

***The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy:***  
**Roundtable Review**



Reviewed Works:

**John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt.** *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, September 2007. Hardcover, \$25.00. ISBN: 978-0-374-17772-0.

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When asked to join this H-Diplo roundtable review, I have to admit to having serious second-thoughts. Two reservations occurred immediately. First, what more is there possibly to say about *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*? The attention the book has received has been overwhelming, even at times obsessive. This glut of attention—or more precisely, the ferocious criticism that has dominated the glut of attention—led to my second, and admittedly stronger, reservation. Rarely has a major book, especially one written by esteemed scholars and published by a reputable press, been received so harshly by so many reviewers. Indeed, it is the very nature of the criticism that seems so intimidating. Mearsheimer and Walt have been accused of many things, from sloppy scholarship to analytical simple-mindedness. But more seriously, they have also been accused of anti-Semitism. While some reviewers have been sympathetic, on the whole their “Israel lobby” thesis has not just been criticized, but vilified on a deeply emotional level. Many reviews have been so extraordinarily passionate that future historians will undoubtedly study the book’s reception as much as they will the book itself.

Thus it was with some trepidation that I agreed to review *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*—trepidation, but not really curiosity. I had probably read as many pages of reviews as there are in the book itself, and wondered whether there was any point in agreeing to read and review it. But read it I did; and as I read, I realized the extent to which some critics had wildly distorted the book, its authors, and especially its message. The book I read actually bore little resemblance to the one portrayed by its harshest critics. Using personal, mostly *ad hominem* attacks and scattershot but totally spurious charges of anti-Semitism, some of the most shrill, hysterical reviewers—Jeffrey Goldberg’s recent assessment in *The New Republic* is probably the best (or worst) example—have been guilty of nothing less than character assassination.<sup>1</sup>

So, putting aside all the sound and fury, what does the book actually say? Mearsheimer and Walt present one essential thesis with several component parts. Not all of the parts are completely convincing, and the overall thesis itself is at times stretched to its very limits, but every analytical aspect of *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is plausible and empirically testable. The first half of the book contends that there is a powerful interest group, comprised mainly of American Jews but also conservative Christians and mainstream gentile politicians, that exerts a profound influence on the shaping of U.S. policy towards the Middle East. The book’s first six chapters, which make up the first half, explore the Israel lobby’s membership (for lack of a better word, because as Mearsheimer and Walt rightly point out, the lobby is not a single, tightly controlled organization but a loose affiliation of like-minded individuals and groups) and how they operate. The second half of the book, consisting of five chapters that examine America’s relations with the Middle East, argues that the lobby’s influence on U.S. foreign policy is actually detrimental

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Usual Suspect,” *The New Republic*, 8 October 2007, 40-50. For a similarly hyperbolic review of the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis—as expressed in the earlier *London Review of Books* article rather than the book—see Eliot A. Cohen, “Yes It’s Anti-Semitic,” *Washington Post*, 5 April 5 2006, A23.

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to the American national interest. The lobby, in sum, is powerful, and it uses its power to distract and divert U.S. foreign policy from what it should actually pursue. Overall, Mearsheimer and Walt's thesis is broadly—yet not always completely—convincing.

Just as important, though, given the deeply irresponsible nature of much of the criticism, is what the book does *not* say. Mearsheimer and Walt do not argue that American Jews represent a uniformity of opinion or that they present a monolithic front. Quite the opposite: the Israel lobby, they write, “is not synonymous with American Jewry, and ‘Jewish lobby’ is not an appropriate term... For one thing, there is significant variation among American Jews in their depth of commitment to Israel” (115). Nor do they portray pro-Israel American Jews as operating conspiratorially and secretly manipulating gullible gentiles into pursuing a policy of Jewish dominance. “On the contrary,” they observe, “the organizations and individuals who make up the lobby operate out in the open and in the same way that other interest groups do” (112). Nor do they charge members of the Israel lobby with disloyalty to the United States. Throughout the book, Mearsheimer and Walt are true to their word on all these contentious matters. In short, there is nothing remotely anti-Semitic about the book or its authors.

