

## **The Israel Lobby: How Powerful is it Really?**

**By Stephen Zunes | May 16, 2006**

Since its publication in the *London Review of Books* in March, John Mearsheimer and Steve Walt's article "The Israel Lobby"—and the longer version published as a working paper for Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government—has received widespread attention from across the political spectrum. These noted professors put forward two major arguments: the first is the very legitimate and widely acknowledged (outside of official Washington) concern that U.S. Middle East policy, particularly U.S. support for the more controversial policies of the Israeli government, is contrary to the long-term strategic interests of the United States. Their second, and far more questionable, argument is that most of the blame for this misguided policy rests with the "Israel lobby" rather than with the more powerful interests that actually drive U.S. foreign policy.

The Mearsheimer/Walt article has been met by unreasonable criticism from a wide range of rightist apologists for U.S. support of the Israeli occupation, including Democratic Congressman Eliot Engel (who accused the authors of being "anti-Semites"), Harvard Law professor Alan Dershowitz (who falsely claimed that the authors gathered materials from websites of neo-Nazi hate groups), pundits like Martin Kramer and Daniel Pipes, and publications like the *New York Sun* and the *New Republic*. The authors have also been unfairly criticized for supposedly distorting the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though their overview is generally quite accurate. The problem is in their analysis.

The article has garnered unreasonable praise from many in progressive circles, who have posted it on websites, circulated it on listservs, and lauded it as an example of speaking truth to power. Though critiques in establishment circles of the bipartisan U.S. support for the Israeli occupation are unusual and welcome, progressive promoters of this article have largely failed to assess the ideological agenda of its authors and the validity of their specific arguments.

It should be noted that Mearsheimer and Walt are prominent figures in the realist school of international relations, which discounts international law, human rights, and other legal and moral concerns in foreign policy. The realist tradition downplays diplomacy not backed by military force, belittles the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations, and dismisses the growing role of international nongovernmental organizations and popular movements.

With some notable exceptions, Mearsheimer and Walt have been largely supportive of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War and subsequently. For example, during the 1980s, Mearsheimer—a graduate of West Point—opposed both a nuclear weapons freeze and a no-first-use nuclear policy. A critic of nonproliferation efforts, Mearsheimer has defended India's atomic weapons arsenal and has even called for the spread of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states such as Germany and Ukraine. He was also an outspoken supporter of the 1991 U.S.-led Gulf War.

It is ironic, then, that these two men have suddenly found themselves lionized by many progressive critics of U.S. foreign policy as a result of their article. Any



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adulation should be tempered by the authors' blind acceptance of a number of naïve assumptions regarding America's role in the world, such as their assertion that the foreign policy of the United States—the world's number one arms supplier for dictatorial regimes—is designed “to promote democracy abroad.”

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It is always welcome and significant when traditional conservatives, hawks, and others in the foreign policy establishment speak out against specific manifestations of U.S. foreign policy, such as when Mearsheimer and Walt joined other prominent conservatives in academia in opposing the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. However, such realist opposition grows not out of concern over any of the important moral or legal questions but out of a rational calculation that a particular war could lead to greater instability and thereby run counter to America's national security interests. Indeed, Israel's violation of international legal norms and its impact on the civilian population in the occupied territories are mentioned in the article primarily as a means to counter claims that U.S. policy in support of the Israeli government is based upon a moral imperative.

What progressive supporters of Mearsheimer and Walt's analysis seem to ignore is that both men have a vested interest in absolving from responsibility the foreign policy establishment that they have served so loyally all these years. Israel and its supporters are

essentially being used as convenient scapegoats for America's disastrous policies in the Middle East. And though they avoid falling into simplistic, anti-Semitic, conspiratorial notions regarding Jewish power and influence for the failures of U.S. Middle East policy, it is nevertheless disturbing that the primary culprits they cite are largely Jewish individuals and organizations.

Also problematic are the article's references to U.S. Middle East policy resulting in part from the influence of “Jewish voters,” since most American Jews take more moderate positions regarding Iraq, Iran, and Palestine than does Congress or the Bush administration. Similarly, while Mearsheimer and Walt do not claim that the Israel lobby is monolithic or centrally directed, they fail to emphasize how not all pro-Israel groups support the policies of the Israeli government, particularly its right-wing administrations. Groups like Americans for Peace Now, the Tikkun Community, Brit Tzedek v' Shalom, and the Israel Policy Forum all identify themselves as pro-Israel but oppose the occupation, the settlements, the separation wall, and Washington's unconditional support for Israeli policies.

