



The War over Israel's INFLUENCE

*Political scientists John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt sparked a firestorm when they raised questions about the power the Israel lobby wields over U.S. foreign policy. Now, in an exclusive **FP Roundtable**, they face off with four distinguished experts of the Middle East over whether the influence of the Israel lobby is ordinary or extraordinary.*

UNRESTRICTED ACCESS

What the Israel lobby wants, it too often gets.

By John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt

America's relationship with Israel is difficult to discuss openly in the United States. In March, we published an article in the *London Review of Books* titled "The Israel Lobby,"

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based on a working paper which we posted on the faculty Web site at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Our goal was to break the taboo and to generate a candid discussion of U.S. support for Israel, because it has far-reaching consequences for Americans and others around the world. What followed was a barrage of responses—some constructive, some not.

Every year, the United States gives Israel a level of support that far exceeds what it provides to other states. Although Israel is now an industrial power with a per-capita GDP roughly equal

to Spain's or South Korea's, it still receives about \$3 billion in U.S. aid each year—that is, roughly \$500 per Israeli citizen. Israel also gets a variety of other special deals and consistent diplomatic support. We believe that this generosity cannot be fully explained on either strategic or moral grounds. Israel may have been a strategic asset during the Cold War, but it is a strategic burden in the war on terror and the broader U.S. effort to deal with rogue states. The moral rationale for unconditional U.S. support is undermined by Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and its unwillingness to offer them a viable state. We believe there is a strong moral case for Israel's existence, but that existence is not at risk. Palestinian extremists and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may dream of wiping Israel “off the map,” but fortunately neither has the ability to make that dream a reality.

The “special relationship” with Israel, we argue, is due largely to the activities of the Israel lobby—a loose coalition of individuals and organizations who openly work to push U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. The lobby is not synonymous with Jewish Americans, because many of them do not support its positions, and some groups that work on Israel's

behalf (Christian evangelicals, for example) are not Jewish. The lobby has no central leadership. It is not a cabal or a conspiracy. These organizations are simply engaged in interest-group politics, a legitimate activity in the American political system. These organizations believe their efforts advance both American and Israeli interests. We do not.

We described how the Israel lobby fosters support within the U.S. Congress and the executive branch, and how it shapes public discourse so that Israel's actions are perceived sympathetically by the American public. Groups in the lobby direct campaign contributions to encourage politicians to adopt pro-Israel positions. They write articles, letters, and op-eds defending Israel's actions, and they go to great lengths to discredit or marginalize anyone who criticizes U.S. support for Israel. The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)

is the lobby's most powerful organization, and it openly touts its influence over U.S. Middle East policy. Prominent politicians from both parties acknowledge AIPAC's power and effectiveness. Former House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt once observed that if AIPAC were not “fighting on a daily basis to strengthen [the relationship], it would not be.”

We also traced the lobby's impact on recent U.S. policies, including the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Neoconservatives inside and outside the Bush administration, as well as leaders of a number of prominent pro-Israel organizations, played key roles in making the case for war. We believe the United States would not have attacked Iraq without their efforts. That said, these groups and individuals did not operate in a vacuum, and they did not lead the country to war by themselves. For instance, the war would probably not have occurred absent

the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which helped convince President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to support it.

With Saddam Hussein removed from power, the Israel lobby is now focusing on Iran, whose government seems determined to acquire nuclear weapons. Despite its own nuclear arsenal and conventional military might,

Israel does not want a nuclear Iran. Yet neither diplomacy nor economic sanctions are likely to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions. Few world leaders favor using force to deal with the problem, except in Israel and the United States. AIPAC and many of the same neoconservatives who advocated attacking Iraq are now among the chief proponents of using military force against Iran.

There is nothing improper about pro-Israel advocates trying to influence the Bush administration. But it is equally legitimate for others to point out that groups like AIPAC and many neoconservatives have a commitment to Israel that shapes their thinking about Iran and other Middle East issues. More important, their perspective is not the last word on what is good for Israel or the United States. In fact, their prescriptions might actually be harmful to both countries. **FP**

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AN UNCIVILIZED ARGUMENT

Claiming that the lobby endangers America is irresponsible and wrong.

