Six-Day War in 1967, the centerpiece of US Middle Eastern policy has been its relationship with Israel. The combination of unwavering support for Israel and the related effort to spread 'democracy' throughout the region has inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardized not only US security but that of much of the rest of the world. This situation has no equal in American political history. Why has the US been willing to set aside its own security and that of many of its allies in order to advance the interests of another state? The U. S.-Israeli relations have evolved from an initial American policy of sympathy and support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in 1948 to an unusual partnership that links a small but militarily powerful Israel, dependent on the United States for its economic and military strength, with the U. S. superpower trying to balance competing interests in the region. One might assume that the bond between the two countries was based on shared strategic interests

or compelling moral imperatives, but neither explanation can account for the remarkable level of material and diplomatic support that the US provides.

Paul Findley a member of the U.S. House of Representatives argues, "there is an open secret in Washington that all members swear to serve the interests of the United States, but there is an unwritten and overwhelming exception: The interests of one small foreign country almost always trump U.S. interests. That nation of course is Israel".

What few Americans understand however, is the steep price they pay in many other fields for the U.S.-Israeli relationship, which in turn is a product of the influence of Israel's powerful U.S. lobby on American domestic politics and has nothing to do with U.S. strategic interests, U.S. national interests, or even with traditional American support for self-determination, human rights, and fair play overseas.

This is a tragedy. The U.S. government deliberately enmeshed itself ever more deeply in international crises of its own making, particularly in the Middle East. President Bush has continued aggressive policies resulting in even more hatred against the United States. New wars are likely, and the U.S. will probably be the aggressor. The U.S. policy to dominate global oil markets, The drive for empire, global political domination, immoral wars against "terrorism" (as self-servingly defined by Washington and its allies), the policies of killing thousands of innocents in Afghanistan and Iraq (that the U.S. refuses even to count); as well as the policies implementing the injustices of a U.S. version of economic globalization that has widened the gap between rich and poor in many nations. And then too there are the ever-expanding and wasteful military expenditures of the U.S.; more new American military bases almost everywhere; the continuing U.S. support for authoritarian

governments in the Arab world, Central Asia, and elsewhere; and the new nuclear weapons that a blatantly hypocritical U.S. government wants to produce while futilely trying at the same time to prevent unfriendly nations and non-state entities from obtaining nukes, and while Washington adamantly refuses to negotiate seriously on reducing and eliminating our own nukes. That's a pretty long list. But neither democracy, nor freedom for the rest of the world, nor concern for human rights is among these real policies of the U.S.

The price America has paid for its support for Israel is reflected in the almost universal hatred for their government both by Arabs in the Middle East and by Muslims around the world. There is no question that it is blamed for the bombings and invasions of Lebanon and Syria—which are accomplished with American weapons. Although the average American may not know why the U.S. is so unpopular around the world, every single person in the Middle East is able to discuss at length the cluster munitions and other American weapons that Israel drops in civilian areas maiming and killing small children as well as the American made jets and bombs that routinely kill Arabs. Beyond cluster weapons, when Israel occupied Southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000, it planted land mines throughout the area it controlled, and to this day refuses to provide a map to the Lebanese government of where they are planted. Periodically, Lebanese farmers come away with their legs blown off, or they are killed by the hidden exploding mines.

Noam Chomsky commented in an interview that five years ago much of the world regarded the United States as a rogue state and the greatest threat to their existence. He then went on to say: "Since then, the situation has become far worse. It's now not much of the world . . . but most of the world George Bush has . . . succeeded in a few years in

making the United States the most feared and often hated country in the world.⁹

These are key U.S. policies in encouraging the U.S. to wage aggressive war against Iraq and soon perhaps Iran, but they are also key U.S. policies that encourage future terrorism against the U.S. and its allies. Furthermore, it is known throughout the world that the U.S. has acquiesced for decades in Israel's obtaining and expanding its own nuclear weapons, while at the same time the U.S. is trying to stop other nations, particularly in the Middle East, from doing the same. Controversial though the subject of the Israeli-U.S. relationship may be, it is important that we face it directly.