Perhaps the most twisted argument in their article is the authors' claim that the 2003 invasion of Iraq “was motivated in good part by a desire to make Israel more secure.” This is ludicrous on several grounds. First of all, Israel is far less secure as a result of the rise of Islamist extremism, terrorist groups, and Iranian influence in post-invasion Iraq than it was during the final years of Saddam Hussein's rule, when Iraq was no longer a strategic threat to Israel or actively involved in anti-Israeli terrorism. Indeed, it had been more than a decade since Iraq had posed any significant threat to Israel and some of Israel's biggest supporters on Capitol Hill were among the most outspoken voices against the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

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Within the Bush administration, although the neo-conservatives who championed the invasion of Iraq were supporters of Israel's rightist governments, they had for many years also been supporters of rightist governments in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere out of a belief that such alliances strengthened American hegemony. More fundamentally, the United States has had strong strategic interests in the Persian Gulf predating the establishment of modern Israel. Indeed, oil companies and the arms industry exert far more economic and ideological influence over Washington's policy in the Persian Gulf region than does the Israel lobby. (See *The U.S. Invasion of Iraq: Not the Fault of Israel and Its Supporters.*)

Mearsheimer and Walt also claim that the Israel lobby has urged Washington to put "very heavy" pressure on Syria. In reality, the Israeli government—fearing instability and a rise of Islamic fundamentalism should the Assad regime be toppled—has been encouraging the United States to back off from putting too much pressure on Syria. Furthermore, dozens of House members who voted in favor of the Syria Accountability Act in 2003 have opposed a number of resolutions supporting Israeli policies. (See *The Syrian Accountability Act and the Triumph of Hegemony.*)

The authors' claim that the Israel lobby is a major factor in the formulation of overall U.S. Middle East policy is plainly false. Indeed, U.S. policy in the Middle East over the past several decades—orchestrating military interventions and CIA-backed coups, backing right-wing dictatorships, peddling neoliberal economic policies through the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions, undermining the United Nations and international law, imposing sanctions against nationalist governments, etc.—is remarkably similar to U.S. policy toward Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. If the United States can pursue such policies elsewhere in the world without pressure from the

Israel lobby, why is its presence necessary to explain U.S. policies in the Middle East?

If the agenda advocated by the Israel lobby was substantially at variance with U.S. foreign policy elsewhere in the world, one could make a strong case that these lobbyists were influential. However, that is simply not the case. This is why some of the most outspoken opponents of U.S. foreign policy in general and of U.S. support for Israel in particular—such as Noam Chomsky, Phyllis Bennis, Mitchell Plitnick, Simona Sharoni, Joseph Massad, Steve Niva, and Norman Finkelstein—have raised serious questions about the supposed power of the Israel lobby, noting that it is responsible, in the words of Professor Massad, for "the details and intensity but not the direction, content, or impact of such policies."

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When it comes to U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine, groups like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and its related political action committees (PACs) have certainly influenced

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some members of Congress as well as some decision-makers in both Republican and Democratic administrations. Moreover, mainstream and conservative Jewish organizations have mobilized considerable lobbying resources, financial contributions from the Jewish community, and citizen pressure on the news media and other forums of public discourse in support of the Israeli government. At times, they have even created a climate of intimidation against many who speak out for peace and human rights or who support the Palestinians' right of self-determination. But all this is very different from claiming that the Israel lobby is primarily responsible for U.S. policy in the Middle East, even when it comes to Israel.

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### What Motivates U.S. Support for the Israeli Government?

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. To claim otherwise is to assume that without the pro-Israel lobby, the United States would be supportive of international law and human rights in its foreign policy. Given that U.S. foreign policy has rarely ever been supportive of international law and human rights, except when it corresponds with short-term political interests, why should the Middle East be an exception? There was no Indonesian-American lobby

responsible for the bipartisan support for Indonesia's quarter century of brutal occupation in East Timor, nor is there a Moroccan-American lobby responsible for the bipartisan support for the ongoing Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara.

It is certainly true that the United States is, in the words of Mearsheimer and Walt, "out of step" with the vast majority of the international community on the question of Israel and Palestine. Yet the United States is also out of step with the vast majority of the international community regarding the treaty banning land mines, the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, and the embargo against Cuba. Similarly, two decades ago the United States was also out of step with the vast majority of the international community in regard to the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and support for the Contra terrorists as well as opposition to sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa and allying with Pretoria in supporting the UNITA rebels in Angola.

Mearsheimer and Walt's observation that U.S. support of Israel runs contrary to U.S. strategic interests by stimulating anti-Americanism in the Arab/Islamic world is not an unprecedented dissenting position. During any administration, there are elements within establishment circles that come to conclusions challenging the prevailing mindset. For example, Mearsheimer and Walt joined Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jacek Krugler, and other realists who recognized that the invasion of Iraq was contrary to U.S. national security interests, but the Bush administration and a sizable majority of Congress (including the leadership of both parties) believed otherwise. Similarly, some leading realists of the 1960s, such as Hans Morgenthau, opposed the Vietnam War, but that didn't stop an overwhelming bipartisan majority in Washington from mistakenly believing, at least until the late 1960s, that the war was somehow in America's best interests. In other words, administrations of both parties have repeatedly

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proven themselves capable of acting contrary to long-term national interests without the Israel lobby forcing them to do so.

In certain narrowly defined, short-term ways, U.S. support for the Israeli government *does* enhance U.S. interests. In a region where radical nationalism and Islamist extremism could threaten U.S. control of oil and other strategic interests, Israel has played a major role in preventing victories by radical movements, not just in Palestine but in Lebanon and Jordan as well. Israel has kept Syria, with its radical nationalist government once allied with the Soviet Union, in check, and the Israeli air force is predominant throughout the region.

