

Prophets in Their Own Land

How to go from respected academic to anti-Semite—in one simple step

By Michael C. Desch

JOHN MEARSHEIMER and Stephen Walt's *London Review of Books* essay "The Israel Lobby," and the heavily footnoted working-paper version posted on the John F. Kennedy School of Government website, have generated a tsunami of commentary. This is not surprising given their thesis: a small group of Israel's supporters inside and outside of government have a disproportionate influence over American foreign policy toward the Middle East, and this works to the detriment of U.S. security. As with many prophets in their own lands, they have received a much fairer hearing abroad—ironically even in Israel—than they have at home.

Mearsheimer and Walt have impeccable establishment credentials. They are leading international-relations scholars and members of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Mearsheimer, a distinguished professor of political science at the University of Chicago, is a West Point graduate who served in the Air Force before retreating behind ivy-covered walls. Walt will step down this summer after three years as academic dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government—despite much speculation, a move planned long before the furor—but retains the chair at Harvard he assumed after previous positions at Princeton and Chicago.

Both wrote about the Arab-Israeli conflict in fairly conventional terms in their early work and have only recently become concerned with the influence of the Israel lobby on American foreign policy.

In Israel, the debate has been vigorous but balanced. Some Israeli commentators have been critical: a column in the *Jerusalem Post* characterized the piece as a "compendium of every slander and innuendo that's ever been aired about the supposedly pernicious influence of supporters of Israel on US foreign policy." But many Israeli commentators have echoed the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz's* editorial line: "it would be irresponsible to ignore the article's serious and disturbing message." Former Ehud Barak advisor Daniel Levy admitted that the piece was "strong in substance," if "lacking in nuance." *Ha'aretz* columnist Tom Segev carped about the piece but conceded that Mearsheimer and Walt "are also correct in the most important argument in their essay."

To be sure, not all foreign commentators have accepted their argument. But typical of the response in Europe was an editorial in London's *Financial Times* deploring how critics attacked Mearsheimer and Walt rather than engaging their argument. "This," the *FT* lamented, "is a shame and a self-inflicted wound no society built on freedom should allow." Writing from Paris, *International Herald Tribune* columnist William Pfaff dubbed the piece "a responsible document of public importance." British-born historian Tony Judt, himself no stranger to the lobby's wrath, reminded readers of the *New York Times* that a lobby is not a conspiracy. English journalist and historian of Zionism Geoffrey Wheatcroft attributed the more favorable reception of the argument in

Europe to the fact that "on the eastern side of the Atlantic, it has long been recognized that there is an intimate connection between the United States and Israel, in which AIPAC clearly plays a major role." And even in the face of withering criticism, *LRB* editor Mary-Kay Wilmers stood by her decision to publish the piece and rejected the notion that "criticising US foreign policy, or Israel's way of going about influencing it, is anti-Semitic."

One might wonder why the "The Israel Lobby" was published in a British rather than an American magazine. Things began promisingly enough when *The Atlantic Monthly* commissioned Mearsheimer and Walt to write the piece in 2002. After submitting the first draft in May 2004, they worked closely with the editors on the substance and organization. There was some discussion about how big a role the story of the Israel lobby should play, and the authors acceded to *The Atlantic's* request to pare down that part of the argument and submitted the final draft in January 2005. Despite a long letter from the editors outlining their dissatisfaction, Mearsheimer and Walt still aren't sure why *The Atlantic* declined to publish the piece. Whatever the reason, to the magazine's credit someone associated with it played an indirect role in getting the piece published in the *LRB*. It appeared online March 16.

The first significant press coverage came in the *New York Sun*, a neoconservative paper backed by wealthy Israel supporters Conrad Black and Michael

Steinhardt. Reporter Eli Lake wrote the article around an interview he did with white-supremacist David Duke, not normally a regular source for the *Sun*, who not surprisingly claimed “The Israel Lobby” vindicated his long-held anti-Semitic views.

