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# Breaking The Taboo: Why We Took On The Israel Lobby

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Why did your article "The Israel Lobby," which was published in the London Review of Books in 2006, provoke such heated discussion around the world? James Traub wrote in The New York Times Magazine: " 'The Israel Lobby' slammed into the opinion-making world with a Category 5 force." How would you describe the reaction?

The article received enormous attention because it challenged what had become a taboo issue in mainstream foreign policy circles, namely the impact of the Israel lobby on U.S. Middle East policy. We did not question Israel's legitimacy and explicitly stated that the United States should come to Israel's aid if its survival is at risk, but we did argue that pro-Israel groups in the United States were encouraging policies that were ultimately not in America's national interest. Although the views we expressed are often discussed openly in other democracies -- including Israel itself -- they have rarely been set forth in detail by mainstream figures in the United States. The article was also of great interest to many readers because it has become increasingly obvious that U.S. Middle East policy has gone badly awry. Although a number of groups and individuals either mischaracterized our views or attacked us personally, many other readers agreed that such an examination of the lobby's role was long overdue.

Why did you feel the need to follow up the article with your book "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy"? What more is there to say?

Writing a book provided an opportunity to present a more nuanced and complete statement of our views, and also allowed us to address some of the responses to the original article. Although the article was long by magazine standards, space limitations forced us to omit

several key issues and to deal with other topics more briefly than we would have liked. Events like the 2006 Lebanon war had not occurred when the article was published, and additional information about other episodes -- such as the U.S. decision to invade Iraq -- had since come to light. Thus, writing a book allowed us to refine our analysis and bring it up to date.

In particular, the book presents a more detailed definition of the lobby, an extended discussion of its development and rightward drift over time, an examination of the role of the so-called Christian Zionists, and an analysis of the controversial issue of "dual loyalty." We also offer a more detailed description of the various strategies that groups in the lobby use to advance their goals within the U.S. political system. The book also addresses the widespread belief -- as illustrated by Michael Moore's documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11" -- that oil companies are the real driving force behind America's Middle East policy, and explains why this view is incorrect.

Finally, our original article did not offer much in the way of positive prescriptions, but the book outlines a new approach to U.S. Middle East policy that would better serve U.S. interests and, in our view, be better for Israel as well. To that end, it also identifies how the influence of the lobby might become more constructive, for the good of both countries.

What is the extent of American financial, diplomatic, and military aid to Israel, and how does it compare with other states'?

Israel is the largest recipient of U.S. economic and military assistance, having received more than \$154 billion in U.S. aid since its creation in 1948, and it currently receives roughly \$3 billion in direct U.S. assistance every year, even though it is now a prosperous country. The United States also consistently gives Israel diplomatic support, and consistently comes to its aid in wartime, as it did during the 2006 war in Lebanon. Most important, U.S. support for Israel is largely unconditional: Israel receives generous American assistance even when it takes actions that the U.S. government believes are wrong, such as building settlements in the Occupied Territories. As former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin once remarked, U.S. backing for Israel is "beyond compare in modern history."

Isn't America's special relationship with Israel based on strong strategic and moral arguments? Isn't it important for the United States to have an ally that shares our values in a region dominated by extremism and enemies of America?

Israel is not the strategic asset to the United States that many claim. Israel may have been a strategic asset during the Cold War, but it has become a growing liability now that the Cold War is over. Unconditional support for Israel has reinforced anti-Americanism around the world, helped fuel America's terrorism problem, and strained relations with other key allies in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The United States derives some tangible strategic benefits from its close security partnership with Israel, but it pays a high price for them. On balance, it is more of a liability than an asset.

Similarly, the moral case for unconditional U.S. support is not compelling. Israel is a democracy, but no other democracy gets the same level of support that Israel does -- and so unconditionally. There is a strong moral case for Israel's existence, which is why we support a Jewish state in Palestine and believe the U.S. should come to its aid if its survival is jeopardized. But many of Israel's policies -- especially the continued occupation of the West Bank and its refusal to allow the Palestinians a viable state of their own -- are at odds with key U.S. values. Viewed objectively, the early Zionists' behavior during the founding of the Jewish state and Israel's later behavior toward the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors undermine the

myth of Israel as victim and the Arabs as aggressors.

The strategic and moral rationales for unconditional U.S. support have grown weaker since the end of the Cold War, yet U.S. support has continued to increase. This anomaly suggests that some other factor is at work.

Why do you focus on Israel and not on other U.S. allies?

