

# The Long View: The Middle East Needs More Israels

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**The Arab Spring may well produce a few more strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American allies in the Middle East, but until that moment arrives, Washington would be wise to strengthen and protect the only such ally it has in the region.**

**T**iming is to politics what location is to real estate -- it's just about everything. For years, advocates of the idea that Israel is an albatross around America's neck, not an asset to U.S. strategic interests, were mainly has-been politicians (like Paul Findley) or disgruntled ex-diplomats (like the late George W. Ball). They wrote books with titles like "They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby" and "The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present," but they were so "yesterday's news" that they found little traction among America's policy-media-cultural-university elite, which may have sympathized with some of their arguments, let alone among the broader American public, which rejected their reasoning out of hand.

Then, in 2006, two credentialed political scientists, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, struck gold with an essay, followed soon by a book, laying the faults and failures of U.S. Middle East policy at the doorstep of a nefarious "Israel Lobby" -- with a capital L. Their timing was impeccable. They appeared on the scene after the initial patriotic outburst following the 9/11 attacks had dimmed and with the "mission accomplished" moment of America's Iraq expedition a faint memory, at a time when many Americans (if they were concerned with such issues) were trying to understand what went wrong, to misappropriate Bernard Lewis's apt question, in America's relations with Arabs, Muslims, and the broader Middle East. The fact that some of these professors' fundamental arguments were prima facie ludicrous -- like the idea that Israel and its allies advocated for the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Iran, maybe, but certainly not Iraq!) -- did not stop some serious people from taking their book seriously. Out in the heartland, support for Israel never wavered, but along the Acela corridor, where support for the U.S.-Israel relationship has long been weaker, cracks began to appear.

History, however, proved itself more powerful than political science. The seismic events the world has witnessed since the Tunisian revolution have not only changed the political map of the Middle East, but they have done much to

silence those attached passionately to the idea that nothing so enrages Arabs as America's friendship with Israel. In fact, as we now know, it is the corruption, venality, torture, and inequality of Arab governments, not Israel or U.S.-Israel relations, that enrages Arabs so much that they are willing to fight and die to change their reality. America will indeed have to adjust accordingly, but not because a core theme of U.S. foreign policy -- ties with Israel -- was judged to have been either a reason for or a cause of the Arab uprisings of 2011.

In this context, Michael Oren's brief, powerful, and trenchant [essay \(http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/the\\_ultimate\\_ally\)](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/25/the_ultimate_ally) comes -- as did "The Israel Lobby" essay five years ago -- at precisely the right time. With history shaking governments throughout the Middle East, a political earthquake having virtually nothing to do with the still-important task of resolving the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, now is the moment to drive a nail deep in the heart of the misdiagnosis of the ills of American's Middle East policy presented by the line of thinking from Ball to Mearsheimer. And, accomplished historian that he is, Oren does this with thoroughness, wit, and attention to detail.

If anything, Oren -- currently Israel's ambassador to the United States -- understates the case for Israel's value as a strategic asset to America. For example, his diplomatic mantle prevents him from discussing at length the unique contribution Israel has made to counterproliferation, i.e., its raids on nuclear facilities in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007). There has been much armchair-quarterbacking about the wisdom of these attacks, but it does not really take a Metternich to realize that the Middle East -- and U.S. interests -- are better off without either Saddam Hussein's clan or Bashar al-Assad's wielding nuclear weapons. And Oren's diplomatic politesse prevents him from banging his fist on the table to remind Barack Obama's administration that now is precisely the time to bolster America's remaining allies in the Middle East, especially the limited number that are democratic allies (still, ahem, one).

Last July, in a debate with another realist making the case for Israel-as-a-liability (Chas W. Freeman), I argued that "what we really need in the Middle East are more 'Israels' -- not more Jewish states, of course, but more strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American allies.... The absence of those sorts of allies is precisely what has gotten us into such deep trouble over the past 30 years." I hope that the Arab Spring produces a few more Middle Eastern states that are "strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American allies" -- and I believe there is a chance that this may eventually come to pass. In the meantime, as Oren persuasively argues, Washington should be wise to do everything it can to strengthen and protect the only one it has.

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