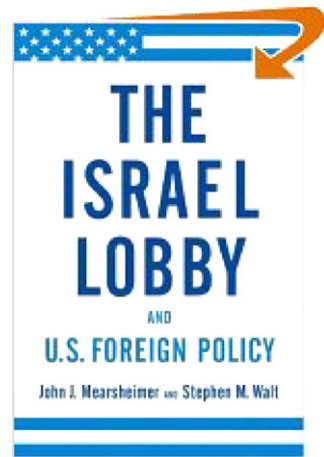

Review Essays

The 'Israel Lobby': A Realistic Assessment by Ben Fishman

Ben Fishman is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at The George Washington University and a research associate at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. An abbreviated version of this article appeared in *The National Interest Online*, August 27, 2007.



When John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt published a paper decrying the influence of the Israel lobby on American foreign policy in March 2006,¹ they received a torrent of criticism from former policymakers, historians, politically-inclined academics, and several of the Jewish organizations

¹This paper refers to the original, fully-sourced paper: John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," Faculty Research Working Paper Series, John F. Kennedy School of Government, March, 2006: Available at: <http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011>. Hereafter, cited as Mearsheimer and Walt (2006). Walt and Mearsheimer also published "an edited and reworked version" of their paper in the *London Review of Books*, March 23, 2006, as well as an updated version of the academic article in *Middle East Policy*, Fall 2006, pp. 29-87.

their paper cited.² The professors maintained that support for Israel damages America's interests in the Middle East, and that the collective activities of Israel's supporters in the United States – the Israel lobby – largely determine American policies in the region. Mearsheimer and Walt adamantly defended their thesis³ and expanded their paper into a bestselling book titled, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*.⁴

The varied reactions to *The Israel Lobby* stem from the number and scope of controversial issues the book addresses: the definition of the Israel lobby; the description of its operations; the argument that Israel is a “strategic liability” to the United States; the depiction of Israel’s “dwindling moral case”; the lobby’s efforts to stifle public criticism of Israel; and, five chapters devoted to allegations of how the lobby has shaped the Bush administration’s policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and the Lebanon War. Although the initial reviews of *The Israel Lobby* have been generally more restrained in tone than the burst of criticism aimed at Mearsheimer and Walt’s earlier paper, critics have widely noted the professors’ biased presentation of history and their uninformed characterization of the policymaking process.⁵

²For responses from policymakers see, for example Aaron Friedberg, “An Uncivilized Argument,” *Foreign Policy*, July-August, 2006; David Gergen, “An Unfair Attack,” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 26, 2006 and Dennis Ross, “The Mind-Set Matters,” *Foreign Policy*, July-August, 2006. Responses from historians include Martin Kramer, “The American Interest,” *Azure*, Fall 2006; Benny Morris, “And Now For Some Facts,” *New Republic* May 8, 2006, pp. 23-29 and Michael B. Oren, “Tinfoil Hats at Harvard Yard,” *The New Republic*, April 10, 2006. Other critiques from academics include, Eliot A. Cohen, “Yes, It’s Anti-Semitic,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2006; Alan Dershowitz, “Debunking the Newest – and Oldest – Jewish Conspiracy,” Harvey Sicherman, “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Working Paper that Does Not Work,” Foreign Policy Research Institute’s *E-Notes*, March 28, 2006. Harvard Responses to KSG Working Papers, April 5, 2006; and Daniel Drezner, “A Follow-up on the Israel Lobby,” March 21, 2006: <http://www.danieldrezner.com/archives/002642.html>; rebuttals from Jewish organizations include “Mearsheimer and Walt’s Anti-Jewish Screech: A Relentless Assault in Scholarly Guise,” *ADL Analysis*, March 24, 2006: http://www.adl.org/Israel/mearsheimer_walt.asp; and “Study Decrying Israel Lobby Marred By Factual Errors,” CAMERA, April 6, 2006: http://www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=7&x_issue=35&x_article=1099.

³See, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Setting the Record Straight: A Response to Critics of ‘The Israel Lobby,’” *America and the Future*, Spring, 2007, pp. 1-31. Available at: http://www.israellobbybook.com/Setting_the_Record_Straight.pdf.

⁴John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, September, 2007).

⁵Reviews that focus on Mearsheimer and Walt’s treatment of history include: Richard Cohen, “Rationalizing Israel Out of Existence,” *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2007; David Remnick, “The Lobby,” *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2007. Those that emphasize the policy-making process include: Leslie H. Gelb, “Dual Loyalties,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2007; “Powerful, but not that powerful,” *The Economist*, September 27, 2007. An exception is Jeffrey Goldberg’s extensive review essay that connects Mearsheimer and Walt to the tradition of Judeocentrism and anti-Semitism. See, Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Usual Suspect,” *The New Republic*, October 10, 2007.

Some reviewers, such as former Secretary of State George Shultz and former Bush administration speechwriter Michael Gerson offered rationalizations for American backing of Israel.⁶

Arguing the merits of the U.S.-Israel relationship is certainly a valid focus, but condemning the alliance is not unique to Mearsheimer and Walt. Rather, what distinguishes *The Israel Lobby* is its claim that advocates and defenders of Israel in the United States shape not just America's close relationship with the Jewish state, but the totality of American foreign policy in the Middle East. Therefore, the standard by which the professors should be judged is whether the evidence in the book about the lobby's actions and the responses by the U.S. government actually supports this purported causal relationship between the lobby and the lobbied. Do the U.S. officials responsible for shaping the policies described by Mearsheimer and Walt even remotely agree with the professors' depiction of the lobby's influence? Had Mearsheimer and Walt conducted any interviews with current or former Bush administration officials, they would have learned that their characterization of events and the role of the Israel lobby differs substantially from those actually engaged in policymaking. Yet the professors have insisted "we felt we already had sufficient information about the lobby's operations," and such interviews "would not have altered our conclusions."⁷

A thorough examination of Mearsheimer and Walt's evidence together with original interviews of key American officials responsible for the policies depicted in the book reveals the lobby's limited role in shaping American foreign policy decisions. To substantiate this challenge, this essay proceeds in four parts. First, it traces the evolution in the authors' views about U.S. policy and highlights the analytical challenges they earlier identified – but later ignored – when trying to substantiate causal claims about the influence of domestic pressure groups on the formation of American foreign policy. After this intellectual history, this essay briefly recaps Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments to replicate precisely their key claims. Third, it examines in detail

⁶ George P. Shultz, "The 'Israel Lobby' Myth," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 9, 2007 and Michael Gerson, "Seeds of Anti-Semitism," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2007.