Few years ago, Atlantic Monthly commissioned two academics, John Mearsheimer of Chicago University and Stephen Walt of Harvard, to write a significant article about the influence of the Israeli lobby on American foreign policy. When the piece was at last completed, the magazine declined to publish, deeming it too hot for delicate American palates. It eventually appeared in 2005, in the London Review of Books, provoking one of the most bitter media and academic rows of recent times. The authors were accused of anti-Semitism, and attacked with stunning venom by some prominent US commentators. Mearsheimer and Walt obviously like a fight, however, for they have now expanded their thesis into a book.

The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy adds some substance to an argument that has already been made. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* has entered the canon of contemporary political culture in the United States. So much, positive and negative, has been written about their thesis that the phrase "the Mearsheimer-Walt argument" is now shorthand for the idea that

pro-Israel advocates exert a heavy—and malign—influence upon the formulation of US Middle East policy. To veteran students of Middle East affairs, this idea is hardly new, of course. But the fact that two top international relations scholars affiliated with the University of Chicago and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, respectively, have espoused this analysis has lent it unprecedented currency. Along with President Jimmy Carter's volume *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy" has opened up a debate that many members of the lobby have long sought to suppress.

Review:

The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, is the title of a work by John Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and Stephen Walt, The Robert and Rene Belfer Professor of International Relations at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, that has gone through several versions from 2002 to 2007. The paper was originally commissioned in 2002 by *The Atlantic Monthly*, which then rejected it. ¹⁰ It became available as a working paper at the Kennedy School's website in 2006. ¹¹ The paper was finally published in March 2006 by the *London Review of Books*. ¹² The most recent version is *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, ¹³ a New York Times Best Seller, published in September 2007 by Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

The work's thesis is that "the United States has been willing to set aside its own security in order to advance the interests of another state [Israel]", and that U.S. Middle East policy has driven primarily by domestic politics, especially the "Israel Lobby", defined as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to steer U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction". 14

One of the myths surrounding the creation of the State of Israel is that the Zionists fought a war of independence in 1948, and won against heavy odds. The Israeli narrative has been that Israel was a David struggling for its independence against the Arab Goliath. It is a great story, but that is exactly what it is—a story. As Mearsheimer and Walt detail in their book on the Israel Lobby, the Zionist armies outnumbered the Arab armies, they were better trained and had better equipment and weapons.

What is more accurate historically is that Israel became the bully of the Middle East, starting even before May 15, 1948, when it declared itself a state. The full details of what the Zionist movement did to grab the Palestinians' land are outlined in Ilan Pappe's book, The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, ¹⁵ from which Mearsheimer and Walt quote in their narrative on the Israeli Lobby.

Mearsheimer and Walt argue that "No lobby has managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest, while simultaneously convincing Americans that U.S. and Israeli interests are essentially identical".[2] They argue that "in its basic operations, it is no different from interest groups like the Farm Lobby, steel and textile workers, and other ethnic lobbies. What sets the Israel Lobby apart is its extraordinary effectiveness." According to Mearsheimer and Walt, the "loose coalition" that makes up the Lobby has "significant leverage over the Executive branch," as well as the ability to make sure that the "Lobby's perspective on Israel is widely reflected in the mainstream media." They claim that AIPAC in particular has a "stranglehold on the U.S. Congress," due to its "ability to reward legislators and congressional candidates who support its agenda, and to punish those who challenge it."

They argue that the Lobby pursues two broad strategies. First, it wields its significant influence in Washington, pressuring both Congress and the executive branch. Whatever an individual lawmaker or policymaker's own views may be, the Lobby tries to make supporting Israel the 'smart' choice. Second, it strives to ensure that public discourse portrays Israel in a positive light, by repeating myths about its founding and by promoting its point of view in policy debates. The goal is to prevent critical comments from getting a fair hearing in the political arena. Controlling the debate is essential to guaranteeing US support, because a candid discussion of US-Israeli relations might lead Americans to favor a different policy.

"Although we deplore the Palestinians' reliance on terrorism and are well aware of their own contribution to prolonging the conflict, we believe their grievances are genuine and must be addressed. We also believe that most Americans would support a different approach . . . if they had a more accurate understanding of past events and present conditions."