Israel's frequent wars facilitate battlefield testing of U.S. weapons and Israel's arms industry has provided weapons and munitions for governments and opposition movements supported by the United States. Moreover, during the 1980s, Israel served as a conduit for U.S. arms to governments and movements too unpopular in the United States to receive overt military assistance, including South Africa under the apartheid regime, Iran's Islamic Republic, Guatemala's rightist military juntas, and the Nicaraguan Contras. Israeli military advisers assisted the Contras, the Salvadoran junta, and other movements and governments backed by the United States. The Israeli intelligence agency Mossad has cooperated with the CIA and other U.S. agencies in gathering intelligence and spearheading covert operations. Israel possesses missiles capable of striking targets thousands of miles from its borders and has collaborated with the U.S. military-industrial complex in research and development for new jet fighters and anti-missile defense systems, a relationship that is growing every year. As one Israeli analyst described it during the Iran-Contra scandal, where Israel played a crucial intermediary role, "It's like Israel has become just another federal agency, one that's convenient to use when you want something done quietly." Former U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig once described Israel as the

largest and only unsinkable U.S. aircraft carrier in the world.

One of the most fundamental principles in the theory of international relations is that the most stable military relationship between adversaries (besides disarmament) is strategic parity. Such a relationship provides each opponent with an effective deterrent against the other launching a preemptive attack. If the United States was concerned simply with Israel's security, Washington would maintain Israeli defenses only to a level approximately equal to any combination of Arab armed forces. Instead, leaders of both U.S. political parties have called for insuring qualitative Israeli military *superiority*. When Israel was less dominant militarily, there was less consensus in Washington for backing Israel. The continued high level of U.S. aid to Israel stems less out of concern for Israel's survival than from a desire for Israel to continue its political dominion over the Palestinians and its military dominance of the region.

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Similarly, while Mearsheimer and Walt do not claim that the Israel lobby is monolithic or centrally directed, they fail to emphasize how not all pro-Israel groups support the policies of the Israeli government, particularly its right-wing administrations.

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The enormous amount of military aid received by Israel annually has been cited by Mearsheimer and Walt, among others, as indicative of the power of the Israel lobby. Yet the pattern of this aid merely reflects the importance of Israel to U.S. interests. Immediately following Israel's spectacular victory in the 1967 war, when it demonstrated its military superiority in the region, U.S. aid skyrocketed by 450%. Part of this increase, according to the *New*

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*York Times*, apparently was related to Israel's willingness to provide the United States with examples of new Soviet weapons captured during the war. Following the 1970-71 civil war in Jordan, when Israel exhibited its ability to deter Syrian intervention in support of the uprising against the pro-Western monarchy and thus curb revolutionary movements outside its borders, U.S. aid expanded still further. When Israel further proved its strength in successfully countering a surprisingly strong Arab military assault in October 1973, U.S. military aid burgeoned once again. These aid increases paralleled the British decision to withdraw its forces from areas east of the Suez Canal. Along with the shah of Iran, who also received massive arms and logistical cooperation as a key component of the Nixon Doctrine, Israel emerged as an important allied force in the wake of the British withdrawal.

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This pattern continued when aid shot up yet again in 1977, following the election of the first right-wing Likud government in Israel. Subsequent aid boosts coincided with the fall of the shah and the

ratification of the Camp David Treaty with Egypt. U.S. aid swelled still further soon after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. In 1983 and 1984, when the United States and Israel signed memoranda of understanding on strategic cooperation and military planning and conducted their first joint naval and air military exercises, Israel was rewarded with an additional \$1.5 billion in economic aid and another half billion dollars for the development of a new jet fighter. During and immediately after the Gulf War, U.S. aid strengthened by \$650 million. In the decade following—as concerns arose regarding the threat of terrorist groups, Islamic extremists, and so-called “rogue states”—U.S. aid to Israel grew further still. A peace treaty with Jordan and a series of disengagement agreements with the Palestinians led to still additional arms transfers despite the resulting enhanced security for Israel.

Rather than being a liability, as Mearsheimer and Walt claim, the 1991 Gulf War once again proved Israel to be a strategic asset: Israeli developments in air-to-ground warfare were integrated into allied bombing raids against Iraqi missile sites and other targets; Israeli-designed conformal fuel tanks for F-15 fighter-bombers greatly enhanced their range; Israeli-provided mine plows were utilized during the final assaults on Iraqi positions; Israeli mobile bridges were used by U.S. Marines; Israeli targeting systems and low-altitude warning devices were employed by U.S. helicopters; and Israel developed key components for the widely-used Tomahawk missiles. Israel is also the fifth-largest supplier of high-tech military hardware to the United States. Not surprisingly, U.S. aid to Israel intensified still further in the 1990s, even as military support for Israel's key Arab adversaries plummeted due to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since the Sept. 2001 terrorist attacks, the perception of Israel as a natural ally in President George W. Bush's “war on terror” has cemented the strategic partnership still further, as the Pentagon pre-positions equipment in Israel to enhance military readiness for

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intervention elsewhere in the Middle East. Israel has also been supportive of U.S. military operations in Iraq by helping to train U.S. Special Forces in aggressive counterinsurgency techniques and sending urban warfare specialists to Fort Bragg to instruct assassination squads targeting suspected Iraqi guerrilla leaders. The U.S. civil administration in Iraq, established following the 2003 invasion, was modeled after Israel's civil administration in the occupied Arab territories following the 1967 Israeli invasion. U.S. officers have traveled to Israel and Israeli officers have traveled to Iraq for additional consulting. What's more, Israelis have helped arm and train pro-American Kurdish militias and have assisted U.S. officials in interrogation centers for suspected insurgents under detention near Baghdad. Israeli advisers have shared helpful tips on erecting and operating roadblocks and checkpoints, have provided training in mine-clearing and wall-breaching methods, and have suggested techniques for tracking suspected insurgents using drone aircraft. Israel has also provided aerial surveillance equipment, decoy drones, and armored construction equipment. In return, Israel has reaped ever-greater U.S. support.