⁷ Mearsheimer and Walt, "Setting the Record Straight," p. 53. Interestingly, the one interview cited in the book references Flynt Leverett who served on the National Security Council staff in the Bush administration's first term and has since become a frequent critic of the administration's policies. Yet, Mearsheimer and Walt do not quote Leverett's characterizations of the lobby or policymaking; they only reference the circumstances related to his departure from the Brookings Institution. Mearsheimer and Walt (2007), p. 410. Later, Mearsheimer and Walt reference Leverett's book on Syria as providing "much evidence that Israel and the lobby are the main forces behind" the shift in U.S. policy from engagement to isolation, but acknowledge Leverett himself "never explains what accounts for this fluctuation." Since Leverett was the only official the authors chose to interview, it is striking that they did not question him directly on the lobby's role in influencing U.S. policy toward Syria. Or perhaps, he simply provided an answer that did not confirm their views. Mearsheimer and Walt, p. 439.

the primary case that motivated Mearsheimer and Walt's original essay: U.S.-Israel relations from 2001-2002. Of the five case studies presented in *The Israel Lobby*, the chapter devoted to Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is crucial to the book's thesis; if the Israel lobby does not significantly impact U.S. policy toward Israel – the very purpose of its existence – it is unlikely to have a significant influence on the development of policy toward other states in the Middle East. Finally, the essay concludes with a brief survey of the other cases Mearsheimer and Walt cite as evidence of their thesis.

The Origins of 'The Israel Lobby'

Mearsheimer's, and especially Walt's, views on the influence of the pro-Israel lobby have evolved considerably over the last two decades. Walt first addressed the issue in his 1987 dissertation-turned-book, *The Origins of Alliances*, which is required reading for political scientists because of its contribution to theories of balancing. Walt devotes the last substantive chapter of the book to examining the impact of foreign aid and "transnational penetration" on patterns of alliance formation. His assessment of the role of what he then termed "pro-Israeli forces" is instructive not just for its empirical findings, but because it identifies the difficulty in assessing the impact of domestic lobbying groups on the shape of alliance formation in particular and foreign policy behavior in general.⁸

Walt observes that evaluating the impact of lobbying efforts on alliance formation and maintenance is especially challenging "when the alliance in question is the product of several different causes."⁹ Indeed, he continues, "Determining the relative importance of these different factors may be impossible if external circumstances and domestic pressures are reinforcing each other."¹⁰ Differentiating the precise impact of lobbying efforts from other sources of policy decisions thus presents irresolvable analytical challenges when the objectives of such activity are reinforced by other more traditional sources of alliance behavior, such as common threats or cultural affinities. Walt himself thus anticipated one of the primary criticisms his later work with Mearsheimer would encounter because it failed to heed his warning about specifying lobbying as a singular cause of foreign policy behavior when domestic political factors represent only one of many influences on policy decisions.

Not only is it nearly impossible to differentiate particular drivers of American foreign policy, but according to Walt, "how one judges the

⁸ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 251-259.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

importance of domestic lobbies will be determined by one's view of what U.S. foreign policy should be."¹¹ It is not surprising then, that Walt would return to the question of domestic political influences on U.S. foreign policy at a time when he disagreed with the direction the Bush administration was taking in the Middle East. In 1987, he candidly observed, "one cannot easily separate one's vision of what U.S. policy should be from one's assessment of how different factors determined what U.S. policy is."¹² Fast forward to 2007: "although America's problems in the Middle East would not disappear if the lobby were less influential, U.S. leaders would find it easier to explore alternative approaches and be more likely to adopt policies more in line with American interests."¹³ It seems that in 2007 Mearsheimer and Walt's disenchantment over the direction of American foreign policy in the Middle East clouded their ability to distinguish "different factors" affecting American foreign policy and focus only on domestic politics.

Finally, Walt's empirical description of the lobby's limited successes offers a further indication that he was uncertain precisely how to evaluate its influence in 1987. It is worth quoting at length from the evidence he arrays to form his ultimate conclusion:

Of course, pro-Israeli forces are not all-powerful. As already noted, Eisenhower defied domestic pressures on several occasions, and Kennedy sought a rapprochement with Nasser despite domestic opposition. Johnson's support for Israel in the crisis preceding the Six Day War was lukewarm at best, and Nixon, Ford, and Carter all made policy decisions that clashed with the stated preferences of Israel and its supporters in the United States. Pro-Israeli forces have failed in their efforts to obtain a formal alliance between the United States and Israel, were unable to prevent the 1978 sale of F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia, and failed to overturn the 1981 decision to supply Saudi Arabia with AWACS early-warning aircraft and a significant enhancement package for the F-15s. They have also been unable to prevent – at least until recently – military aid and training for Jordan. Although Israel's domestic backers play a key role in preserving the special relationship between the United States and Israel and in restricting presidential options in related areas, *they fall well short of controlling U.S. Middle East policy.*¹⁴

When confronted with the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East and the positions taken by the Israel lobby, Walt clearly cannot come to the same conclusion that he and Mearsheimer arrived at two decades later, that "the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the region is due almost entirely to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹³ Walt and Mearsheimer (2007), p. 336. Their 2006 paper more clearly stated Mearsheimer and Walt's discontent over the lobby's role in distorting American foreign policy: "no lobby has managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the American national interests would otherwise suggest, while simultaneously convincing Americans that U.S. and Israeli interests are essentially identical." Walt and Mearsheimer (2006), p. 1.

¹⁴ Walt (1987), pp. 256-257, emphasis added.

U.S. domestic politics, and especially the activities of the ‘Israel Lobby.’”¹⁵ What changed in the two decades since the publication of *The Origins of Alliances*?

Walt does not seem to have returned to the subject of American support for Israel in his academic work until he published a review of Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in 1997.¹⁶ (Mearsheimer and Walt dedicate *The Israel Lobby* to Huntington). In the article, Walt critiques Huntington for not addressing American support for Israel. Walt recognizes that, “During the Cold War, U.S. support for Israel could be justified on both ideological and strategic grounds.” But according to Walt, if Huntington advocates minimizing civilizational friction, his theory should “prescribe a sharp reduction in Western support for the Jewish state,” because there is no innate cultural bond between the United States and Israel, and the current U.S.-Israel relationship “is a source of tension with the Islamic world.”¹⁷ Walt’s critique of Huntington for not addressing the issue, his suggestion that Huntington avoided the topic in order to “enhance the appeal of his book,”¹⁸ and the proposition that close relations with Israel are no longer strategically beneficial after the Cold War all foreshadow his later views about the detrimental consequences of U.S. support for Israel.