Mearsheimer and Walt decry what they call misuse of "the charge of anti-Semitism," and argue that pro-Israel groups place great importance on "controlling debate" in American academia; they maintain, however, that the Lobby has yet to succeed in its "campaign to eliminate criticism of Israel from college campuses". The authors conclude by arguing that when the Lobby succeeds in shaping U.S. policy in the Middle East, then "Israel's enemies get weakened or overthrown, Israel gets a free hand with the Palestinians, and the United States does most of the fighting, dying, rebuilding, and paying." 17

Mearsheimer and Walt devote the early chapters of the book to dismantling the strategic and moral arguments commonly made on Israel's behalf. The two realists are perhaps most convincing on the moral front when they challenge the common narrative of little Israel fending off ruthless Arab states. "A good case can be made that current US policy conflicts with basic American values and that if the United States were to choose sides on the basis of moral considerations alone, it would back the Palestinians, not Israel."

"Because most Americans are only dimly aware of the crimes committed against the Palestinians," they say, "they see their continued resistance as an irrational desire for vengeance. Or as evidence of unwarranted hatred of Jews akin to the anti-Semitism that was endemic in old Europe" 19

With The Israel Lobby being released in the very month that State Department official Patrick Syring was exposed for having telephoned the Arab American Institute in 2006 and declared, "The only good Arab is a dead Arab," it is disquieting to see that IDF Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan has said much the same. ²⁰ Such open racism generally ends careers in the United States. In Israel, as the authors illustrate, such views are all-too-frequently held at the highest level of government.

Strategically, US government action abetting the subjugation of the Palestinians has caused our country enormous harm. "Today, America's intimate embrace of Israel – and especially its willingness to subsidize it no matter what its policies are – is not making Americans safer or more prosperous. To the contrary: unconditional support for Israel is undermining relations with other US allies, casting doubt on America's wisdom and moral vision, helping inspire a generation of anti-American extremists, and complicating US efforts to deal with a volatile but vital region."

The distraction caused by personal attacks on critics of Israel is, of course, intended to get everyone off the subject of whether or not America's overdone support for whatever Israel does is good for

America. That is something no one in the Lobby wants to hear—a real debate on the issue. The Lobby does its best work out of the public's eye.

"It is difficult to talk about the lobby's influence on American foreign policy, at least in the mainstream media in the United States, without being accused of anti-Semitism or labeled a self-hating Jew. It is just as difficult to criticize Israeli policies or question U.S. support for Israel in polite company. America's generous and unconditional support for Israel is rarely questioned, because groups in the lobby use their power to make sure that public discourse echoes its strategic and moral arguments for the special relationship."

That kind of anonymity disguises the kind of work done by the Lobby—frightening and intimidating officeholders in order to keep American taxpayers' money flowing to Israel. Mearsheimer's and Walt's main argument is that American support for Israel is not in America's best interests.

The questions of what is the Israel lobby and how does it work? Mearsheimer and Walt define the lobby as a "shorthand term for the loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction." Some of the most important organizations in the lobby – such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations – have moved to the right in recent years. They are out of step with the majority of Jews in the United States who are generally liberal and supportive of a two-state outcome. "Groups in the lobby employed a variety of tactics: open letters, congressional resolutions, op-eds and press releases, and direct meetings between administration officials and the leaders of influential Jewish and evangelical groups" to mystify executive branch initiatives intended to bring pressure against Israel in the effort to advance a two-state solution. "A solution of the lobby and a solution of the leaders of influential Jewish and evangelical groups" to mystify executive branch initiatives intended to bring pressure against Israel in the effort to advance a two-state solution.

The authors cite repeated examples of the lobby undercutting the Bush administration when it displayed the slightest willingness to press Israel to respect Palestinian rights and aspirations. Mearsheimer and Walt repeatedly stress that the lobby is not a cabal or conspiracy²⁵ and clearly regard such talk, as they should, as anti-Semitic. The lobby's members believe they are advancing American and Israeli interests, though they are failing on both fronts,²⁶ and "have successfully convinced many Americans that American and Israeli interests are essentially identical" when, quite clearly, "they are not." In order to mask the kind of mugging the Lobby undertakes on members of Congress, it's necessary for supporters of Israel to explain American generosity in ways other than how the Lobby intimidates members of Congress, and presidential candidates as well.