Lake’s colleague Meghan Clyne followed up four days later with an extended interview with Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz, who among other smears insinuated that Walt and Mearsheimer cribbed some of their choicest quotes from neo-Nazi websites. (Most of the *Sun*’s readership likely missed the irony that Dershowitz himself has been accused of this form of plagiarism in his book *The Case for Israel*.) Between the *Sun* and the *Harvard Crimson* arose an almost daily drumbeat of criticism.

These two charges—that “The Israel Lobby” gave aid and comfort to extremists like David Duke and that it parroted material on anti-Semitic websites—quickly made their way into the national media through two articles in the *Washington Post*, one running under the incendiary title “Of Israel, Harvard, and

est.” But Mearsheimer and Walt quote a candid speech that Bush intelligence adviser Philip Zelikow gave on Sept. 10, 2002 in which he said that Iraq was an imminent threat to Israel, not America. It was, he said, “the threat that dare not speak its name,” because it was not a “popular sell.”

On March 24, *The Forward* reported that officials of major Jewish organizations were trying to avoid “a frontal debate with the two scholars, while at the same time seeking indirect ways to rebut and discredit the scholar’s arguments.” These included demands by some Jewish donors to Harvard to distance the university from the piece. (There is no evidence these worked, as the decision to remove Harvard’s logo from the working paper was made with Walt’s approval.) Certain neoconservatives also lobbied financial backers of prominent journals to have Mearsheimer and Walt dropped from their editorial boards. Finally, there were thinly veiled appeals to other Jewish colleagues to exclude Mearsheimer and Walt from conferences and other scholarly activities so as to “leave them marginalized and isolated.” This bare-knuckled

it was having around the world. Colleagues traveling in the Middle East reported that “The Israel Lobby” was the talk of Arab and Muslim elites. I can confirm from a recent trip to Europe that it remains a hot topic of conversation on the Continent.

In fact, the lobby’s efforts to stifle the piece by ignoring it publicly while working behind the scenes to attack Mearsheimer and Walt’s integrity and credibility may already be backfiring. University of Michigan Middle East historian Juan Cole, another scholar who has felt the lobby’s ire, published a defense of Mearsheimer and Walt on Salon.com and is circulating a petition among Middle East specialists calling upon the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations to repudiate the charges of anti-Semitism. The *New York Times*, which initially ignored the piece, broke its silence on April 12 and ran a balanced article on the controversy followed by the long opinion piece by Judt. After weeks of reporting the negative aspects of the story, the *Washington Post* ran a column by Richard Cohen repudiating Eliot Cohen’s charge of anti-Semitism. In *The Nation*, Phil Weiss weighed in with an account that quoted more defenders (full disclosure: including me) than critics of “The Israel Lobby.” Reportedly, there are more pieces in the pipeline that will offer favorable reviews.

But while the political winds may be shifting in America, the Israel lobby continues to constrain discussion of the U.S.-Israel relationship. On the face of it, there’s no good intellectual reason for the differences in the reactions to the piece abroad and at home. Writing in *The New Republic*, Josef Joffe dismissed Mearsheimer and Walt’s critique as “anti-American.” But there is nothing unseemly about studying the influence of small groups of highly motivated and like-minded individuals and organizations upon American policy. After all, concern

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David Duke.” The *Post* also ran an opinion piece by Bush administration Defense Policy Board member Eliot Cohen pointedly entitled, “Yes, It’s Anti-Semitic.” This set the tone for much of the early discussion of the piece in the American media.

Writing in *U.S. News and World Report*, longtime White House insider David Gergen, like Captain Renault in “Casablanca,” professed to be shocked to learn that the Israel lobby is working to “tilt U.S. foreign policy in favor of Israel at the expense of America’s inter-

maneuvering by lobby members shows why most people in the U.S. steer clear of criticizing the U.S.-Israeli relationship publicly.