By Aaron Friedberg

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt are engaging in a stunning display of intellectual arrogance. From their Olympian perch, the authors, apparently alone, see what is truly in America's national interest. While others cower in silence, they brave accusations of anti-Semitism to speak truth to power. If the American people persist in seeing Israel in a positive light, it is because they have been manipulated and misinformed. Those who advocate policies with which the authors disagree are either unwitting dupes or active agents of a foreign power. In response to their critics, Mearsheimer and

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Walt recently lamented the difficulty of having a "civilized discussion about the role of Israel in American foreign policy." If that is the end they truly seek, they chose a distinctly uncivilized way to begin.

Although the authors say they believe that the United States still has an interest in Israel's well-being, they do their best to demolish any conceivable rationale for continued American support of that country. In their view, Israel has become a strategic liability, provoking Islamist jihadis and stirring anti-Americanism. Morally, Mearsheimer and Walt proclaim, Israel is no better than its adversaries. That is a distorted accounting. Israel is a democracy, and its enemies are authoritarians of various stripes. Although the authors choose to ignore it, there is an obvious moral distinction between combatants who send



suicide bombers to kill civilians and those who target terrorist commanders.

That is not to say that everything Israel does is right or deserving of American support. For more than a decade, Washington has sought to broker a settlement that will lead to Israel's withdrawal to defensible borders from virtually all of the West Bank and Gaza (territories taken, it should be recalled, in a war Israel's neighbors provoked and on which they had previously refused to establish a permanent Palestinian homeland) and create a coexisting Palestinian state. Here the primary obstacle to peace has not been Israeli recalcitrance, but the absence of a Palestinian negotiating partner willing to make agreements and capable of keeping them.

What would the authors have the United States do differently? Cut off support for Israel, apparently. Such a move is unlikely to make Israel more pliant, and it will certainly embolden Israel's enemies and empower the more radical among them who still dream of its destruction. The jihadis who wage war on the West will not be mollified. Instead, they will rightly claim victory and use their success to rally more followers. Whatever the United States gains in popularity by abandoning a friend, it will lose in the more important international currency of respect. For all their tough-minded "realism," Mearsheimer and Walt are surprisingly obtuse about the pitfalls of appeasement.

Mearsheimer and Walt blame the distortion of U.S. policy on "the lobby," which in their previous

writing they deemed worthy of a capital "L." They portray it as an amorphous entity, sometimes indistinguishable from a single organization, AIPAC, and at other times broad enough to include any person or group that seeks to "push U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction." The authors generously noted in an essay in the *London Review of Books* that "not all Jewish-Americans are part of the Lobby, because Israel is not a salient issue for many of them." But their definition is so broad as to capture the great majority of American Jews who do care about Israel. Mearsheimer and Walt say there is "nothing improper" in the lobby's efforts to sway U.S. policy, but they go on to describe its activities in ways that suggest otherwise. The lobby stifles debate, "marginalize[s] anyone who criticizes U.S. support for Israel," and, as they wrote in their original essay, convinces leaders to send young Americans to do "most of the fighting [and] dying" to defeat Israel's enemies. Its members are not merely mistaken, they are guilty of putting the interests of a foreign country above their own.

At a minimum, this is a slanderous and unfalsifiable allegation of treason leveled at individuals whose views on Middle East policy differ from the authors'. At worst, it is an ugly accusation of collective disloyalty, containing the most unsavory of historical echoes. Mearsheimer and Walt have built successful careers out of advocating a rigorous, scientific approach to the study of politics. Sadly, their argument here is not only unscientific, it is inflammatory, irresponsible, and wrong. **FP**

THE MIND-SET MATTERS

Foreign policy is shaped by leaders and events, not lobbies.

By Dennis Ross

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt are troubled by the power and influence of the Israel lobby in Washington. The tone and argument of their essay in this magazine is more reasoned than their original working paper, but it suffers from the same

flawed premise: U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is distorted by this seemingly all-powerful lobby.

According to Mearsheimer and Walt, the Israel lobby is governed by its concern for Israel, not America. They say it drove the United States into a disastrous war in Iraq and is now pushing for a similarly dangerous war against Iran. Mearsheimer and Walt discuss other maladies caused by the lobby, but it's their concern about U.S. policies toward Iraq and Iran that have principally motivated them to "expose" the lobby.

No one questions the propriety of debating our policy choices in Iraq, Iran, or anywhere else. But

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such debates should be based on reality. To say that the Israel lobby is largely responsible for the U.S. invasion of Iraq presumes that elected leaders, their worldviews, and extraordinary events such as those on Sept. 11, 2001, don't matter. Mearsheimer and Walt should know better. Regardless of their position on the war in Iraq, do they seriously doubt that the mind-set of the man sitting in the Oval Office made a big difference? Al Gore was against going to war in 2002 and 2003. Yet, Al Gore was closer to leaders of the "Israel lobby" throughout his career than was President George W. Bush.