In short, the stronger, more aggressive, and more compliant with U.S. interests that Israel has become, the higher the level of aid and strategic cooperation it receives. A militant Israel is seen to advance American interests. Indeed, an Israel in a constant state of war—technologically sophisticated and militarily advanced, yet lacking an independent economy and dependent on the United States—is far more willing to perform tasks unacceptable to other allies than an Israel at peace with its neighbors. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once put it, in reference to Israel's reluctance to make peace, "Israel's obstinacy ... serves the purposes of both our countries best."

In contrast, Washington's Arab allies—still suspicious of U.S. intentions and lacking the Israeli advantages of well-trained armed forces, political stability, technological sophistication, and the ability to mobilize

human and material resources—could never substitute for America's alliance with Israel. Since continued support of Israel—despite its ongoing repression of the Palestinians—has not precluded unprecedented U.S. cooperation with Egypt, Morocco, and the Persian Gulf monarchies, few policymakers have expressed concern that the U.S.-Israeli alliance will interfere with cultivating even closer strategic relationships with authoritarian Arab regimes.

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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.

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In short, though counterproductive in the long-term, U.S. support for the Israeli government is rooted in the same strategic considerations that have led Washington to bolster other governments that violate international legal norms. Indeed, it strains credibility to assume that such an overwhelming bipartisan consensus of lawmakers would knowingly pursue policies they believed to be contrary to the national security interests of the United States. There is plenty of historic precedent, however, for a wide bipartisan consensus of lawmakers myopically pursuing policies which end up hurting U.S. interests. While the Israel lobby certainly contributes to this myopia through its distortions of the historical narrative and the current situation, there are plenty of other cultural, political, and related factors also at work.

As leading Israeli academic and peace activist Jeff Halper observed, "Israel is able to pursue its occupation only because of its willingness to serve Western (mainly U.S.) imperial interests" and has essentially

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become “a handmaiden of American Empire.” In other words, the Israel lobby appears powerful because Israel supports U.S. global interests. By contrast, if Israel had a genuinely leftist government or an anti-imperialist foreign policy, the Israel lobby would not appear to be so powerful.

### The Lobby’s Influence on Policymakers

The Israel lobby appears more powerful than it really is because its agenda normally parallels the interests of those who really hold power in Washington. When its agenda conflicts with those interests, its weakness becomes apparent.

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American presidents are hardly powerless when it comes to pressure by the Israel lobby. Evidence suggests that whenever U.S. presidents have come to the conclusion that policies advocated by the Israel lobby were not in America’s best interests, the administration has generally won. During the Suez Crisis of 1956, just days before the presidential election, President Dwight Eisenhower—fearing a radical backlash in the Arab world if the United States failed to do otherwise—strongly condemned the Israeli/French/British invasion of Egypt. Threatening to end the tax-exempt status for Israeli bonds and related private contributions to Israel, Eisenhower forced the Israeli government to completely withdraw from Egyptian territory within months. Similarly, when Israeli forces invaded southern Lebanon in 1978, advancing as far north as the Litani River, President Jimmy Carter forced Israeli troops back to within a few miles of the border by threatening a

suspension of some U.S. aid. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan successfully defeated a concerted effort by AIPAC to get Congress to block the proposed sale of advanced AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia. Ten years later, the senior President George Bush successfully fought off enormous pressure from AIPAC and delayed a \$10 billion loan guarantee to Israel until after the Israeli election, thereby insuring the defeat of rightist Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who had been stonewalling the peace process much to the chagrin of the Bush administration. In 2004, the current Bush administration successfully pressured Israel to renege on a deal with China to upgrade Harpy surveillance aircraft and forced the ouster of the Israeli Defense Ministry’s director general, Amos Yaron. In short, the Israel lobby hardly has a “stranglehold” on U.S. Middle East policy, as professors Walt and Mearsheimer claim.

Though the U.S. bias in supporting the Israeli government and Washington’s double standards regarding Israeli behavior are undeniable, such official U.S. conduct is not uniquely applicable to Israel. For example, Mearsheimer and Walt correctly observe how Washington’s support for Israel despite its human rights abuses against the Palestinians “makes it look hypocritical when it presses other states to respect human rights,” but there is no mention of the equally hypocritical U.S. support for Saudi Arabia (see *Time to Question the U.S. Role In Saudi Arabia*), Egypt (see *Bombings and Repression in Egypt Underscore Failures in U.S. Anti-Terrorism Strategy*), Oman, Morocco (see *Morocco and Western Sahara*), and other repressive Arab regimes. Similarly, the authors are accurate in observing how “U.S. efforts to limit nuclear proliferation appear equally hypocritical given its willingness to accept Israel’s nuclear arsenal.” But is this any more hypocritical than signing a nuclear cooperation agreement with India or selling sophisticated nuclear-capable fighter-bombers to the Pakistani government in spite of those countries’ nuclear arsenals? (See *Bush*

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Administration Stokes Dangerous Arms Race on Indian Subcontinent.)