They are, however, anti-Israel. Part of this approach is justifiable: if they aim to call into question the American-Israeli special relationship, and if that relationship is justified in large measure on moral grounds, Mearsheimer and Walt need to demolish such morality-based justifications. Fair enough. But the effect is also to present a strangely one-sided history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Mearsheimer and Walt rightly point out that the domestic U.S. view of the Middle East is overwhelmingly lop-sided in Israel's favor. But what is needed as a corrective is even-handedness, not a competing lop-sided version of the Arab case. Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments about the influence of the Israel lobby are mostly right, but they undermine them with a tone and analysis that is often overly strident.

What is remarkable about the book's thesis is just how, well, unremarkable it is. Mearsheimer and Walt argue that politically active pro-Israel Americans have dominated debate within the United States to such an extent that they have made it all but impossible for America to be even-handed in the Middle East. For anyone who has followed U.S. politics and foreign policy of the last forty years, even if only in passing, this is not exactly breaking news. The impact of the Israel lobby—and “lobby” is precisely the right word given its similar usage for other foreign policy interest groups, from the anti-Castro Cuba lobby to the infamous China lobby of the early Cold War—pops up in pretty much every book on post-1945 (and especially post-1967) U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. Nor are Mearsheimer and Walt the first to focus exclusively on the Israel lobby itself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The relevant literature is enormous, as Mearsheimer and Walt themselves acknowledge, but a good place to begin is Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000). For a more comprehensive bibliographical list, see Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 359n17, 360n26, 393n2.

But what *is* actually remarkable, even startling, about *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is that it has been written by two preeminent realists of IR (international relations) theory. Realists, especially the more rigorous kind like Mearsheimer and Walt, look suspiciously upon domestic influences—when they bother to look at them at all. They believe in black boxes, billiard balls, and bandwagons, not in the messiness of domestic politics, religious and ethnic identity, and cultural discourse. Mearsheimer's theory of "offensive" realism is particularly emphatic on this point. American politicians and policymakers may occasionally need to bow before the false gods of domestic politics and a virtuous foreign policy. But "[b]ehind closed doors," Mearsheimer writes in his 2001 book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, "the elites who make national security policy speak mostly the language of power, not that of principle, and the United States acts in the international system according to the dictates of realist logic."<sup>3</sup> And although Walt has emphasized the crucial influence of internal politics on the external behavior of revolutionary states,<sup>4</sup> there is nothing currently revolutionary about the United States and its political system, leading adherents of Walt's thesis to assume that it should respond to the normal dictates of realist theory. States, then, maximize power and/or security because of an inherently anarchic international system; states also measure power and/or security in mostly objective terms. Ultimately, non-revolutionary states act in their own best interest and have little time or patience for influences that get in the way of this all-consuming goal.

Yet Mearsheimer and Walt have now produced a detailed exploration of the domestic influence on foreign policy, something more akin to political sociology or anthropology than parsimonious political science. True, recent work in "neoclassical" realist theory links domestic politics to international relations<sup>5</sup>—but this is not what Mearsheimer and Walt are doing here. In fact, according to them, policy on one of the most important regions for U.S. national security policy is being driven by a single domestic constituency. Contrary to most variants of realist theory, then, and certainly contrary to the impressive body of work already produced by both Mearsheimer and Walt, when it comes to the Middle East the biggest state in the international system is motivated not by threat or power or security, or even by ideology, but by short-term, partisan, domestic political calculations. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, domestic politics even prompts American leaders to pursue policies that run *contrary* to what is best for U.S. foreign policy. Support for Israel, they

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<sup>3</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, 51 (October 1998), 144-172; William C. Wohlforth, "Measuring Power—and the Power of Theories," in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, ed. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 250-265; and Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

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argue, is actually counter-productive to American national security. This is not to suggest that *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is necessarily wrong—but it is certainly not an analytical world normally inhabited by hard-headed realists. With this in mind, one hopes that in future work Mearsheimer and Walt will use their vast array of evidence on the Israel lobby to link domestic politics more rigorously to IR theory.