The reality is, neither the Israel lobby nor neo-conservatives convinced Bush to go to war. September 11 did. Prior to 9/11, Bush's Iraq policy was one of "smart sanctions"—the containment of the Iraqi regime, not its overthrow. His worldview changed on 9/11. He came to believe that America could not wait to be hit again, and that the threat Saddam Hussein posed was all encompassing. This belief transformed his policies. Although Mearsheimer and Walt now acknowledge that "war would probably not have occurred absent the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks," they still persist in declaring that they "believe the United States would not have attacked Iraq without [the Israel lobby's] efforts." They may want to resolve this contradiction.

Mearsheimer and Walt's thinking on Iran is similarly confused. Do they really believe that only "the lobby" cares about Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons? They say that the United States need not be concerned about Iranian nukes because deterrence will work. This idea ignores the possibility that Iran's going nuclear will trigger others in the Middle East to do the same, and that the prospects of atomic miscalculation could make a nuclear war in the region a real possibility. A nuclear Iran could also fatally undercut the nonproliferation regime, which would make the world more dangerous. The British, French, and Germans—none of whom are anxious for war—understand these realities. That is why they introduced a U.N. Security Council resolution to prevent Iran from going nuclear. It isn't the Israel lobby that is pushing the British, French, and Germans to confront Iran any more than it is the Israel lobby that is driving U.S. policy.

The truth is, the Israel lobby doesn't always get its way. It failed to prevent several major arms sales to Arab nations. It has failed to get the U.S. embassy in Israel moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It failed to prevent the Clinton administration from crafting a peace proposal that would have divided Jerusalem in two. In fact, never in the time that I led the



American negotiations on the Middle East peace process did we take a step because "the lobby" wanted us to. Nor did we shy away from one because "the lobby" opposed it. That is not to say that AIPAC and others have no influence. They do. But they don't distort U.S. policy or undermine American interests. Republican and Democratic presidents alike have consistently believed in a special relationship with Israel because values matter in foreign policy. Policymakers know that, even if Mearsheimer and Walt do not. **FP**

THE COMPLEX TRUTH

Hijacking America's Middle East policy is not so easy.

By Shlomo Ben-Ami

Mearsheimer and Walt's focus on the Israel lobby's influence on America's Middle East policy is grossly overblown. They portray U.S. politicians as being either too incompetent to understand America's national interest, or so undutiful that they would sell it to any pressure group for the sake of political survival. Sentiment and idealism certainly underlie America's commitment to Israel. But so do the shared interests and considerations of realpolitik.

President Richard Nixon, no friend of the Jews, sided with Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War not to protect Israel from Soviet invasion, but to serve America's national interest. Israel was just a pawn in Nixon's great game of the Cold War, and it was thanks to U.S. arms shipments to Israel that America was able to disrupt the Soviet-Egyptian alliance, eventually dismantling Soviet hegemony in the region. Two decades later, according to President George H.W. Bush, "thousands of lobbyists"—presumably many of whom were Jewish—fought his policy, but that did not prevent him from dragging then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to a peace conference in Madrid against his will. Nor did "the lobby" prevent Bush's predecessor, Ronald Reagan, from distancing himself from Israel by officially recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization. And it did not stop President Bill Clinton from offering unconditional sovereignty to the Palestinians on the Temple Mount, the holiest of Jewish sites.

The United States, Mearsheimer and Walt would have us believe, has failed to force Israel to offer the

Palestinians a viable state, and it has consistently backed the Israeli approach to peace negotiations. These uninformed assertions misunderstand America's role. The Palestinians have never really expected America to mediate, but rather to "deliver" Israel. Nor did they ever intend Camp David to be an endgame. They insisted from the start that it was one in a series of summits. That attitude explains why Yasir Arafat never offered counterproposals that would have allowed both sides to advance to a better deal. I was at Camp David with Clinton when he made a last-ditch effort to save the summit through new proposals

on Jerusalem, which I accepted and Arafat turned down—the same way he had rejected Clinton's earlier independent proposal to divide the old city. Mearsheimer and Walt would like us to forget that six months later Clinton returned with an ambitious American plan for peace. In what the Saudi ambassador in Washington would later characterize as a crime against the Palestinian people, Arafat again declined.