September 11th only reinforced Walt’s conclusion that supporting Israel represented a strategic liability for the United States. In an article he wrote reevaluating American foreign policy priorities, Walt asserted that, “To make it less risky for Arab and Islamic governments to back the U.S. effort and to isolate anti-American extremists within the Islamic world. . . [t]he obvious first step—which the Bush administration has been inching toward—is to take a less one-sided approach to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.”¹⁹ Mearsheimer too had a similar reaction to September 11th. He argued in a 2002 piece for *The National Interest*, that “the United States should adopt policies that ameliorate the rampant anti-Americanism in the Islamic world.”²⁰ Chief among these antagonizing policies is America’s unwavering support for Israel. Without referencing any responsibilities required of the Palestinians, Mearsheimer places the full burden of peace on the Israelis; and, if Israel does not accept a peaceful solution (whose specific parameters remain undefined) and “end its occupation,” Mearsheimer prescribes, “America should cut off economic and diplomatic

¹⁵ Mearsheimer and Walt (2006), p. 1.

¹⁶ Stephen M. Walt, “Building Up New Bogeymen,” *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1997.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Stephen M. Walt, “Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, Winter 2001/2002, p. 70.

²⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, “Hearts and Minds,” *The National Interest*, Fall 2002, pp. 15-16.

support to Israel. In short, the United States either has to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict or distance itself from Israel. Otherwise, the terrorism problem will never go away, and might even get worse.”²¹ Therefore, by 2002, Walt and Mearsheimer separately challenged American support for Israel, suggesting as Walt earlier observed, their “views of what U.S. foreign policy should be” guided their judgment about “the importance of domestic lobbies.”

Mearsheimer and Walt’s focus on domestic lobbies increased further when the United States pursued regime change in Iraq – a policy they publicly opposed in numerous forums. A paid advertisement in *The New York Times* that they signed together with 30 other preeminent international relations scholars laid out the logic behind their opposition to the war: Saddam was a rational actor who could be deterred and an invasion would be enormously costly and require the United States to “occupy and police [Iraq] for many years to create a viable state.”²² In an essay in *Foreign Policy* three months later, Mearsheimer and Walt elaborated on why Saddam’s past behavior indicated he was a rational dictator who did not undertake rash actions with his WMD arsenal because he did not want to threaten the survival of his own regime.²³ When the Bush administration failed to heed the admonitions from the political science community, Mearsheimer and Walt (in spite of Walt’s earlier admonition about the difficulty in separating individual views about foreign policy from the attribution of influence to domestic sources) turned to a singular explanation for why the war proceeded: the powerful Israel lobby.

The Argument in Their Words

The first iteration of Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument about the Israel lobby’s influence on U.S. policy toward the Middle East occurred in Walt’s 2005 book, *Taming American Power*, which contained a 15-page section that anticipated all of the primary issues covered in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, though in a more cautious tone. Walt observed, “The Israel lobby is not the only factor shaping U.S. policy toward this critical region, but it is clearly an important one,” and later, “Domestic political penetration is not the only reason why the United States has done these things [providing Israel with aid and diplomatic backing], but it is far from a trivial element in shaping U.S. policy.”²⁴ Walt’s qualifiers disappeared

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²² The advertisement appeared in *The New York Times* on September 26, 2002. Available at: <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/P0012.pdf>.

²³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003, pp. 51-59.

²⁴ Walt (2005), pp. 208, 210.

in his 2006 essay with Mearsheimer, which stated boldly, “the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the region is due almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics, and especially the activities of the ‘Israel Lobby.’”²⁵ The professors do not include that sentence in their book, but its essence remains in a series of claims about particular areas in which the lobby played a central if not determinative role. They write, the lobby “was the principal driving force behind the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003.”²⁶ Similarly, the Bush administration has failed to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict, “because there has been little change in the balance of power between Bush and the lobby.”²⁷ And on Syria, they state, “absent the lobby, there might already be a peace treaty between Israel and Syria.”²⁸

Overall, Mearsheimer and Walt depict the Israel lobby as manipulating the range of individuals and institutions that constitute the policymaking process in Washington on all issues facing the United States in the Middle East. In two chapters, Mearsheimer and Walt present several mechanisms that allow the Israel lobby to determine America’s Middle East policy. These include: dominating Congress; constraining executive choice through voting behavior and campaign contributions; controlling the foreign policy elite with U.S. officials who have “well-known sympathies for Israel” and ensuring “that people who are seen as critical of Israel do not get important foreign policy jobs;”²⁹ and, “dominating public discourse” by monopolizing op-ed pages and think tanks, and “policing academia.”³⁰

Each of these topics warrants careful scrutiny both regarding the accuracy of their characterizations and the claims about how these various components of the lobby actually impact policy. But it is easier to unravel Mearsheimer and Walt’s case by focusing on the evidence they present to support their assertion about the lobby’s determinative role in shaping American foreign policy toward the Middle East. Absent such illustrative examples, the authors simply present a one-dimensional universe summarized by *The New Yorker*’s David Remnick: “This is not a cabal but a world in which Abraham Foxman gives the signal, Pat Robertson describes his apocalyptic rapture, Charles Krauthammer pumps out a column, Bernard Lewis delivers a lecture—and the President of the United States invades another country. Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Exxon-Mobil barely exist.”³¹

The 2001-2002 period of U.S.-Israel relations is the crucial case supporting Mearsheimer and Walt’s theory both because it motivated their

²⁵ Mearsheimer and Walt (2006), p. 1.

²⁶ Mearsheimer and Walt (2007), p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-196.

³¹ Remnick.

original study and because the lobby should be most effective in shaping policies directly related to Israel's own actions (as opposed to American policies toward Iraq, Iran, and Syria). In this case, as in the remaining cases in the book, Mearsheimer and Walt leave out key factors from their story, selectively employ quotes and facts to support their claims, and ignore substantial information that challenges their theory. A detailed review of this case, supported by interviews with Bush administration officials whom Mearsheimer and Walt do not engage, shatters the assertion from the professors 2006 essay that "Readers may reject our conclusions, of course, but the evidence on which they rest is not controversial."³²

The Crucial Case: U.S.-Israel Relations, 2001-2002

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that the original motivating factor behind Mearsheimer and Walt's efforts to expose the detrimental influence of the Israel lobby was the Iraq war, the actual case that inspired their paper was the development of U.S.-Israel relations in the months following September 11th. In a debate about their 2006 paper, Mearsheimer explained, "Iraq did actually not motivate us to write the piece because we were commissioned to write it by the *Atlantic Monthly* in the Fall of 2002 right before Iraq had heated up as an issue and it was not what motivate[d] us." Rather, he admitted, "What motivated us was events in April of 2002."³³ The events to which Mearsheimer referred were the reentry of the Israel Defense Forces into the cities of the West Bank after a particularly deadly wave of suicide bombings in Israel – a move initially opposed by the United States but eventually accepted tacitly. For Mearsheimer and Walt, this transition from an openly critical position toward Israel to silence to eventual praise for Ariel Sharon resulted from the activities of the Israel lobby.