We focus on Israel's policies in this book not because we have any animus toward Israel or because we regard its behavior as worse than other states'. Rather, we focus on it because the United States has long focused so much of its financial, diplomatic, and military attention on Israel. Israel is often said to deserve this support because it supposedly acts better than other states do, but we show that this is not the case. It has not acted worse than other states, but neither has it acted significantly better. Regrettably, uncritical U.S. support has led to policies that are harmful to the United States and Israel alike.

If the strategic and moral rationales don't account for the exceptional backing of Israel, what does?

The pro-Israel lobby. The lobby is a loose coalition of individuals and groups that actively works to push American policy in ways that will benefit Israel. It is not a cabal or conspiracy, or a single, hierarchical organization with a central leadership and total unanimity of views. Rather, it is a set of groups and individuals who all favor steadfast U.S. support for Israel but sometimes disagree on certain policy issues. Prominent groups in the lobby include the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL); Christians United for Israel (CUFI), and pro-Israel think tanks like the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Leading individuals in the lobby include the heads of these various organizations, as well as neoconservatives who served in the Bush administration like Elliott Abrams, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, Paul Wolfowitz, and David Wurmser, some of whom are closely associated with hard-line pro-Israel think tanks and conservative politicians in Israel, or Christian Zionists like John Hagee of CUFI and ... Tom DeLay (R-Texas).

Religious and ethnic identity does not define who is part of the lobby, as it includes gentiles as well as Jewish-Americans. It is the political agenda of an individual or a group, not ethnicity or religion, that determines whether they are part of the lobby. Thus, the Israel lobby is not synonymous with American Jewry, and "Jewish lobby" is not an appropriate term for describing the various groups and individuals that work to foster U.S. support for Israel. These groups and individuals sometimes disagree on particular issues but they are united in their belief that the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel should not be substantively questioned. They are not all-powerful and they do not "control" U.S. foreign policy. Rather, they form a powerful special interest group, which over time has acquired considerable influence over U.S. policy in the Middle East.

What are the strategies the lobby uses to influence the policymaking process and public discourse about Israel and its relationship with the United States?

The Israel lobby uses the same basic strategies that other interest groups employ. It pushes its agenda in Congress by supporting friendly candidates and legislators with votes and campaign money and by helping to frame legislation; by getting sympathetic individuals

appointed to key policy positions in the executive branch; by monitoring the media and pressuring news organizations to offer favorable coverage; and by writing articles, books, and op-eds designed to move public opinion in directions they favor. These various strategies are as American as apple pie, and there is nothing illegitimate about them. Yet it ought to be equally legitimate to examine and discuss how the Israel lobby works to push its agenda in government, and to debate whether its influence is beneficial, the same way that one might examine other interest groups like the gun lobby, the farm lobby, the pharmaceutical lobby, the energy lobby, and other ethnic lobbies (e.g., Cuban-Americans, Indian-Americans, Armenian-Americans, etc.).

Do you think the Israel lobby's tactics sometimes go beyond acceptable interest-group politics?

Unfortunately, yes. Although most of the lobby's tactics are legitimate forms of political participation, some groups and individuals in the lobby also try to silence or marginalize opponents and critics by smearing them as anti-Semites or self-hating Jews. This sort of response was evident in the personal attacks directed at Jimmy Carter for writing a controversial book about Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories, and in the efforts of the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League to prevent the historian Tony Judt from giving a lecture on the Israel lobby to a group in New York City. True anti-Semitism is loathsome and should be firmly opposed, but using this sort of accusation to silence or marginalize critics is antithetical to the principles of free speech and open debate on which democracy depends.

Why is it so difficult to talk about the role of the Israel lobby?

Primarily because of the many centuries of anti-Semitism in the Christian West, which culminated in the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. Given this long history of sometimes violent persecution, Jewish Americans (and many gentiles) are understandably sensitive to any argument that is critical of Israel or of the political influence of groups in which Jews are central participants. This sensitivity is compounded by the memory of bizarre conspiracy theories of the sort laid out in "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a notorious anti-Semitic tract that was discredited long ago. Such paranoid views remain a staple of neo-Nazis and other fringe groups, however, which reinforces Jewish sensitivities even more. Given this history, some people are likely to suspect that anyone who criticizes Israel is in fact questioning its right to exist, or that anyone who examines the political influence of the Israel lobby is questioning the loyalty of pro-Israel individuals or accusing them of some sort of illegitimate activity. We explicitly reject these anti-Semitic notions, but given past experience, we understand why it is easier to talk about the influence of other special interest groups than it is to talk about the Israel lobby.

What is the lobby's impact on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East?