Suggesting that the United States would be unconcerned about threatening states such as Iran, Iraq, or Syria were it not closely tied with Israel is absurd.

By ignoring such inconvenient facts, Mearsheimer and Walt fail to appreciate how defining a moment Arafat's rejection of Clinton's peace plan was. Having such an advantageous and all-embracing offer to the Palestinians spurned by Arafat left President George W. Bush no incentive to pursue peace in his own administration. It was Arafat, not the mythological Israel lobby, who caused America's disengagement from the peace process.

The United States should do more to end the humiliation of the Palestinians. But it is preposterous to claim that Israel or the lobby is responsible "in good part" for America's terror problem, as Mearsheimer and Walt claimed in their original article in the *London Review of Books*. The Twin Towers were first attacked in 1993, when Clinton and Yitzhak Rabin were in the middle of promising

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peace talks with Syria, and Israel was engaged in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. Osama bin Laden sent his men to train as suicide pilots in Florida when Israel was negotiating peace with the Palestinians at Camp David. America is hated in the Arab world because of what it is perceived to be (an intrusive power that supports the autocratic rulers of a dysfunctional Arab world), not because its interests and Israel's sometimes coincide.

Mearsheimer and Walt display an abstruse indifference to the complex fabric of America's interests in the Middle East. How, for instance, was the Persian Gulf War to undo the Iraqi occupation

of Kuwait and ensure the flow of oil closely tied with Israel? The current Iraq war may benefit Israel, but it benefits Iran as much or more. Certainly no one would say that it was waged at Iran's bidding? A nuclear Iran is as much a threat to America and its Sunni allies in the Arab world as it is to Israel. Suggesting that the United States would be unconcerned about threatening states such as Iran, Iraq, or Syria were it not closely tied with Israel is absurd. The Israel lobby is certainly effective. But petitioning the government in favor of a given foreign policy is not the same as manufacturing it. **FP**

A DANGEROUS EXEMPTION

Why should the Israel lobby be immune from criticism?

By Zbigniew Brzezinski

Given that the Middle East is currently the central challenge facing America, Professors John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have rendered a public service by initiating a much-needed public debate on the role of the "Israel lobby" in the shaping of U.S. foreign policy.

The participation of ethnic or foreign-supported lobbies in the American policy process is nothing new. In my public life, I have dealt with a number of them. I would rank the Israeli-American, Cuban-American, and Armenian-American lobbies as the most effective in their assertiveness. The Greek- and Taiwanese-American lobbies also rank highly in my book. The Polish-American lobby was at one time influential (Franklin Roosevelt complained about it to Joseph Stalin), and I daresay that before long we will be hearing a lot from the Mexican-, Hindu-, and Chinese-American lobbies as well.

Mearsheimer and Walt are critical of the pro-Israel lobby and of Israel's conduct in a number of historical instances. They are outspoken regarding Israel's prolonged mistreatment of the Palestinians. They are, in brief, generally critical of Israel's policy and, thus, could be labeled as being in some

respects anti-Israel. But an anti-Israel bias is not the same as anti-Semitism. To argue as much is to claim an altogether unique immunity for Israel, untouchable by the kind of criticism that is normally directed at the conduct of states.

Anyone who recalls World War II knows that anti-Semitism is the unbridled and irrational hatred of Jews. The case made by Mearsheimer and Walt did not warrant the hysterical charges of anti-Semitism leveled at them by several academics in self-demeaning attacks published in leading U.S. newspapers. Sadly, some even stooped to McCarthyite accusations of guilt by association, triumphantly citing the endorsement of Mearsheimer and Walt's views by vile, fanatical racists as somehow constituting proof of the authors' anti-Semitism. In contrast, several of the Israeli reactions to the Mearsheimer and Walt article were quite measured and free of such mudslinging.

I do not feel qualified to judge the historical parts of their argument. But several of the current themes that emerge from their thinking strike me as quite pertinent. Mearsheimer and Walt adduce a great deal of factual evidence that over the years Israel has been the beneficiary of privileged—indeed, highly preferential—financial assistance, out of all proportion to what the United States extends to any other country. The massive aid to Israel is in effect a huge entitlement that enriches the relatively prosperous Israelis at the cost of the

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American taxpayer. Money being fungible, that aid also pays for the very settlements that America opposes and that impede the peace process.