Mearsheimer and Walt claim that after September 11, "the Bush administration sought to reduce anti-American sentiment in the Arab world by pressing Israel to halt its expansionist policies in the Occupied Territories and by advocating the creation of a Palestinian state."³⁴ However, according to their narrative, the administration not only "was unable to persuade Jerusalem to change its policies," but "ended up backing Israel's hard-line approach toward the Palestinians." They conclude, "The lobby's influence was one of the central reasons for this shift."³⁵

³² Mearsheimer and Walt (2006), p. 2.

³³ "The Israel Lobby Debate," Cooper Union, New York, NY, October 10, 2006. Transcript available at: <http://www.scribemediaweb.org/2006/10/10/transcript-israel-lobby/>.

³⁴ Mearsheimer and Walt (2007): p. 204.

³⁵ Mearsheimer and Walt (2007): p. 204. In 2006, they phrased their conclusion slightly differently: "The main reason for this switch is the Lobby." Mearsheimer and Walt (2006): p. 27.

Mearsheimer and Walt highlight two distinct periods when the Bush administration attempted to curb Israeli actions with respect to the Palestinians: the fall of 2001 (loosely defined) and April 2002. In the first case, they contend, “President Bush began pushing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to show restraint in the Occupied Territories and do everything possible to contain the violence of the Second Intifada.”³⁶ Bush pressed Sharon to allow a meeting between Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres and Yasir Arafat and publicly supported the creation of an independent Palestinian state. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, the combination of these steps by the administration led Sharon to compare Bush to Neville Chamberlain at Munich, warning the American president not “to appease the Arabs at our expense.” By December, however, relations between Sharon and Bush had mended as a result of efforts by Israeli officials and members of the Israel lobby to equate Arafat and Palestinian terrorism with bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Because of a declining “perceived need for Arab support in dealing with al Qaeda” after initial successes in Afghanistan, and “the lobby’s efforts,” pressure on Israel abated.³⁷

According to Mearsheimer and Walt, tensions reemerged between Israel and the Bush administration in April 2002 after the initiation of Operation Defensive Shield that returned Israel’s military into the Palestinian cities from which it had withdrawn during the Oslo period. Without fully contextualizing the Israeli military activity, (they cite the Passover bombing that triggered the operation but not the numerous bombings before and after that solidified Israel’s perceived need for a dramatic response) Mearsheimer and Walt contend that “Bush knew right away that Israel’s action would damage America’s image in the Arab and Islamic world and undermine the war on terrorism, so he demanded on April 4 that Sharon ‘halt the incursions and begin withdrawal.’”³⁸ Other senior administration officials, such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice reiterated this demand, and Secretary of State Powell went to the region to try to quell the violence.

In response to these calls for withdrawal, the administration faced a multi-front assault from Israel’s supporters in the Vice President’s office and the Pentagon, neoconservative commentators as well as congressional sympathizers and evangelical leaders. As a result, the administration reversed its demands on Israel with the President famously calling Sharon “a man of peace” just weeks later. Further, Congress moved to pass virtually unanimous resolutions expressing American solidarity with Israel. Mearsheimer and Walt conclude, “Sharon and the lobby took on the President of the United States and triumphed. . . it was the pro-Israel forces in the United States, not Sharon or Israel, that played the key role in defeating Bush’s efforts to pursue a more

³⁶ Mearsheimer and Walt (2007), p. 204.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-207.

³⁸ Mearsheimer and Walt, (2007), p. 208.

evenhanded policy.”³⁹ Therefore, according to The Israel Lobby, on two separate occasions the Bush administration – acting out of a broader strategic calculation to improve its standing among Arab allies – attempted to curb Israeli behavior but reversed course and retreated from its initial demands. It did so primarily as a result of domestic political considerations and the influence and activities of the Israel lobby.

Mearsheimer and Walt’s use of these two cases misrepresents American objectives and behavior during this period by overstating the importance of insignificant events and misreading U.S. relations with the Arab world after 9-11. Most glaringly, the authors entirely ignore the mediation efforts pursued precisely during this period by former CENTCOM commander General Anthony Zinni, appointed as Secretary Powell’s envoy to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Had Mearsheimer and Walt researched the Zinni mission or interviewed participants in the policy deliberations, they might have discovered that developments on the ground in the Middle East – and not politics at home – served as the primary drivers of the administration’s policies during this period.

Misstating the Impact of 9/11

A key element of the Mearsheimer and Walt version of history is the American desire to gain Arab support after 9-11 for combating al-Qaeda and the broader phenomenon of Islamic terrorism. To ensure Arab backing, the Bush administration thus sought to change its positions on Israel and advance the cause of a Palestinian state. According to this narrative, it wasn’t until the Israel lobby intervened and the war in Afghanistan succeeded that the Bush administration backed away from these objectives and returned to its traditional role in support of Israel.

This treatment of the events during the fall of 2002 reverses the actual direction of U.S.-Arab relations from August to November 2001, and therefore greatly overstates the sources of what Mearsheimer and Walt label as pressure on Israel. In reality, American efforts to shift course on the Israeli-Palestinian front in order to improve its relations with the Arab world began in the summer of 2001, before anyone believed 19 hijackers could alter the course of American foreign policy. The administration had avoided high-level involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because it saw the failed efforts of President Clinton as demonstrating the futility of presidential engagement on these issues. However, by the summer of 2001, the administration concluded that ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict altogether was, in the words of then senior director for Near Eastern affairs at the National Security Council Bruce Riedel, “not a viable policy.” According to Riedel, the driving force behind this recognition was Saudi Arabia and then-Crown Prince Abdullah’s refusal to

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

meet President Bush until the administration decided to become more actively engaged in Israeli-Palestinian issues.⁴⁰ Not even his old friend, President George H.W. Bush or handwritten letters from his son could convince Abdullah to lift his boycott of the White House, Camp David, Crawford, Texas and the other venues offered as possible meeting locations. In late August, Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin Sultan delivered a stern message to President Bush from the Crown Prince. Since the U.S. had decided, “its national interest in the Middle East is 100-percent based on Sharon. . .we will protect our national interests, regardless of where America’s interests lie in the region.”⁴¹