Despite these efforts to shut off discussion, “The Israel Lobby” ricocheted like a pinball around the Internet. I ran a Google search on the terms “mearsheimer + lobby” on the day the piece came out and have checked its progress daily since then. As of mid-May, it had generated nearly 300,000 hits. While not all of these link to discussions of the piece, this figure gives some sense of the immense impact

that factions “who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, [might be] adverse ... to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community” dates back to James Madison’s famous *Federalist* No. 10. The study of interest-group influence upon American politics has been a staple of American political science in such classic works as Theodore Lowi’s *The End of Liberalism* and E.E. Schattschneider’s *The Semisovereign People*.

If one were to take Mearsheimer and Walt’s description of how the Israel lobby operates and substitute “gun” or “tobacco,” it would hardly be controversial. The National Rifle Association and the rest of the gun lobby routinely engage in behind-the-scenes maneuvering in Washington, D.C., channel financial support to friendly politicians, target those they see as hostile, and disseminate self-serving propaganda to advance their agenda. Few outside that lobby would regard pointing this out as beyond the pale of legitimate debate.

Other critics charge that Mearsheimer and Walt impugn the patriotism of American Jews. But this is a red herring. At no point do Mearsheimer and Walt question anyone’s loyalty. As a nation of immigrants, many of us have multiple loyalties to some extent. The key thing is that we should not pretend that we do not have them. Nor should we deny that on occasion our loyalties conflict. When they do, it is better to confront them directly. The burden of proof ought to be on supporters of Israel, or any other country, to prove that their policies also benefit the United States.

It understandable that Jews and others would be hypersensitive to arguments that suggest a small group is slanting our Mideast policy in the interest of the Jewish state. In the past, anti-Semites have charged Jewish groups with behind-the-scenes scheming and have questioned the loyalty of individual

Jews. Often this was the precursor to disenfranchisement and even murderous persecution, as Mearsheimer and Walt are well aware. But a fair reading of their piece makes clear that the Israel lobby is not a Jewish conspiracy. There are, to be sure, Jews in the Israel lobby, but the Israel lobby is not, at least in Mearsheimer and Walt’s formulation, a strictly Jewish lobby. It is not a monolithic force but rather a loose coalition of like-minded people—Christian Zionists, opportunistic gentile politicians, uncompromising Jewish community

hardly surprising that the topic would not be something they would have much interest in seeing debated.

Moreover, the leadership of the lobby consists in part of gentile politicians such as former CIA Director James Woolsey, former Education Secretary William Bennett, and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, who are strong supporters of Israel for political reasons. Some believe that Israel is a strategic asset, others feel a moral commitment to a fellow democracy that is the haven for survivors of the Holocaust, still others

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leaders, and a reflexively pro-Israel American Jewish community. The problem “The Israel Lobby” highlights is not a cabal of the sort concocted in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* but just another example of good old American interest-group politics run amok.

Indeed, rather than Jews, the largest constituent of the lobby, in terms of raw numbers, are evangelical Christians who embrace Christian Zionism. Adherents of this creed believe that God gave the land of Israel to the Jews through his covenant with Abraham in Genesis and that the re-establishment of the state of Israel will herald the coming of the end of days foretold in the Book of Revelation. It is hard to say precisely how many American gentiles embrace the notion that unquestioning support for Israel has divine sanction, but they number in the tens of millions. Televangelist John Hagee recently teamed up with other prominent evangelical leaders, including Jerry Falwell and Gary Bauer, to inaugurate a Christian Israel lobby to add their voices to the pro-Israel chorus in Washington. Since support for Israel is, by their lights, divinely sanctioned, it is

understand that there are political rewards for supporting the Jewish state.

It is, however, among the leadership of the American Jewish community, particularly in the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, that we find the bulk of the lobby’s leaders. Unfortunately, moderate pro-Israel groups like the Israel Policy Forum and Jewish peace groups like *Brit Tzedek V’Shalom* or Jewish Voice for Peace lack the clout of AIPAC and the Presidents Conference.

A California teenager, Alice Ollstein, recounted her experience with how these organizations inculcate hard-line attitudes among young American Jews in *JewishJournal.com*. While attending AIPAC’s national conference, she encountered a “carefully manufactured atmosphere of fear and urgency” that was “geared toward persuading the audience that another Holocaust is evident ... unless we get them first.”