In Part II of the book, we show how the lobby has encouraged the United States to take Israel's side in its long struggle with the Palestinians, and made it more difficult for the United States to help bring this conflict to a close. The lobby -- and especially the neoconservatives within it -- also played a key role in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, although other factors (such as the September 11 attacks) were also critical in making the decision for war. The lobby has successfully pressed the Bush administration to adopt a more confrontational stance toward Syria and Iran, and encouraged it to back Israel to the hilt during the 2006 war in Lebanon.

Why are these policies not in America's national interest?

Backing Israel's harsh treatment of the Palestinians has reinforced anti-Americanism around the world and almost certainly helped terrorists recruit new followers. U.S. and Israeli policy also led directly to Hamas' growing popularity and its victory in the Palestinian elections, which made a difficult situation worse and a long-term peace settlement even more elusive. The Iraq war is a strategic disaster that has damaged America's standing and strengthened Iran's regional position, and now provides other terrorists with an ideal training ground. The Lebanon war enhanced Hezbollah's position, weakened the pro-American Siniora government in Beirut, and further tarnished America's image throughout the region. A hard-line approach to Iran helped bring President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power but failed to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions, and threatening Syria led Damascus to stop helping the United States against al Qaeda. None of these developments has been good for the United States.

What is the impact on Israel's long-term interests?

U.S. aid has indirectly subsidized Israel's attempt to colonize the Occupied Territories, a policy that many Israelis now see as a strategic and moral disaster. Yet the lobby has made it effectively impossible for Washington to convince the Israeli government to abandon this misguided policy. The lobby's influence has also made it harder for the United States to persuade Israel to seize opportunities -- such as a peace treaty with Syria, the 2002 Saudi peace initiative, or full and complete implementation of the Oslo agreements -- that would have saved Israeli lives and shrunk the number of enemies it still faces. The invasion of Iraq -- which Israel and the lobby both supported -- turned out to be a major boon for Iran, the country many Israelis fear most. And by pressing Congress and the Bush administration to back Israel's ill-conceived response to Hezbollah in the summer of 2006, the lobby unwittingly facilitated a policy that damaged Israel significantly.

Do you think the upcoming 2008 presidential campaign will provide a chance for the Israel lobby's influence to be discussed?

Regrettably, no. The candidates will undoubtedly disagree on a wide array of domestic and foreign-policy issues: health care, education, taxes, the environment, what to do in Iraq, how to deal with a rising China, etc. But the one issue on which there will be virtually no debate is the question of whether the United States should continue to give Israel unconditional backing. Even though almost everyone recognizes that U.S. Middle East policy is a disaster, no serious candidate is going to suggest anything other than steadfast and largely unconditional support for Israel. Indeed, all the major candidates (Clinton, Edwards, McCain, Obama, Romney, etc.) have already expressed their strong and uncritical backing for Israel, even though the campaign is just getting underway. Not only is this situation bad for the United States, it is also not good for Israel. The United States would be a better ally if its

leaders could make support for Israel more conditional and if they could give their Israeli counterparts more candid and critical advice without facing a backlash from the Israel lobby.

What in your view should the U.S.-Israel relationship look like? What should the lobby's role be?

The United States has three strategic interests in the Middle East: maintaining the flow of Persian Gulf oil to world markets, discouraging the spread of WMD, and reducing anti-American terrorism from this region. It is also committed to Israel's survival, but on moral rather than strategic grounds. Instead of garrisoning the region with its own troops or attempting to transform the entire region, the United States should act as an "offshore balancer." The United States does not need to control the Middle East itself; it merely needs to prevent any hostile power(s) from controlling the region. To do that, Washington should strive to maintain a balance of power in the region and intervene with its own forces only when local actors cannot uphold the balance themselves, as it did when it liberated Kuwait in 1991.

As part of this strategy, the United States would begin to treat Israel like a normal state, rather than as the 51st state. Israel is nearly 60 years old, increasingly prosperous, and now officially recognized by the vast majority of the world's nations. The United States should deal with it as it does with other democracies: backing Israel when its policies are consistent with U.S. interests, but opposing it when they are not. And the United States should use its considerable leverage to fashion a durable two-state solution, as it is the only outcome that is consistent with U.S. values and with the long-term interests of both America and Israel.

Achieving this shift will require overcoming the opposition from the most powerful groups in the lobby, like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents. This goal can be achieved if there is a more open debate about the lobby's role in shaping U.S. policy, more widespread awareness of Israel's history and behavior, and a candid discussion within America's pro-Israel community. Instead of trying to weaken or counter the lobby, one may hope that moderate pro-Israel organizations will become more influential, and that the leading organizations realize that the hard-line positions they have espoused in the past have been counterproductive. If these groups can bring their impressive influence to bear in more constructive ways, U.S. policy will be more in line with its national interests, and better for Israel too.

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