As a result of this diplomatic crisis, the administration acted to reinsert itself in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a letter to the Crown Prince to be followed by a speech advocating for the first time the creation of a Palestinian state.⁴² The two-page letter from the President responded directly to Abdullah’s threats, and in particular to the Crown Prince’s concern about alleviating the suffering of the Palestinians. According to one report, it went so far as saying, “I reject this extraordinary, un-American bias whereby the blood of an Israeli child is more expensive and holy than the blood of a Palestinian child. I reject people who say when you kill a Palestinian, it is defense; when a Palestinian kills an Israeli, it’s a terrorist act.”⁴³ The letter sufficiently healed the rift in U.S.–Saudi relations and the administration discussed operationalizing their plan to promote a two-state solution the first week of September, 2001. Riedel thus observed that, “the driving force” of American policy toward the Middle East during this period was Saudi Arabia and “policy was set under pressure from the Saudi lobby.”⁴⁴

Mearsheimer and Walt claim that September 11th created a new need for the U.S. to align with Arab states and gain their support in counterterrorism efforts by pressing Israel to stop military activities against Palestinians. Not only did the desire to appease Arab officials, particularly the Saudi Crown Prince, exist *before* September 11, but after that day, American views toward Arafat and Palestinian terrorism shifted markedly. As terrorism increased, Riedel explained, “The Palestinians were digging themselves a hole with the

⁴⁰ Author’s interview with Bruce Riedel, April 30, 2007.

⁴¹ Quoted in Robert G. Kaiser and David B. Ottaway, “Saudi Leader’s Anger Revealed Shaky Ties,” *Washington Post*, February 10, 2002, p. A1.

⁴² Although it is widely assumed that President Clinton’s endorsement of Oslo and his deeply involved negotiations were equivalent to American recognition of the need for Palestinian statehood, official American policy had never declared its support for this outcome. The closest President Clinton came to officially endorsing Palestinian statehood was during a January 8, 2001 speech to the Israel Policy Forum in which he observed just days before leaving office, “I think there can be no genuine resolution to the conflict without a sovereign, viable, Palestinian state that accommodates Israeli’s security requirements and the demographic realities.” Text available at: <http://telaviv.usembassy.gov/publish/peace/archives/2001/january/me0108b.html>.

⁴³ Kaiser and Ottaway.

⁴⁴ Author’s Interview with Riedel.

President of the United States at a rapid pace,” and were increasingly seen to be “on the wrong side of the post 9-11 great divide.”⁴⁵ Similarly, a senior State Department official observed, “9-11 tended to transform the administration’s view of the conflict, and frame it more in terms of a wider ideological struggle between forces of extremism and democratic modernization in the region. Arafat’s continuing flirtation with terrorism, solidified the view that he was on the wrong side of the emerging divide in the region.”⁴⁶ Moreover, Arab states at the time were eager to assist the United States in their emerging war against al-Qaeda; they did not need progress on Palestinian issues to endorse these actions since they were more concerned about disavowing any connection to September 11th and proving their worth to the United States. In the first months after 9-11, at least, the Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians, and other traditional Arab allies of the United States were more than willing to assist on counterterrorism issues, regardless of what was going on between Israelis and Palestinians.

What Pressure?

During the fall of 2001, Mearsheimer and Walt note three distinct focal points of U.S. pressure on Israel: demanding restraint in the Palestinian territories; allowing Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to meet Arafat, and endorsing the creation of the Palestinian state. With respect to Israeli “restraint,” American statements during the period consistently stipulated that Palestinians halt terrorism as a precondition for returning to negotiations. As Assistant Secretary of State Bill Burns told the Middle East Institute (not one of the pro-Israel organizations identified by Mearsheimer and Walt) on October 19, “there can be no hope of reviving a political process, let alone making progress toward a fair, long-term vision, without a maximum effort against violence and terrorism.”⁴⁷ Burns did not reference Israeli activities in the territories except for a brief mention that settlement activity “undermine[s] political hope for a fair solution.” Burns’ speech was the only public address devoted to the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by a senior administration official between 9-11 and Bush’s endorsement of Palestinian statehood at the United Nations on November 10. Just two days prior to Burns’ remarks, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine assassinated an Israeli cabinet minister in his Jerusalem hotel room, prompting the following Presidential statement: “It is time for the Palestinian Authority to take vigorous action against terrorists.”⁴⁸ Any time spokesmen at either the White House or

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Author’s Interview with Senior State Department Official, May 1, 2007.

⁴⁷ Speech by Assistant Secretary of State William J. Burns, “Toward a Positive Agenda for the Middle East,” Middle East Institute, October 19, 2001: <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rt/5486.htm>.

⁴⁸ “President Bush Condemns Assassination of Rehavam Zeevi,” October 17, 2001: <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rt/5428.htm>.

State Department referenced the need for Israel to curb its reprisals against Palestinians during this period, the statements always reiterated the rights of Israel to defend itself. In sum, according to one senior State Department official, “We were not putting much pressure on the Israelis during this period regarding military operations, and even less regarding settlement activity.”⁴⁹ Absent condemnations from senior-level officials, it is hard to believe that Israel – or its advocates in Washington – interpreted this period as representing significant pressure on Israel.

Palestinian Statehood as a Goal

Word of U.S. efforts to reengage in the Middle East peace process and declare its support for a two-state solution leaked in an October 2nd article in the *New York Times*.⁵⁰ Asked that day about his position, the President confirmed his support for the creation of a Palestinian state, and further clarified in a nationally-televised press conference on October 11, “I believe there ought to be a Palestinian state, the boundaries of which will be negotiated by the parties, so long as the Palestinian state recognizes the right of Israel to exist and will treat Israel with respect, and will be peaceful on her borders.”⁵¹ During his address to the United Nations a month later, President Bush officially announced this position to the world: “We are working toward a day when two states, Israel and Palestine, live peacefully together within secure and recognize borders as called for by the Security Council resolutions.”⁵² These statements may have signaled an evolution in the public positions of the United States, but they were perfectly consistent with Israeli policies at the time-and thus not of significant concern to the Israel Lobby and Mearsheimer and Walt’s claim.