On March 28, the same day as Israel’s general election, the Jewish Agency staged a mock election among diaspora college students. These young Jewish

voters, the target of much of AIPAC's attention, gave Likud and other rightist parties a great victory. This hypothetical result stood in marked contrast to the outcome in Israel, where the centrist Kadima and dovish Labor parties, running on platforms that promised unilateral withdrawals from occupied Palestinian territory, trounced the parties of the nationalist Right.

Ha'aretz's Bradley Burston has become so disenchanted with hard-line Jewish-American second-guessing of Israeli peace overtures that in a recent column he confessed, "I used to be an American Jew. And then I read Daniel Pipes," the leader of Campus Watch, an organization devoted to purging American universities of Israel-critical sentiments. Admitting that the leadership of the American Jewish community was far more intransigent than most Israelis, former Barak adviser Daniel Levy said, "the pro-Israel position in the United States needs to start approximating more closely just where the debate is in Israel."

As Mearsheimer and Walt note, most of America's six million Jews do not support the Israel lobby's hard-line positions across the board. But on the salience of Israel there is much greater unanimity. According to the American Jewish Committee's 2005 annual survey, 76 percent of respondents said that they felt "very" or "fairly close" to Israel. This broad attachment makes many American Jews eager to tilt U.S. policy in Israel's favor.

Part of the reason is the understandable belief that a Jewish state is their only bulwark against a second Holocaust. In his book *The Holocaust in American Life*, University of Chicago historian Peter Novick traced the increasing prominence of the Holocaust in the identity of American Jews. Writing in *First Things* a few years ago, then *National Review* literary editor David

Klinghoffer confirmed, "for many of us Jews lately, everything and anything is 'remindful of the Holocaust.'" Given this belief, it is not surprising that many American Jews would feel the need to mentally keep "one bag packed" for a hasty departure to Israel.

While religious faith links some Jews to Israel, a lack of faith connects others. As the commitment of many American Jews to Judaism as a faith is waning, some compensate by making support for the state of Israel their "civil religion." "A generation that 'feels Jewish'—often without an accompanying theology or much Jewish education—can embrace the Zionist trinity of peoplehood, history, and homeland," confirms McGill University professor Gil Troy.

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Finally, there seems to be a sense of guilt among some American Jews living in peace and prosperity in the United States that leads them to believe they owe unstinting support to their co-religionists living in greater peril and less opulence in the Middle East. Rather than make literal *aliyah* (ascent to the Holy Land), they content themselves with making political *aliyah* through uncompromising support for the Jewish state. "American (Jews) have this apocalyptic sense of danger in regard to Israel, more than Israeli Jews," Columbia University professor Todd Giltin told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. They therefore "feel a certain guilt that they are American. ... They write the checks, but the Israelis have to fight." One consequence of this, as George Washington University President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg observed, is the "idea, which persists ...

that it was better to keep quiet than to criticize Israel. Doing otherwise, the argument went (and still goes in some places) is no less than giving aid and comfort to Israel's antagonists."

Groups like the Anti-Defamation League and CAMERA and individuals like Alan Dershowitz promised detailed rebuttals of Mearsheimer and Walt's logic and evidence. So far, they have failed to identify any significant errors of fact and interpretation. They are left with impugning the integrity of the authors and the legitimacy of the whole line of inquiry. Dershowitz labels Mearsheimer and Walt "bigots." Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham Foxman characterizes the piece as "conspiratorial anti-Semitic

analysis." Congressman Jerrold Nadler, a staunch supporter of Israel, dismisses it as "a repackaging of old conspiracy theories." *New Republic* publisher Martin Peretz declares it "the labor of obsessives with dark and conspiratorial minds." Even as he conceded much of their argument, columnist Christopher Hitchens found it "smelly" with the odor of anti-Semitism.