The Israel lobby, like most lobbying groups, is most influential when it comes to Congress. Yet Congress only rarely plays a crucial role in the development of foreign policy and, in recent decades, foreign policy has become even more the prerogative of the executive branch. Congress generally plays a reactive role regarding foreign policy.

In any case, it is incorrect to assume that most members of Congress stridently defend the policies of the Israeli government because their careers would be at stake if they did otherwise. Indeed, the majority of the most outspoken congressional champions of the Israeli government are from some of the safest districts in the country and need no support from pro-Israel PACs or Jewish donors in order to be re-elected. For example, my congresswoman, Nancy Pelosi, routinely wins re-election with 80% of the vote and could easily stave off any challenge from the right in her very liberal district. (After more than a decade of communicating with her office on Middle East issues, I am convinced that her hard-line anti-Palestinian position is the result of her anti-Arab racism, not any fear that evenhandedness would harm her chances of re-election.)

Many of the cases frequently cited as evidence of the Israel lobby's power to defeat incumbents who challenge the extent of U.S. support for Israeli policies are not as clear-cut as their proponents make them out to be.

For example, Illinois Republican Congressman Paul Findley was indeed targeted by pro-Israel PACs in his unsuccessful re-election bid in 1982, but he was also targeted by pro-union, pro-environmentalist, pro-feminist, and pro-Democratic PACs. He represented a rural district at a time when farm prices were low and he was the nominee of the incumbent party in the White House in an off-year election. Not surprisingly, several other Republican incumbents from

rural Midwestern districts, who were not targeted by pro-Israel PACs, were also defeated that year.

Similarly, when Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney was defeated in the Democratic primary for renomination in 2002, there were some pro-Israel PACs that contributed to her challenger's campaign. The bulk of her challenger's contributions, however, came from downtown Atlanta business interests and right-wing groups incensed at McKinney's outspoken opposition to the Bush administration on other issues. Georgia is one of the few states that allow crossover voting, and thousands of Republicans in her district voted in the Democratic primary that year, providing the margin for her defeat. In recapturing her seat two years later, McKinney acknowledged the diversity of interests responsible for her failed renomination in 2002. Yet, despite this, some still blame her defeat, like that of Rep. Findley, primarily on the Israel lobby.

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Throughout most of the 1950s and 60s, it was widely assumed in Washington that there could never be diplomatic relations between the United States and communist China because of the supposed power of the pro-Taiwanese "China lobby." Those who raised the possibility of normalized relations were believed to be putting their political careers at risk. (There were even efforts undertaken to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas when he suggested recognizing the reality of the communist government in Beijing.) However, once President Richard Nixon,

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Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and other national security elites realized that it was in America's interest to open up to "Red China," there was little the pro-Taiwan lobbyists could do about it. Similarly, if there ever came a time when those in power in Washington decided that a major shift in policy toward Israel was necessary, they could likely effect such a shift, however the Israel lobby might react.

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Mearsheimer and Walt correctly note the bias in the mainstream media, particularly among leading columnists and other pundits, in its defense of Israeli government policies and U.S. support for such policies. It is unclear, however, whether this bias is any stronger than in other conflict regions or international policy issues in which the U.S. government is heavily invested. During the 1980s, for example, it was extremely rare to read or hear anything positive in the mainstream media about the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Articles documenting that leftist regime's human rights abuses were more prominent than accounts of the far greater human rights abuses by rightist regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador. Today, negative press coverage regarding Cuba and Venezuela outweighs any negative stories regarding pro-U.S. governments with poor human rights records like Colombia and Mexico. Similarly, rarely is there serious critical analysis of the neoliberal model of globalization or the Pentagon's bloated budget, nor are there many positive news stories or

opinion pieces regarding groups challenging corporate greed and militarization.

This is not to say that those who challenge U.S. policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict haven't been subjected to enormous pressure from organized right-wing forces. I have often been on the receiving end of such attacks. As a result of my opposition to U.S. support for the Israeli government's policies of occupation, colonization, and repression, I have been deliberately misquoted, subjected to slander and libel, and been falsely accused of being "anti-Semitic" and "supporting terrorism;" my children have been harassed and my university's administration has been bombarded with calls for my dismissal. I have also had media appearances and speaking engagements cancelled, even by groups generally supportive of the right to dissent. (For example, in 2003, just two weeks prior to its annual meeting at which I had been scheduled to speak on U.S. foreign policy and international law, the State Bar Association of Arizona rescinded its invitation after the president and board received a flurry of emails claiming that I was "anti-Israel." A few years earlier, the Oregon Peace Institute cancelled an invitation for me to speak at a forum in Portland following similar pressure from the campaign of the first district's Democratic nominee for Congress. And a recent peace studies conference at Hofstra University insisted at the last minute on adding a right-wing supporter of the Israeli government to their plenary program in order to counter my scheduled "anti-Israel" presentation, wherein I raised concerns about Washington's role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; at no other plenary session, even those involving other left-leaning speakers on controversial issues, did the organizers at Hofstra insist upon such "balance" from the right.)