If they do, they will probably need to revisit the issue of whether Americans' steadfast support for Israel is a top-down or bottom-up phenomenon. In other words, is it driven by elite preferences (as pursued by the lobby) or by a more widespread popular sentiment? Mearsheimer and Walt, of course, prioritize a top-down approach, but in doing so they pay insufficient attention to the deeper roots of American support for the idea of "Israel," be it before or after the founding of the official Jewish state in 1948. They note that the phenomenon of Christian Zionism—Christians who support a Jewish state in Israel largely because it purports to fulfill biblical prophecy—dates to the nineteenth century. But a more diffuse, popular identification with Judaism, with the Old Testament, and with "Israel," long predates the ideas of figures like William Blackstone, an evangelical who first led the Christian Zionist movement. The philo-Semitic, Old Testament-loving Puritans who migrated to New England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example, had been persecuted in England not only as political and religious dissenters, but actually as Jews, under anti-Jewish laws, and they saw their mission—their errand into the wilderness—as establishing a New Jerusalem for God's chosen people. This cultural conceit, and others closely related to it, have been remarkably and consistently durable throughout American history. Of course, they do not in themselves automatically account for Americans' support for Israel today; but they do suggest that sympathy for Jews, and especially for an idea of "Israel" as a Jewish homeland and as Jews as a chosen people, rests deeper within the American psyche than Mearsheimer and Walt allow.

To put it differently, and more currently, the media have recently reported the growing influence of an "India lobby," reflecting increased Indian immigration to the United States and India's deepening ties to America due in no small part to its growing role in a globalized economy. According to the *Washington Post*, the fledgling India lobby finds the soaring Israel lobby "downright inspiring," and it is using the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—the notorious, and notoriously powerful, AIPAC—as its model for growth.<sup>6</sup> This has a certain *prima facie* plausibility: India would seem to be well-placed to take its place in American hearts alongside Israel because it shares some of the political attributes that Americans find so morally compelling in Israel, such as a democratic tradition and a constant threat from Islamic terrorism; and strategically, India will be an increasingly important player in world politics and economics. But still, despite these advantages, it is totally inconceivable—at least, to this reviewer—that Indians will attract among Americans

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<sup>6</sup> Mira Kamdar, "Forget the Israel Lobby. The Hill's Next Big Player Is Made in India," *Washington Post*, 30 September 2007, B3. For a more optimistic view of the potential for an Indo-American alliance based in large part on cultural affinity, see R. Nicholas Burns, "America's Strategic Opportunity with India," *Foreign Affairs* 86 (November/December 2007), 145-146.

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the same levels of axiomatic sympathy and empathy that Israelis do. While India shares Israel's attractiveness in some ways, it cannot possibly compare at a deeper, historical, and more emotive level. Thus no matter how effective the India lobby will be at top-down political maneuverings—and there are already signs of its effectiveness—it will never be able to tap into the deep, wide, bottom-up reservoir of sympathy and empathy available to the Israel lobby.

Aside from identifying who makes up the lobby and how they operate, the other chief argument in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is that the lobby not only influences policy, but that it has a pernicious effect. Too often, Mearsheimer and Walt argue, the Israel lobby successfully pressures the White House and Congress to side with Israel when taking a more genuinely neutral, or even oppositional, stance would better suit American interests. This is perhaps even more controversial—and certainly more original—than their more straightforward observation that an Israel lobby exists and wields disproportionate power. They point to many examples, but in separate chapters they highlight the adverse influence the Israel lobby has had in recent years on U.S. policy towards Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and above all Iraq. Their argument has many merits, and some aspects of it—for example, that steadfast U.S. support for Israel increases Arab anger, and thus helps to foment Arab terrorism, against America—are just plain common sense.