As the architect of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and a long-time supporter of the settlement movement, Ariel Sharon enjoyed the reputation of being one of Israel’s most hard-line politicians. Yet, he recognized the eventuality of a Palestinian state as early as January 2001 during his campaign against Ehud Barak for prime minister.⁵³ Sharon presented his initial ideas about a long-term arrangement with Palestinians that would include statehood to President Bush in their June 27 meeting at the White House, and then announced publicly after 9-11, “The State of Israel wants to give the

⁴⁹ Author’s Interview.

⁵⁰ Jane Perlez and Patrick Tyler, “Before Attacks, U.S. Was Ready To Say It Backed Palestinian State,” *New York Times*, October 2, 2001.

⁵¹ “President Holds Prime Time News Conference,” October 11, 2001: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>.

⁵² “President Bush Speaks to United Nations,” November 10, 2001: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011110-3.html>.

⁵³ “Sharon Reiterates His Separation Plan,” *Haaretz*, January 16, 2001.

Palestinians what they have not been given by anyone before - the possibility of establishing a state.”⁵⁴ Sharon had his own terms for Palestinian statehood and the territorial constraints he favored would clearly not have been accepted by the Palestinians, but none of the American statements about the requirements for a Palestinian state were necessarily inconsistent with the negotiated, mutual agreement that Sharon described. With respect to the influence of pro-Israeli groups on the administration’s position regarding the establishment of a Palestinian state, Bruce Riedel explained, “we weren’t going to get in trouble for supporting something Sharon already supported.”⁵⁵

Ignoring Zinni

In a speech offering more details about the administration’s views on the creation of a Palestinian state, Secretary of State Powell announced on November 19, 2001 that “Retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni has agreed to serve as a senior advisor to me, with the immediate mission of helping the parties achieve a durable cease-fire and to move along the lines of the Tenet security work plan and the Mitchell Committee Report.”⁵⁶ Powell explained Zinni’s purpose: “Get that cease-fire in place, and other things can start to happen. Without that cease-fire, we are still trapped in the quicksand of hatred.”⁵⁷ In other words, the administration would first focus on stopping the ongoing violence before addressing longer-term political issues. Zinni’s story reflects how developments on the ground, and primarily Arafat’s unwillingness to confront Palestinian terrorism, inhibited progress toward peace, and laid the foundation for Israel’s offensive in April – and the American response to it. Yet Mearsheimer and Walt totally ignore Zinni’s input on U.S. decisions at the time, perhaps because it demonstrates a source of American policy other than the lobby.

Zinni focused his efforts on forging a consensus between Israeli and Palestinian security committees designated by Sharon and Arafat respectively to implement a ceasefire arrangement under the existing framework

⁵⁴ “Israel’s Sharon presents his plan for Palestinian state to U.S. president,” *Voice of Israel*, June 27, 2001. Translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring; “Israeli premier explains cancellation of meeting; refers to Palestinian state,” *Israel TV Channel 1*, September 23, 2001: translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring.

⁵⁵ Author’s Interview.

⁵⁶ “United States Position on Terrorists and Peace and the Middle East,” November 19, 2001: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/6219.htm>. The Mitchell Committee investigated the outbreak of the second intifada in the fall of 2000 and offered a series of recommendations for confidence-building measures that would ultimately lead the parties back to negotiations; the Tenet plan was a detailed effort authored by the CIA director to structure security coordination between Israelis and Palestinians, and ensure the durability of a ceasefire.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

negotiated by George Tenet. Zinni made extended trips to the region each month starting in late November. On the Israeli side, he recalled, “the security forces were willing to take risks to get Tenet in play.”⁵⁸ Similarly, the Palestinian security chiefs Mohammad Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub also wanted to implement this Tenet plan. They knew, according to Zinni, that if they did not confront Hamas at that juncture, Hamas would grow too strong and “it would be too late.”⁵⁹ Before returning to the U.S. after his first weeks on the ground, Zinni tasked each side with a homework assignment to provide him with a specific list of steps they would take to implement each stage of the Tenet plan.

When Zinni returned in early January, he landed on the same day that the Israelis announced the capture of the *Karine-A*, a ship carrying nearly 50 tons of weaponry purchased by Palestinian officials from the Iranians. The capture of the *Karine-A* was a watershed event that provided concrete evidence of Arafat’s continued support of Palestinian terrorism despite public declarations that he favored a ceasefire. (For their part, Mearsheimer and Walt assert, “there was no definitive evidence that directly implicated Arafat,”⁶⁰ despite captured Israel documents indicating that Fouad Shubaki, the director of finances for the Palestinian Authority’s security forces, provided the funds for the cargo and the operation. The notion that Arafat, who was known for personally approving the purchase of airplane tickets for senior Palestinian officials, remained ignorant of such a significant operation is highly dubious.⁶¹) At the time, Zinni believed the discovery would kill his mission, but was pleasantly surprised when Sharon insisted on continuing negotiations over a ceasefire.

Over the next several weeks, Zinni focused on closing the gaps between the workplans individually proposed by both sides. By February, he was worried that there would be “a drumbeat of terrorist attacks and Sharon would call it off.”⁶² He therefore proposed his own “bridging plan,” an effort to provide individual compromises on all the unresolved issues. The Israelis responded with a series of reservations that Zinni judged to be possible to resolve. The Palestinians offered two trivial reservations and one critical one: they refused to be held to any “objective measurements” on counterterror measures in general and numbers of arrests in particular. Zinni went back to the Israelis who conceded not to establish “absolute” standards; so long as an “honest effort” was being made, it would be enough to move to the next phase of the plan. When the Palestinians refused to accept this reduced standard,

⁵⁸ Author’s interview with General Anthony Zinni, April 25, 2007.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Mearsheimer and Walt (2007): p. 207.

⁶¹ For more on Shoubaki, see <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2002/Provisions%20Supplied%20to%20PA%20Chairman%20Arafat%20-%20Apr->.

⁶² Author’s Interview.

Zinni realized, “the only way to get them is if they were held to nothing on their side.”⁶³

By then the Israelis had accepted Zinni’s plan without reservations as then IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, a former student of Zinni’s at the Marine Basic School, told Sharon he could “trust Zinni.” However, by March 2002, Arafat was preoccupied with participating in the upcoming Arab League Summit and Zinni felt, “he was blowing me off.” Zinni never got a final answer on the “bridging plan” before the Passover bombing on March 27 intervened and killed the process. According to Zinni, the bombing had a “9-11 effect” on Israelis; even those who had been most forthcoming on security issues in the past months “lost all hope and faith” in Arafat’s willingness to halt violence and terrorism. They had been burned by virtually every concession they had made; every step they had taken to ease movement restrictions on Palestinians had been exploited.⁶⁴

In sum, Zinni believed that “Arafat was the stumbling block. . . No matter what he told anyone, he would not make compromises.” During a trip in March to the region, Vice President Cheney even offered to help Zinni by meeting Arafat – a step the White House had previously shunned – if he felt such a meeting would be productive and advance the process. Cheney announced these conditions during a March 19 press conference with Ariel Sharon: “whether or not the meeting occurs will be determined by General Zinni. He will make a determination based upon whether or not the Tenet plan is being implemented by the Palestinians.”⁶⁵ Rather than making even a modest gesture toward advancing the security framework, Arafat, “didn’t do shit”⁶⁶ and consequently Zinni recommended Cheney not meet him. Just one week later, the Passover bombing destroyed the process.