It is important to remember, however, that those who challenge U.S. policy anywhere are going to be subjected to intimidation. Recent attacks against U.S. professors specializing in the Middle East and

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criticism of the Middle East Studies Association are very disturbing, but no more disturbing than similar attacks against professors specializing in Latin America and the Latin American Studies Association during the 1980s. Right-wing criticism during the 1960s targeting Southeast Asia scholars was also widespread. In other words, intellectuals with empirical knowledge of any world region who dare challenge the lies and distortions of a given administration relevant to their area of research are going to be subjected to intimidation.

This is not to belittle the exceptional nature of the challenges faced by critics of U.S. support for the Israeli government. Given that Israel is the world's only Jewish state and that some criticism of Israel really *is* rooted in anti-Semitism, organized attacks against those opposing Israeli policies tend to carry more resonance since they involve alleged manifestations of prejudice against a minority group. If a Jewish state were not the focus, many liberals would dismiss such attacks as passé McCarthyism and would not take them seriously. As a result, assaults on critics of Israeli policies have been more successful in limiting open debate, but this gagging censorship effect stems more from ignorance and liberal guilt than from any all-powerful Israel lobby.

A related problem is that progressive movements in the United States have failed to challenge U.S. policy toward Israel and Palestine in an effective manner. For years, many mainstream peace and human rights groups have avoided taking a public position on Israel and Palestine, even while doing exemplary work regarding other injustices. Such prominent liberal groups as the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, National Impact, and Demilitarization for Democracy have refused to include Israel in their otherwise-ambitious lobbying agenda linking arms transfers with respect for human rights.

And groups that do take a progressive position on Israeli-Palestinian issues rarely make it a legislative

priority. For example, Peace Action, the largest and most influential peace organization in the country, routinely endorses House and Senate candidates who take extreme anti-Palestinian positions and defend Israeli occupation policies. Ironically, the group recently posted a link to the Mearsheimer/Walt article on its home webpage. Like many groups on the left, Peace Action is more prone to complain about the power of the Israel lobby and its affiliated PACs than to do serious lobbying on this issue or condition its own PAC contributions on support for a more moderate U.S. policy.

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In any case, it is incorrect to assume that most members of Congress stridently defend the policies of the Israeli government because their careers would be at stake if they did otherwise. Indeed, the majority of the most outspoken congressional champions of the Israeli government are from some of the safest districts in the country and need no support from pro-Israel PACs or Jewish donors in order to be re-elected.

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Meanwhile, some groups that do challenge U.S. policy on this issue have accepted funding from autocratic Arab regimes, thereby damaging their credibility. Some others have taken hard-line positions that not only oppose the Israeli occupation but challenge Israel's very right to exist and are therefore not taken seriously by most policymakers.

In the absence of an effective counter-lobby, the Israel lobby appears more powerful than it really is. In addition, the myth of an all-powerful Israel lobby is so pervasive that it has often scared off progressive funding and organizing that could conceivably

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challenge it. As a result, exaggerating the power of the Israel lobby leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### The Real Lobby: The Military-Industrial Complex

When examining the power of the Israel lobby in negatively influencing U.S. Middle East policy, it is important to recognize the role of other lobbies that have an interest in encouraging the dangerous direction of current U.S. policy. Placing so much emphasis on AIPAC and its allied groups ignores other special interests and ideologies which also play a role in urging U.S. support for the Israeli government.

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It is important to remember, however,  
that those who challenge  
U.S. policy anywhere are  
going to be subjected to intimidation.

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Such allied groups include fundamentalist Christians, who believe that a militarily dominant Israel is necessary for the Second Coming of Christ, but Mearsheimer and Walt mention them only in passing in their article. The authors recount, as an example of the power of the Israel lobby, how—after President Bush’s initial call on Israel to back off from its bloody spring 2002 re-conquest of West Bank cities was rebuffed by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—the administration backed down and threw its support behind the offensive. However, most accounts of President Bush’s backtracking attribute it not primarily to pressure from AIPAC and other Jewish groups but rather to the more than 100,000 emails received by the White House from Christian conservatives defending the Israeli offensive. Indeed, these Christian Zionists exercise a much more influential role in the current administration than do Jewish Zionists. (See *The Influence of the Christian Right on U.S. Middle East Policy*.) During his two presidential election campaigns, George W. Bush was less

dependent on Jewish voters than any modern president, but no president has ever been more beholden to the Christian Right.

Other ideological factors impact U.S.-Israel policy as well. Some older liberals maintain an overly sentimental conception of Israel and are defensive—out of sympathy for a historically oppressed minority and respect for Israel’s democratic institutions—regarding any criticism of the Jewish state. And then there are anti-Arab racists and Islamaphobes who simply hate Palestinians. The American psyche also identifies with a poor embattled Israel, consciously or subconsciously. Both states were founded by European pioneers, both peoples aspired to progressive democratic principles, and both nations’ histories are replete with ethnic cleansing and widespread repression of the indigenous populations.

But the most important special interest pressing for strong U.S. support of the Israeli government is the arms industry. 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 support a weapons-proliferation agenda. This clout is due in part to the sheer size of the Middle East military contracts. It is far easier, for example, for a member of Congress to challenge a \$60 million arms deal to Indonesia than the more than \$2 billion in weapons sent annually to Israel, particularly when so many congressional districts include factories that produce this military hardware.