But, as with their generally anti-Israeli stance, they occasionally overstate their argument. The case of Iraq—which they charge was the product of pro-Israel neoconservatives motivated primarily by a concern for Israel's security—is probably Mearsheimer and Walt's most important case, but it is also their most problematic. Their basic argument is that: the Iraq War was almost exclusively a neoconservative project; the neoconservatives are a powerful faction of the Israel lobby; therefore, the Iraq War was engineered by the Israel lobby. Leaving aside the fact that many others advocated war without sharing the neoconservatives' attachment to Israel, such as the liberal interventionists and the governments of Great Britain, Spain, and Australia, this line of reasoning prioritizes one aspect of neoconservative thought—identification with Israel—while completely ignoring others—such as a general belief in the power of military force to effect political change, or a belief that justice should be pursued over order—that are surely just as important. The neoconservatives, in other words, aimed to spread democracy even at the barrel of a gun because they believed it served American interests first and foremost. As a weak, rogue state that was run by a brutal dictator, had recklessly destabilized regional security twice in the space of a decade, and had more or less been at war with the United States since the autumn of 1990, Iraq was a perfectly natural target for this worldview. Whether it was wise to focus on Iraq—and here Mearsheimer and Walt are undoubtedly correct that it was not—is a rather different matter. Moreover, the key decision-makers—George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice—approached Iraq with their own priorities, many of which had little to do with Israel. Finally, as Mearsheimer and Walt acknowledge (pp. 233-234), Israeli officials themselves believed Iran posed a more immediate threat than Iraq, and threw their weight behind war with Iraq only after it was clear that the White House had decided upon it. Obviously, then, the White House had

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already decided upon war based on something other than Israeli security. The Israel lobby was certainly part of the story of the war's origins, but it is hardly the only, or even the definitive, part.

Mearsheimer and Walt are nonetheless onto something when they say that unlike its position during the Cold War, Israel is now more of a strategic liability to the United States than an asset. On many grounds, it seems to make little sense to support Israel unconditionally. "It is time," they propose, "for the United States to treat Israel not as a special case but as a normal state, and to deal with it much as it deals with any other country" (341). In many ways, this is sensible advice.

But is Israel in fact a "normal" state? For example, while Mearsheimer and Walt would like U.S. foreign policy to be more cautious and limited in its support for Israel, they also "explicitly endorse [America] coming to Israel's aid if its survival were ever in jeopardy" (18, *passim*). Quite right—but is this not an extraordinarily high bar to set? To get a sense of how unusual Israel's geopolitical position is, try and apply that statement to any other American ally. The simple fact is, the very "survival" of New Zealand or Britain or Egypt is not in any doubt. Perhaps only South Korea faces a similarly existential threat to its very existence, but in that situation it is America's adversary, North Korea, that is totally isolated. Kuwait once faced a similar threat from Iraq, but only to its sovereignty, not its very existence as a people. The absurdly unnecessary, superfluous nature of an explicit U.S. commitment to Canadian or Turkish or Japanese "survival" highlights just how precariously abnormal Israel's position is. Little wonder, then, that Israel overreacts to crises, such as its foolhardy 2006 war in Lebanon. In this geopolitical climate, the absolutely unshakable nature of the American security guarantee to Israel acts as a powerful deterrent to Israel's Arab and Iranian enemies—and being good realists, surely Mearsheimer and Walt realize that this deterrent is essential to peace.<sup>7</sup> Israel may for now be more powerful than its neighbors, but this balance of forces in the Middle East has not always been the case—as illustrated, contrary to the book's claims otherwise, by the 1973 Arab-Israeli war—and will certainly not hold forever. Finally, the peace that some Arab states, such as Egypt and Jordan, have made with Israel was (and continues to be) based mostly on the perception that as long as America strongly supports Israel, it would be futile to wage war.

Yet these points of difference should not detract from the importance of what is fundamentally an excellent, insightful book. Just as Mearsheimer and Walt call on Americans simply to treat Israel as a normal state, reviewers should simply treat *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* as a normal book. It is, as the best scholarship should be, controversial and provocative. But while it is contentious, it is not tendentious. Mearsheimer and Walt have corroborated all their arguments with a wealth of primary and

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<sup>7</sup> Especially when one considers that Walt built his formidable scholarly reputation by arguing that states respond to threat rather than simply to power. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

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secondary sources. If anything, at times their narrative plods along too deliberately because of their tendency to over-substantiate the analysis. One suspects Mearsheimer and Walt have done this deliberately in order to provide as strong a defensive shield as possible against an anticipated—rightly, as it turns out—partisan onslaught. Whatever the motive, the tactic succeeds: while their book is not always convincing, overall it is cogent and persuasive on many of its key points. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* will not be the last word on the subject, but it will stand, for a very long time, as one of the most valuable.