The foregoing is related to the shift, over the past quarter of a century, of U.S. policy in the Middle East from relative impartiality (which produced the Camp David agreement), to increasing partiality in favor of Israel, to essentially the adoption of the Israeli perspective on the Israeli-Arab conflict. During the last decade, in fact, some U.S. officials recruited from AIPAC or from pro-Israel research institutions were influential in favoring the Israeli preference for vagueness regarding the final shape of any peace accord, thereby contributing to the protracted passivity of the United States regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, Arab Americans by and large have been excluded from serious participation in the U.S. policy process.

Finally, Mearsheimer and Walt also provide food for thought regarding the consequences of the growing role of lobbies in American foreign policy, given the increased inclination of the U.S. Congress to become engaged in legislating foreign policy. With members of congress involved in continuous electoral fundraising, the effect has been an increase in the influence of lobbies and, particularly, those that take part in targeted political fundraising. It is probably not an accident that the most effective lobbies are also the ones that have been the most endowed. Whether that produces the best definition of the American national interest in the Middle East or elsewhere is open to question, and worthy of serious debate.

Of course, stifling such debate is in the interest of those who have done well in the absence of it. Hence the outraged reaction from some to Mearsheimer and Walt. **FP**

MEARSHEIMER AND WALT RESPOND:

We are grateful to Zbigniew Brzezinski for his incisive defense of our article. But one point of clarification is necessary. Brzezinski says that we might be called “in some respects anti-Israel.” To be clear, although we are critical of some Israeli policies, we categorically support Israel’s existence. But we believe the lobby’s influence harms U.S. and Israeli interests.

Regrettably, Aaron Friedberg’s comments demonstrate why it is difficult to have a candid discussion of America’s intimate relationship with Israel. He accuses us of a “stunning display of intellectual arrogance,” then labels our arguments “inflammatory,” “distinctly uncivilized,” “irresponsible,” and “slandorous.” He even invokes the now-familiar charge of anti-Semitism, by hinting that our article contains “the most unsavory of historical echoes.” But he provides no evidence to support these charges. Friedberg does not challenge our claim that AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations exert a marked influence on U.S. Middle East policy. Instead, he invents arguments that we do not make, claiming, for example, that we accuse Israel’s supporters of “treason.” We make no such charge and never would. Friedberg and other supporters of Israel advocate policies that they think will benefit both the United States

and Israel. That is neither improper nor illegitimate. But we believe the policies they advocate sometimes clash with U.S. national security interests, and that their feelings for Israel sometimes color their views of U.S. policy.

To their credit, Dennis Ross and Shlomo Ben-Ami focus on what we actually wrote. Both argue that the lobby does not significantly distort America’s Middle East policy. Ross says that we see the lobby as “all powerful,” while Ben-Ami describes our portrayal of its influence as “grossly overblown,” referring to the lobby at one point as “mythological.” America’s unconditional support for Israel reflects, in Ben-Ami’s words, “shared interests” and, in Ross’s view, common “values.” This argument is familiar but unconvincing. We never said the Israel lobby was “all powerful,” but anyone familiar with U.S. Middle East policy knows that the lobby wields great influence. Former President Bill Clinton, for instance, described AIPAC as “better than anyone else lobbying in this town.” Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called it “the most effective general interest group ... across the entire planet.” And former Democratic Sen. Ernest Hollings noted upon leaving office, “You can’t have an Israeli policy other than what AIPAC gives you around here.”

These comments aside, one way to gauge the lobby's impact is to consider what America's Middle East policy would look like if the lobby were weaker. To begin with, the United States would have used its leverage to keep Israel from building settlements in the occupied territories. Every American president since Lyndon Johnson has opposed building settlements, projects that many Israelis now acknowledge were a tragic mistake. But no U.S. president was willing to pay the political price required to stop them. Instead, as Brzezinski notes, the United States has subsidized a policy that directly undermines the prospects for peace. Opposing Israeli expansionism would also align U.S. policy with its expressed commitment to human rights

offered their own plan for a final settlement and conditioned U.S. aid on Israel's willingness to accommodate U.S. policies. Ben-Ami understands this point, since he recently wrote that Presidents Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush "managed eventually to produce meaningful breakthroughs on the way to an Arab-Israeli peace" because they were "not especially sensitive or attentive to Jewish voices and lobbies" and were "ready to confront Israel head on and overlook the sensibilities of her friends in America."