The arms industry contributes more than \$7 million each election cycle to Congressional campaigns, twice that of pro-Israel groups. In terms of lobbying budgets, the difference is even more profound: Northrop Grumman alone spends seven times as much money in its lobbying efforts annually than does AIPAC and Lockheed Martin outspends AIPAC by a factor of four. Similarly, the lobbying budget of AIPAC is dwarfed by those of General Electric, Raytheon, and

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Boeing and other corporations with substantial military contracts.

Contrary to many predictions, the end of the Cold War and the significant advances in the Middle East peace process in the 1990s did not lessen U.S. military and economic aid to Israel. U.S. aid to Israel is higher now than 30 years ago, when Egypt's massive and well-equipped armed forces threatened war, when Syria's military was expanding rapidly with advanced Soviet weaponry, when armed factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were launching terrorist attacks inside Israel, when Jordan still claimed the West Bank and stationed large numbers of troops along its lengthy border and demarcation line with Israel, and when Iraq was embarking upon an ambitious militarization effort. Today, Israel's borders are far less threatened. Egypt has honored a longstanding peace treaty that established a large demilitarized and internationally monitored buffer zone in the Sinai Peninsula, Syria's military has been severely weakened by the collapse of its Soviet patron, the PLO is supporting the peace process, a peace treaty has achieved full normalized Israeli relations with Jordan, and Iraq's offensive military capabilities have been destroyed by wars, crippling sanctions, internationally monitored disarmament, and U.S. occupation. And yet high levels of military aid to Israel continue.

Noteworthy is the often-repeated insistence by successive administrations and leaders of both political parties that U.S. aid to Israel should be increased or "kept at current levels." If the real objective was providing adequate support for Israeli defense, U.S. officials would instead be focused upon maintaining Israel's security requirements, and aid levels would vary according to those needs. However, Israel's actual defense needs are not Washington's bottom-line concern.

Matti Peled, the late Israeli major general and Knesset member, reported that as far as he could tell, the \$2.2

billion figure of annual U.S. military support of Israel at that time was conjured up "out of thin air." Such a figure, he argued, was far more than necessary to replenish stocks, was not apparently related to any specific security requirements, and had remained relatively constant during the previous several years, reinforcing his impression that "aid to Israel" is little more than a U.S. government subsidy for American munitions manufacturers. This benefit to U.S. defense contractors is multiplied by the fact that every major arms transfer to Israel creates a new demand by Arab states—most paying in petrodollar cash—for additional American weapons to challenge Israel's increased military capacity. Indeed, Israel announced its acceptance of a proposed freeze on arms exports to the Middle East back in 1991, but the Bush and Clinton administrations, under pressure from the defense industry, effectively blocked it.

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There is something quite convenient and discomfortingly familiar about the tendency to blame an allegedly powerful and wealthy group of Jews for the overall direction of an increasingly controversial U.S. policy. Indeed, like exaggerated claims of Jewish power at other times in history, such an explanation absolves the real powerbrokers and assigns blame to convenient scapegoats.

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In 1993, seventy-eight senators wrote President Bill Clinton insisting that the United States send even more military aid to Israel. The lawmakers justified their request by citing massive weapons procurement by Arab states, neglecting to note that 80% of this military hardware was of U.S. origin. If they were really concerned about Israeli security, they

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would have voted to block these arms transfers. Yet this was clearly not their purpose. Even AIPAC did not actively oppose the sale of 72 highly sophisticated F-15E jet fighters to Saudi Arabia in 1992, since the Bush administration offered yet another boost in U.S. weapons transfers to Israel in return for Israeli acquiescence. In many respects, U.S. aid policy serves the interests of both Israel and autocratic pro-Western Arab regimes in that all share an interest in curbing radical nationalism and Islamism and preserving the regional status quo—if necessary, by military force. In addition, for the Israelis, Arab militarism serves as an excuse for continued repression in the occupied territories and resistance to demands for greater territorial compromise. For autocratic Arab leaders, Israeli military power serves as an excuse for their lack of internal democracy and unwillingness to implement badly-needed social and economic reforms. (It is noteworthy that until 1993, the United States refused to even talk with the Palestinians while sending billions of dollars worth of military equipment to autocratic Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf, which took a much harder line toward Israel than did the PLO.) The resulting arms race has been a bonanza for U.S. munitions manufacturers, whose hopes for continued prosperity provide a major explanation for U.S. aid policy.

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The consequences of U.S. policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be tragic, not just for Palestinians and other Arabs, who are the immediate victims of the diplomatic support and largess of American aid to Israel, but ultimately for Israel as well.

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Though Mearsheimer and Walt observe that U.S. foreign aid to Israel comes out to “about \$500 a year for

every Israeli,” they ignore the fact that virtually all of the military assistance goes directly to American arms merchants and the economic aid is barely more than what Israel pays annually for interest on loans from U.S. banks for previous weapons purchases. In other words, ordinary Israelis never see that money. Furthermore, for every dollar of U.S. military aid, Israeli taxpayers are forced to pay two to three dollars to cover personnel, training, and spare parts.

