

Review - The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, OCT 31 2010

It would appear that the influence Israel has on American politics is purely external, a special relationship, akin to that shared by Britain and America, based on mutual interests in foreign policy rooted in shared values. Two leading American professors of international relations, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, disagree fundamentally with this assessment. They authored an extremely controversial book in 2007 concluding that the Israel lobby in America, described as a non hierarchical coalition of pro-Israel interest groups and organisations, profoundly shapes American policy in the Middle East, and has done through virtually every administration since the 1970's.

Mearsheimer and Walt start by looking at the 2008 American Presidential candidates, concluding that each and every one was vociferously 100% pro Israel, often going to extreme lengths to display this, yet they all disagreed on virtually everything else. The traditional argument for American support for Israel is based on the moral case that both nations have shared values, and also due to the fact that Israel is a vital strategic asset for America. Both these factors are dismissed by the authors stating that the strategic value Israel once had is now redundant in the post Cold War era. Furthermore, the moral case is now a burden due to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and their hostile posture towards their neighbours. Therefore, Israel has become a strategic liability, an elephant in the room, and as witnessed via the candidates in the 2008 election, there is a general subservience to the will of the lobby to maintain a level of support for Israel that is not in America's national interest.

Considering the timing of the book, the 2003 Iraq invasion and the Bush re-orientation of American foreign policy feature heavily in the analysis. (Perhaps) the core postulate of the Bush foreign policy package, revolutionary democratisation, is intricately tied to Israel's security. Israeli politicians have long stressed that they live in a 'tough neighbourhood' and frequently stake their claim to be the only truly democratic nation in a sea of dictatorships and corrupt regimes. Both the domestic Israel lobby and the Bush administration believed toppling Saddam Hussein would lead to a domino effect of democratisation that would simultaneously fulfil the aims of increasing Israel's security and the wider aims of the Bush doctrine. In that sense, Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the lobby was the key variable in making the Iraq war happen when it joined the domestic American neoconservative chorus. Where this applies to Iran is ever more important. Mearsheimer and Walt postulate that the lobby was equally as concerned, even as far back as the Clinton years, with Iran. In a pragmatic way the various groups in the lobby understood the neoconservative desire to deal with Iraq first (see Perle 1999), yet read the Bush administration's intent as one of enforcing regime change in Iraq and then Iran in quick succession. Hence the frustration when this did not occur. In actuality, Iran provided significant tactical support in the Afghanistan campaign and offered a significant normalisation dialogue with America in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion, presumably fearing they could be next at a time when American power appeared to be at its zenith. In all cases, the lobby made a "concentrated effort" to spoil the process. The authors cite a stream of empirical data to demonstrate their thesis and state:

"Israel and the lobby...are the central forces today behind all the talk in the Bush administration and on Capitol Hill about using military force to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities" (Mearsheimer & Walt 2007: 282).

By this estimation, the next President in 2009, despite their particular orientation in foreign policy, was just as likely to attack Iran to halt its regional ambitions and remove the threat that poses to Israel, as the lobby will continue to shape policy in that particular direction. Having now witnessed the approach of Obama for some 18 months on Iran, this

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prediction has been largely proven accurate, at least in rhetoric if not in action. Obama's inauguration year promise to 'reach out a hand' to Iran, has been replaced with a retread of the Bush approach and the publicly announced statement that the force option is still 'on the table', conciliated by the Iranian steadfast desire to not negotiate with any good faith on making concessions on its nuclear program.

Walter Russell Mead states that the growing power of the lobby is a distortion, and much of the Israel bias in American foreign policy (which he also recognises) is really the result of the significant evangelical rise in American political life and their desire to fervently support Israel based on their own convictions derived from their particular reading of the Bible (Mead 2006: 41). Indeed, with Bush's evangelical orientation, Mead's point is well advised. Moving on, Gorenberg notes that the influence of the lobby has been overstated; being correct in the recognition that they attempt to control American policy as any lobbying will naturally do within its sphere of interest, but never really achieves the magnitude of success Mearsheimer and Walt credit them with due to the diverse network of competing and divergent interests on Capitol Hill (Gorenberg 2008: 32). Gorenberg's point is valid in the sense that the lobby and successive Israeli governments have still not received clear US support for their steadfast desire to forcibly and urgently end Iran's nuclear program, which is frequently described as an 'existential threat' to Israel's existence. Finally, the neoconservative publication, *Commentary*, published a scathing response to Mearsheimer and Walt, rejecting their thesis, stating that it employed anti-Semitic stereotypes and lacked original research, relying instead on secondary sources and crass generalisations (Stephens 2007).

Whilst there is a valid argument to be made that the book does oversimplify and perhaps over-emphasize the role of Israel and the lobby on foreign politics in America, it is a baseless accusation to accuse the authors of anti-Semitism or bad scholarship. Indeed within the first few pages of the book the authors pre-emptively deal with anti-Semitism and set their analysis apart from any vestige of it. The real conflict between neoconservatives and Mearsheimer and Walt here is most probably based on the fact that both authors are prominent realists. Realists have provided an acute and sustained critique of the whole neoconservative project from the outset, particularly Mearsheimer. The standard defence of those in the Israel lobby, of which many neoconservatives are closely allied (although not all neoconservatives are Jewish), to anyone accusing them of wielding a disproportionate influence in foreign policy and of acting in interests which are not American, is by playing the anti-Semitic card. This has been a contrived defence strategy that has stunted any serious debate. Mearsheimer and Walt's book has finally allowed the issue to be addressed academically rather than at the margins of society. Additionally, the stature of its authors has allowed for much deeper and wider debate than has been the case previously.

The Israel lobby thesis visits, yet dismisses, the importance of other lobby interests in the future of the Middle East, such as the oil lobby and the arms industry, which comes across as premature. Yet despite the apparent flaws, dismissing the thesis out of hand as *Commentary* predictably wishes, is a missed opportunity when attempting to understand the full scope of how American policy is forged towards the Middle East, especially when observing the strikingly similar rhetoric of both Israel's senior political figures and the American political establishment on several critical issues, most notably Iran.

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