If the lobby had as little influence as our critics claim, the 2003 invasion of Iraq would have been much less likely. Ross thinks there is a contradiction between our twin claims that the lobby's influence



and national self-determination. If the Palestinians had spent the past 40 years treating Israelis as they have been treated, American Jews would be outraged and would rightly demand that the United States use its power to stop it. Ross's claim that common "values" lie at the heart of the special relationship is convincing only if one endorses Israel's treatment of its Arab citizens and its Palestinian subjects.

Absent the lobby, the United States would have adopted a more independent approach toward the peace process, rather than acting as "Israel's lawyer," to quote Ross's former deputy, Aaron Miller. American leaders would have

was "critical" in the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and that September 11 was also a determining factor. There is no contradiction. Each was a necessary, but not in itself sufficient, condition for war. The neo-conservatives' campaign for war is well documented by journalists such as James Bamford, George Packer, and James Risen. It was backed by AIPAC and other hard-line, pro-Israel organizations. September 11 was obviously important, but Saddam Hussein had no connection to it. Still, then Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and other neo-conservatives were quick to link the two. They portrayed Saddam's overthrow as critical to winning the

war on terror, when, in reality, September 11 was merely the pretext for a war they had long sought.

It is also worth noting that if the lobby were less powerful, the current U.S. policy toward Iran would be more flexible and effective. The United States would still worry about Iran's nuclear ambitions, but it would not be trying to overthrow the regime or contemplating preventive war, and it would be more likely to engage Tehran directly. The United States learned to live with a nuclear China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and even North Korea. Iran is treated differently not because it threatens America, but as President Bush has said, because it threatens Israel. Ironically, Iranian extremism might have been tempered if the lobby mattered less. Iran has sought better relations with Washington on several occasions, and it helped us go after al Qaeda following September 11. But these overtures were rejected, in part because AIPAC and the neoconservatives oppose any opening to Tehran. U.S. intransigence has merely strengthened Iran's hardliners, making a difficult situation worse. In this case, as in others, the lobby's efforts have jeopardized both American and Israeli interests.

We agree with our critics that U.S. relations with several Arab states are a key source of anti-American extremism, but backing Israel at the expense of the Palestinians makes this problem much worse. Ben-Ami argues that anti-Americanism in the Middle East stems from support for "dysfunctional" Arab autocracies, and that Arafat alone is to blame for the failure of the peace process. In this reading, Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, and Washington's unflinching support for it, has nothing to do with America's deteriorating image in the region. But that is not what a number of objective studies of Arab public opinion have shown. As former Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman recently noted, "al Qaeda's strategic interests are advanced by the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Arab and in other Muslim countries whose cooperation we need ... judgments about American intentions are disproportionately a function of their people's views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

We agree that U.S. relations with several Arab states are a key source of anti-American extremism, but backing Israel makes this problem much worse.

Ben-Ami claims that Arafat's supposed rejection of Clinton's peace plan "caused America's disengagement from the peace process." Yet, in a recent discussion of the July 2000 Camp David summit, Ben-Ami admitted that "if I were a Palestinian, I would have rejected Camp David as well." More important, the historical record shows that Arafat did not reject Clinton's December 2000 proposal. The White House announced on Jan. 3, 2001, that "both sides have now accepted the President's ideas with some reservations," a fact Clinton confirmed in a speech to the Israel Policy Forum four days later. Negotiations continued until late January 2001, when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, not Arafat, broke off the talks. Barak's successor, Ariel Sharon, refused to resume the negotiations, and with the lobby's backing, he eventually persuaded President George W. Bush to support

Israel's attempt to impose a unilateral solution that would keep large parts of the West Bank under Israeli control.

Arafat was a deeply flawed leader who made many mistakes. But Israeli and American policymakers are at least as responsible for the failure of the Oslo peace process. If Arafat was the chief obstacle to peace, why has the United States done so little to help Mahmoud Abbas,

his democratically elected successor? Here, again, pressure from the lobby helped persuade Washington to pursue a counterproductive policy. Abbas has renounced terrorism, recognized Israel, and repeatedly sought to negotiate a final settlement. But his efforts have been spurned by Israel and the United States alike, thus undermining Abbas's authority and popularity. The result? An electoral victory for Hamas that has left everybody worse off.

The challenges facing U.S. Middle East policy defy easy solution, and we do not claim that a more balanced relationship with Israel is the key to resolving all of them. But these problems will not be properly addressed if the lobby continues to enjoy disproportionate political influence, and if Americans cannot debate these questions freely and dispassionately. **FP**



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