## The Functions of Blaming the Israel Lobby

Columbia University professor Joseph Massad—who regularly endures attacks by the Israel lobby for his defense of Palestinian rights—contends that the attraction of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument is that “it exonerates the United States government from all the responsibility and guilt that it deserves for its policies in the Arab world.” There is something quite convenient and discomfortingly familiar about the tendency to blame an allegedly powerful and wealthy group of Jews for the overall direction of an increasingly controversial U.S. policy. Indeed, like exaggerated claims of Jewish power at other times in history, such an explanation absolves the real power-brokers and assigns blame to convenient scapegoats. This is not to say that Mearsheimer, Walt, or anyone else who expresses concern about the power of the Israel lobby is an anti-Semite, but the way in which this exaggerated view of Jewish power parallels historic anti-Semitism should give us all pause.

Those of us who have lobbied for a more balanced U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have often, but always off-the-record, been told by congressional aides—and sometimes by members of Congress themselves—that they are not to blame for right-wing voting records on Israeli-Palestinian issues because they are the victims of pressure from the Israel lobby. Such claims, however, are frequently disingenuous and self-serving.

For example, in 1991, during a meeting with a prominent staffer of Washington Democratic Senator

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Brock Adams, in which I raised concerns about the senator's hard-line anti-Palestinian voting record, the staffer insisted that the senator took such positions to appease wealthy Jewish campaign contributors. He advised that if I really wanted to change the senator's position, I should work for campaign finance reform. In early 1992, a major sex scandal forced Senator Adams to abandon his re-election bid and any hope of ever again being elected to public office. In his remaining year as a lame-duck senator, however, he continued to vote as strongly as ever in defense of Israeli government policies. In short, Jewish money had little to do with Adams' anti-Palestinian extremism. His aide, like many of his counterparts on Capitol Hill, cynically utilized the age-old anti-Semitic stereotype of "blaming the Jews" rather than acknowledging the right-wing militarist predilections of his boss.

To this day, however, you still hear some peace and human rights activists quoting congressional aides and members of Congress as if these influential and (mostly) wealthy, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant lawmakers were actually helpless, innocent victims of a sinister cabal of rich and powerful Jews. Opposing inhumane Israeli policies is not anti-Semitic, but when those in positions of power utilize an exaggerated claim of Jewish clout in order to divert public attention from their own complicity with unpopular policies, they are indeed flirting with anti-Semitism.

Even more disturbing is the way that blaming the Israel lobby has been used in foreign capitals to get U.S. decision-makers off the hook for America's controversial policies regarding Israel and Palestine. Another prominent professor of international relations, A.F.K. Organski, observes, "The belief that the Jewish lobby ... is very powerful has permitted top U.S. policymakers to use 'Jewish influence' or 'domestic politics' to explain the policies ... that U.S. leaders see as working to U.S. advantage, policies they would pursue regardless of Jewish opinion on the matter." Organski further notes that when Arab

and European leaders have raised concerns about U.S. positions, "U.S. officials need give only a helpless shrug, a regretful sigh, and explain how it is not the administration's fault, but that policymakers must operate within the constraints imposed by powerful domestic pressures molding congressional decisions." My interviews with a half dozen Arab foreign ministers and deputy foreign ministers in recent years have confirmed that U.S. diplomats routinely blame the "Jewish lobby" as a means of diverting blame away from the U.S. government. This cynical excuse has contributed to the frightening rise in recent years of anti-Jewish attitudes in the Arab world.

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The so-called peace process is  
not about peace but about  
imposing a Pax Americana.

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## Conclusion

The consequences of U.S. policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be tragic, not just for Palestinians and other Arabs, who are the immediate victims of the diplomatic support and largess of American aid to Israel, but ultimately for Israel as well. The fates of American client states have often not been positive. Though differing in many respects, Israel could end up like El Salvador or South Vietnam, whose leadership made common cause with U.S. global designs in ways that ultimately led to untold misery and massive destruction. Israeli leaders and their counterparts in many American Zionist organizations have been repeating the historic error of accepting short-term benefits for their people at the risk of compromising long-term security.

It has long been in Washington's interest to maintain a militarily powerful and belligerent Israel dependent on the United States. Real peace could undermine such a relationship. The United States has therefore

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pursued a policy that attempts to bring greater stability to the region while falling short of real peace. Washington wants a Middle East where Israel can serve a proxy role in projecting U.S. military and economic interests. This symbiosis requires suppressing challenges to American-Israeli hegemony within the region.

This also requires suppressing challenges to this policy within the United States and there is no question that the Israel lobby plays an important role in this regard. However, this is primarily an issue of the Israel lobby working at the behest of U.S. foreign policymakers, not U.S. foreign policymakers working at the behest of the Israel lobby.

Unfortunately, Washington's agenda provokes a reaction that all but precludes any kind of stable order that would enhance the long-term national security interests of the United States or Israel, much less peace or justice. U.S. policy has resulted in dividing Israelis from Arabs, although both are Semitic peoples who worship the same God, love the same land, and share a history of subjugation and oppression. The so-called peace process is not about peace but

about imposing a Pax Americana. To blame the current morass in the Middle East on the Israel lobby only exacerbates animosities and plays into the hands of the divide-and-rule tactics of those in Congress and the administration whose primary objective is ultimately not to help Israel but to advance the American Empire.

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*Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and is Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy In Focus project. He is the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism (Common Courage Press, 2003).*

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Israel Lobby," [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01_.html)

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