Because they offer virtually no context about Israel’s decision to reoccupy the major cities in the West Bank in response to the Passover bombing and other attacks, Mearsheimer and Walt present only one dimension of the Bush administration’s reaction to these events. It is impossible to fully appreciate the Bush administration’s positions in April without referencing the Zinni mission and the sources of its failure. Because they ignore these developments, and fail to document the magnitude of Palestinian terrorism during this period, Mearsheimer and Walt view the President’s move away from his initial insistence that Israel withdraw its forces from the West Bank as *de facto* evidence of the Israel lobby’s influence.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “The Vice President Participates in a Press Availability with Prime Minister Sharon,” March 19, 2007: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/vicepresident/news-speeches/speeches/vp20020319.html>.

⁶⁶ Author’s Interview with Zinni.

However, Mearsheimer and Walt would have better understood the situation had they investigated the mindset of the administration after September 11, and the effect of these views on its evaluation of Arafat and Israel's response to ongoing terrorism. As one senior administration official explained, "The basic construct in administration thinking shifted more to the view that the Palestinian-Israeli problem was not as central to regional issues as had been believed in previous decades, and that the more basic and urgent priority was to defeat violent extremism and encourage the emergence of democratic Arab states. That shift strengthened the view of many in the Administration that it didn't make sense to challenge the Israeli government on settlements or occupation practices, let alone on final status positions, and that the burden was on Arab leaderships and societies to reform themselves."⁶⁷ The initial insistence on Israeli withdrawal was therefore tempered not because of neoconservative pundits, "pro-Israel officials in Vice President Cheney's office and the Pentagon" (recall that less than a month earlier, Cheney had offered to meet Arafat) or Congressional pressure, as Mearsheimer and Walt claim, but because the administration basically sympathized with the Israeli situation and found it untenable to condemn Israeli counterterrorism measures as the United States prosecuted its Global War on Terror.

Zinni's encounters with Arafat thus influenced Powell's mission more than any criticism the Secretary of State may have received from bureaucratic rivals. Indeed the very statement Mearsheimer and Walt cite as evidence of the President's inclination to pressure Israel indicates the high standards he set for Palestinians and Arabs in addition to his demands on Israel. Bush remarked:

Israel is facing a terrible and serious challenge. For seven days, it has acted to root out terrorist nests. America recognizes Israel's right to defend itself from terror. Yet, to lay the foundations of future peace, I ask Israel to halt incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas and begin the withdrawal from those cities it has recently occupied. I speak as a committed friend of Israel. I speak out of a concern for its long-term security, a security that will come with a genuine peace. As Israel steps back, responsible Palestinian leaders and Israel's Arab neighbors must step forward and show the world that they are truly on the side of peace. The choice and the burden will be theirs.⁶⁸

The window for dealing with Palestinian violence and pursuing a ceasefire passed when Arafat refused to pursue the Zinni ceasefire plan. Up until the Passover bombing, Israeli security officials had accepted the conditions proposed by the American envoy to advance security. As a result of the Passover bombing and contemporaneous attacks, these security officials at the very highest levels of the government felt "burned" by the previous

⁶⁷ Author's Interview.

⁶⁸ "President to Send Secretary Powell to the Middle East," April 4, 2002: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020404-1.html>.

concessions they had made, and Operation Defensive Shield commenced with widespread support in Israel. And so long as the United States did not back its demands for Israeli withdrawal with concrete threats, (an approach the Bush administration never pursued), there was little chance of limiting Israel's operational freedom.

Overall, Mearsheimer and Walt greatly overstate the “pressure” applied to Israel in the fall of 2000 and spring of 2001. By failing to put these incidents in context, they do not present a complete picture of the administration's reasoning and decision-making during this period. Had they done so, they would have come up with a very different story where the activities of the Israel lobby played a minimal role in shaping American policy – if their effect was even felt at all. Since the administration's post-September 11th mind-set recognized the needs of Israel to respond to terrorism, the Israel lobby, according to Bruce Riedel, “was as happy as can be.”⁶⁹ Similarly a senior State Department official noted, that during this period, “AIPAC and others were... pushing on an open door.”⁷⁰ Zinni recalls holding meetings with groups from AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, and the Israel Policy Forum during his tenure as envoy. All of these encounters were positive and constructive, with the representatives of the so-called lobby offering to assist his mission in any way they could. He added, “I never saw an example when the lobby tried to do anything that would influence what I was doing.”⁷¹ If Israel's supporters in the United States played any role during this period, it was simply to reinforce the Bush administration's existing beliefs; it is a vast overstatement to declare them responsible for policy shifts or to advance counterfactual arguments that the administration would have pursued different policies in the absence of an effective lobbying apparatus on behalf of Israel-especially without any evidence in support of the counterfactual.

Conclusion

Mearsheimer and Walt's treatment of the remaining cases in *The Israel Lobby* fits the pattern of analysis they offer on U.S.-Israel relations between 2001 and 2002. Perhaps the most pernicious claim that appears in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is that the lobby “was the principal driving force” behind the decision to invade Iraq. The origins of the Iraq War undoubtedly will be debated by historians for generations to come, but it is pretty clear that Mearsheimer and Walt greatly simplify a complex story by arguing that “The driving force behind the Iraq war was a

⁶⁹ Author's Interview.

⁷⁰ Author's Interview.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

small band of neoconservatives”⁷² whom Israeli officials helped sell the war to the American public. Without the lobby’s efforts, they claim, “America would probably not be in Iraq today.”⁷³ The only evidence they array to back this assertion are comments from leading Israelis in support of the war in Iraq and a detailed description of how neoconservatives within the Bush administration, who “tend to align with the right-wing elements in Israel itself”⁷⁴ manipulated intelligence and drove the country on its inevitable path toward war.