Those charges are demonstrably false. In the fall of 1991, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Germany's leading public-opinion specialist, was due to return to the University of Chicago for a faculty appointment when *Commentary* revealed that as a graduate student in Nazi Germany she made anti-Semitic remarks in her dissertation and in the Nazi newspaper *Das Reich*. Noelle-Neumann never denied these charges, and she and her defenders at the university argued that

her comments ought to be seen in the context of the times. Mearsheimer, then chair of the political science department, along with Walt and a few other colleagues, publicly called on Noelle-Neumann to provide a fuller explanation of her behavior along with an unconditional apology for her anti-Semitic comments. This stand is hardly one bigots or anti-Semites are likely to have taken.

And that position was not an aberration. Friends and colleagues understand that Mearsheimer and Walt are acutely aware of the long and painful history of anti-Semitism and in no way intended to give aid and comfort to Israel's enemies. It is not surprising, therefore, that they would rally to the authors' defense. Brandeis University professor Robert Art's reaction was typical: "I have known John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt for over twenty-five years. I consider both good friends and valued colleagues. Neither John nor Steve is anti-Semitic, and both are strong supporters of Israel. It is a cheap shot to call them anti-Semitic and enemies of Israel. As an American Jew, I would never associate with individuals who hold such views."

Despite having no truck with anti-Semitism, Mearsheimer and Walt understood that critics would level that accusation. As Tony Judt recently explained in *Ha'aretz*, the charge of anti-Semitism is "now the only card left" to the Israel lobby to respond to criticism. But this organized tactic of shutting down serious discussion rather than engaging the argument on its merits is illegitimate. As George Orwell reminds us, "If liberty means anything, it means the right to tell people what they don't want to hear." ■

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The recent surge in violence initiated by the Taliban in Afghanistan is almost certainly linked to the withdrawal of U.S. Special Operations troops and their CIA counterparts

from the Afghan border province of Pakhtia earlier this spring. U.S. forces were controlling access to and from adjacent Waziristan inside the Pakistani tribal region, where Osama bin Laden is believed to be hiding and the Taliban is known to be present in considerable strength. The Americans have been replaced by Afghan soldiers whose loyalties are best described as mixed and whose ability to interdict hostile movement is questionable. The withdrawal was part of a shift in resources ordered by the White House to strengthen special-ops units already engaged along the Afghan border with Iran. American-supported separatists inside the Baluchistan region of Iran are in search of evidence of nuclear facilities, but they have also been pursuing their own agenda by staging ambushes of government officials and causing other problems for the local administration. The abrupt and ill-advised shift in resources is reminiscent of the transfer of troops out of Afghanistan in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, which resulted in the initial failure to finish off the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It might also suggest that a phase of more aggressive military action against Iran is about to begin.



The story of the Niger uranium forgeries has largely run out of steam in the United States, but the change of government in Italy means that there will likely be a full-scale investigation

launched in Rome that might actually determine who forged the documents and why. In the latest wrinkle in the case, the Italian media is speculating that at least one Italian company might have received a kickback from the Pentagon both for former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's unswerving support of the White House and for the Niger documents. The reward was a contract to construct the next generation of Marine One helicopters that transport the U.S. president and other high officials. The \$6.1 billion contract for 23 aircraft plus research and development was awarded in January 2005 to AgustaWestland, a company that is wholly owned by Italy's largest arms contractor, Finmeccanica. At that time, the largely state-owned company's deputy chairman, Gianni Castellana, was also a top security adviser to Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. He also reportedly was one of a number of players involved in the transmittal of the Niger documents to Stephen Hadley at the National Security Council, which led to President Bush's famous claim that Iraq was seeking uranium for nuclear weapons. AgustaWestland is the first foreign company to obtain the contract to provide transport for the White House, and it came as a surprise to American helicopter manufacturer Sikorsky, which has supplied presidential helicopters since the 1950s. It also surprised some intelligence analysts, who noted the lack of any due diligence on the contract. AgustaWestland has sold helicopters to countries considered hostile to the United States, including China and Libya, and it has also actively marketed its products in Iran.

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