In summary the paper says the following about The Lobby:

- "They use 'the Lobby' as a convenient short-hand term for the loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction."
- "The core of the Lobby is composed of American Jews who make a significant effort in their daily lives to bend U.S. foreign policy so that it advances Israel's interests."
- "The Lobby also includes neoconservative gentiles and prominent Christian evangelicals, all of whom believe Israel's rebirth is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and supports its expansionist agenda and to do otherwise, would be contrary to God's will."
- "Over the past 25 years, pro-Israel forces have established a commanding presence in some of the most prominent U.S. Think Tanks.

- "Jewish-Americans have formed an impressive array of organizations to influence American foreign policy. American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) the core of the Lobby's influence in Congress and is the most powerful and renowned."
- "The Lobby also has significant leverage over the Executive branch. That power derives in part from the influence Jewish voters have on presidential elections."
- "Key organizations in the Lobby also directly target the administration in power ... [and] make sure that critics of the Jewish state do not get important foreign-policy appointments"
- "Pro-Israel congressional staffers are another source of the Lobby's power. As 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."
- "The Lobby's perspective on Israel is widely reflected in the mainstream media in good part because most American commentators are pro-Israel. The Lobby doesn't want an open debate, of course, because that might lead Americans to question the level of support they provide."
- "American Jewish leaders often consult with Israeli officials, so that the former can maximize their influence in the United States."

- "The Lobby also monitors what professors write and teach.
 The most disturbing aspect of this campaign to eliminate criticism of Israel from college campuses is the effort by Jewish groups to push Congress to establish mechanisms that monitor what professors say about Israel."
- "Jewish philanthropists have established Israel studies programs (in addition to the roughly 130 Jewish Studies programs that already exist) so as to increase the number of Israel-friendly scholars on campus."
- "No discussion of how the Lobby operates would be complete
 without examining one of its most powerful weapons: the
 charge of anti-Semitism. Anyone who criticizes Israeli actions
 or says that pro-Israel groups have significant influence over
 U.S. Middle East policy stands a good chance of getting
 labeled an anti-Semite."
- "The [Iraq] war was due in large part to the Lobby's influence, especially the neoconservatives within it."
- "Congress insisted on putting the screws to Damascus, largely in response to pressure from Israel officials and pro-Israel groups like AIPAC."
- "The Lobby must keep constant pressure on U.S. politicians to confront Tehran."
- "If their efforts to shape U.S. policy succeed, then Israel's enemies get weakened or overthrown, Israel gets a free hand with the Palestinians, and the United States does most of the fighting, dying, rebuilding, and paying."

- "It is not meant to suggest that 'the lobby' is a unified movement with a central leadership, or that individuals within it do not disagree on certain issues."
- "Not all Jewish Americans are part of the Lobby, because Israel is not a salient issue for many of them."
- "There is nothing improper about American Jews and their Christian allies attempting to sway U.S. policy; the Lobby's activities are not a conspiracy... For the most part the individuals and groups in it are only doing what other special interest groups do, but doing it very much better." However, "the mere existence of the Lobby suggests that unconditional support for Israel is not in the American national interest. If it was, one would not need an organized special interest group to bring it about."
- "Can the Lobby's power be curtailed? One would like to think so ... But that is not going to happen anytime soon."

This is a courageous book. The charge of anti-Semitism, even when clearly politicized, is one that undoubtedly will cause them personal pain. Nonetheless, they have proceeded, presumably because they are convinced Americans are increasingly seeing through such false allegations and because the stakes of American missteps in the Middle East – Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon – are enormous.

End Notes:

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- 15 Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oneworld Publications, 2006
- 16 see Campus Watch and U.S. Congress Bill H.R. 509
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¹⁸Ibid;, p. 80

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³ Michael T. Benson, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, Praeger Publishers, 1997

⁴ Hertzel Fishman, *American Protestantism and a Jewish State*, Wayne State University Press, 1973. See also: John Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, Hoover Institution Press, 1974

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¹⁹ Ibid; p.
20 Ibid; p. 89
21 Ibid; p. 77
22 Ibid; p.112
23 Ibid; p.126
24 Ibid; p.228
25 Ibid; p.150
26 Ibid; p. 112, 199
27 Ibid; p.8