There are two fundamental problems with this argument: first, it assumes that the neoconservatives dominated the administration and ignores the wide ranging consensus inside and outside the government that favored regime change in Iraq. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld responded to this criticism best when he told the *New Yorker* regarding the role of former Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith and his fellow neoconservatives: “I suppose the implication of that is that the President and the Vice-President and myself and Colin Powell just fell off a turnip truck to take these jobs.”⁷⁵ Rather, the Iraq war enjoyed broad bipartisan support and was a priority of President Bush from the initial days after September 11.⁷⁶ The claim that the war was largely a product of pro-Israel officials within the administration ignores the role of the President as a driving force behind this policy, and suggests the Wolfowitz-Feith-Libby triumvirate succeeded in circumventing or controlling the State Department, the military, and the CIA in the policymaking process. Moreover, this singular emphasis on the neoconservatives ignores the war’s advocates in Congress and outside the administration, many of whom who were Democrats or veterans of the Clinton administration.⁷⁷ Peter Wehner, former deputy assistant to the president and director of the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives, called Mearsheimer and Walt’s description of the lobby’s role in the Iraq War “ludicrous.” Instead, Wehner explained, “The principal driving forces behind the decision to invade Iraq were (a) Saddam Hussein and his aggressive and malevolent regime; and (b) the lesson the Administration took away from the attacks on September 11, which were that you do not wait on events while dangers gather.”⁷⁸ Once again, by failing to consult officials, Mearsheimer and Walt

⁷² Mearsheimer and Walt (2007), p. 238.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁷⁴ Mearsheimer and Walt (2007), p. 130.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg “A Little Learning: What Douglas Feith Knew, and When He Knew It,” *New Yorker*, (May 9, 2005).

⁷⁶ George Packer, *The Assassin’s Gate*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), pp. 36, 41 and Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁷ See for example, Kenneth A. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm*, (New York: Random House, 2002).

⁷⁸ Author’s email exchange with Peter Wehner, August 24, 2007.

attribute influence to the lobby when other factors dominated the administration's thinking and actions.

The second flaw in Mearsheimer and Walt's argument is its conflation of neoconservatives with the Israel lobby. True, many of the individuals identified by Mearsheimer and Walt maintained close ties to Israel, but suggesting they determined their policy preferences based on Israeli rather than American security priorities obscures the reality that neoconservative and Israeli positions are hardly synonymous. The case of Israel's arms sales to China, cited by Mearsheimer and Walt as an example of the country's disloyal behavior demonstrates the problems with this argument. Not only did Feith demand the firing of a senior Israeli defense official over a dispute about technology sold to China, but the incident led the United States to suspend significant joint weapons development programs with Israel until the countries reached an agreement on what Israel could sell that would not endanger America's own strategic interests.⁷⁹ Moreover, Feith and the endorsers of the "Clean Break" paper cited by Mearsheimer and Walt as evidence of the neoconservatives' attachment to Israel, advocated ending American economic aid and loan guarantees to Israel – hardly a position favored by AIPAC.⁸⁰ Neoconservatives differed from the Israeli government position even on the Iraq war until Israeli officials assessed that the decision to topple Saddam had already been made in Washington. According to Colin Powell's chief of staff Lawrence Wilkerson – a rival and critic of the neoconservatives – Israel believed that Iran and not Iraq was the primary threat in the Middle East that the United States should address after September 11. Wilkerson told reporter Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Israelis tried their best to persuade us that we were focused on the wrong enemy and that they were very leery of destroying the balance of power in the Middle East. But once they understood that we were going to war, come hell or high water, they weren't going to get on the wrong side of the president of the United States."⁸¹ Clearly, neoconservative officials often part with Israeli policy preferences on key issues – a distinction Mearsheimer and Walt fail to make. Just because neoconservatives often share Israeli assessments of threats in the Middle East does not equate them to a lobbying force in Washington on behalf of Israel.

Similar distortions appear throughout the remaining three chapters on U.S. policy toward Syria, Iran, or the Lebanon War. Reading this version of events provides no mention of Syria's support of jihadists in Iraq and its ongoing assassination campaign to restore its dominance over Lebanon,

⁷⁹ Aluf Benn and Amnon Barzilai, "Pentagon official wants Yaron Fired," *Haaretz*, December 16, 2004 and Miles A. Pomper, "U.S., Israel Reach China Arms Deal," *Arms Control Today*, September, 2005.

⁸⁰ "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm": <http://www.iasps.org/strat1.htm>.

⁸¹ Goldberg, "The Usual Suspect."

nor does it reference the Bush administration's collaboration with the British, French, and Germans on the diplomatic track toward Iran. And on the Lebanon War, Mearsheimer and Walt premise their description of the U.S. role in the war on Seymour Hersh's reporting that the Israelis not only anticipated the war but briefed American officials about their plans; the U.S. did not criticize Israel's bombing campaign because it had been prepared and conditioned to accept it in advance. Yet the official commission charged with investigating Israel's failures in the war indicates that Israel lacked its own plan for responding to Hezbollah's July 12 kidnapping raid: "The Prime Minister made up his mind hastily, despite the fact that no detailed military plan was submitted to him and without asking for one. Also, his decision was made without close study of the complex features of the Lebanon front or of the military, political and diplomatic options available to Israel."⁸² In all three cases, the missing information from Mearsheimer and Walt's characterization of the Middle East provides significant explanations for American policies toward the Middle East – all very different from placing responsibility on the Israel lobby. For example, the Bush administration's view of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is not symptomatic of the Israel lobby's influence but rather a profound disagreement in policy that the authors have with much of the Washington policy community (Democratic and Republican alike) about the dangers a nuclear Iran would pose to stability and nonproliferation in the Middle East.

On all these issues, Mearsheimer and Walt fail to heed Walt's earlier warning about singling out the influence of domestic lobbying on foreign policy decisions that have multiple sources. The influence of the Israel lobby is certainly a legitimate subject for debate, but their one-dimensional, mono-causal research approach suggests that they are more interested in polemical policy debates than serious social science. Nowhere in the book do they attempt to specify conditions under which the Israel lobby has a greater chance of influencing policy based on particular issues, administration priorities and personnel, or specific activities – all serious questions that might contribute to an understanding of how Washington operates. Absent such variation, Mearsheimer and Walt rely exclusively on their misreading of recent history to tell a story about the source of America's problems in the Middle East. Consequently, their book, and not the activities or influence of the Israel lobby, is the real distortion of American foreign policy.



⁸² "Winograd Commission Submits Interim Report," April 30, 2007. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2007/Winograd+Inquiry+Commission+submits+Interim+Report+30-Apr-2007.htm>.