

Why Walt, Mearsheimer, Still Wrong

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Articles & Testimony

On the second anniversary of the publication of the highly controversial book, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," written by University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer and Harvard University's Stephen Walt, it is worth noting that their central thesis -- that Israel is a strategic liability and not an asset to the U.S. -- is erroneous, as evident from examining the Mideast situation today.

While Mearsheimer and Walt concede that during the Cold War Israel may have been an asset to the United States, they suggest that in the post-Cold War period and certainly after 9/11, whatever value it had has long since been replaced by costs. Their argument is that securing oil and good relations with the Arab world should be the primary U.S. goal in the Middle East, and our association with and strong support for Israel impede this aim.

Specifically, they write that Arab and Muslim antipathy toward the United States results from their identifying the United States with Israel.

But the Mideast is far more complex than they appreciate. Not only has the U.S.- Israeli relationship not been a liability for either country, it has been, at least to some extent, an asset to the Arab regimes, as a strategic counterweight to radicalism.

The Mearsheimer-Walt approach appears to reflect the traditionalist, Arabist school in the U.S. State Department. This school was most prominent at the inception of Israel and in the decades that followed. Arabists viewed Israel as an impediment to the United States' ability to establish close ties with the Arab world. According to their zero-sum thinking, every step toward Israel necessarily represented a step away from the Arabs. In other words, ties to one side ensured distance from the other.

Yet, the Arab regimes do not in fact think this way. Their actions are driven by their own national interests, not an automatic (or even a reflexive) zero-sum outlook. If the Arabs do not limit themselves to this approach, why should the United States? The zero-sum mind-set reflects an inability to appreciate the complex dynamics of the Middle East.

Radicals, led by Iran, are enemies not only of the United States and Israel but also of key Arab regimes. The Saudis and all six Gulf states believe that Iran has hegemonic designs on Arab oil. Senior officials in these states, as well as their counterparts in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, also fear Iran for security, territorial, and ideological reasons.

They see Iran as hostile to the Arabs for reasons relating to a mix of historical incursions by Persia into the Arab world, aspirations for regional dominance, and sectarian differences. They fear that Iran will funnel money to militant organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, so that these proxies will destabilize the Arab regimes and gain Iran a foothold in a Sunni Arab world. Iran could, in their eyes, also foment social unrest among Shiite communities who happen to live in the oil-sensitive areas of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. And the Arab regimes fear that Iranian support from abroad could fuel local extremism.

After all, if Iran can fund a Sunni Hamas, why could it not fund the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Islamic Action Front in Jordan?

Yet it is the United States and Israel that are often the most likely to act -- or at least serve as the strongest countervailing forces -- against Hamas and Hezbollah and perhaps against Iran, leaving Arab regimes to benefit while still maintaining an arm's distance. Few Arab governments actually believe that a weak Israel would serve their national interests.

Converging Interests

In the post-9/11 world, there are numerous cases of converging interests between Israel and Arab regimes, shaped by a perception of common enemies. Four recent cases highlight this point.

First, the 2007 Israeli bombing of the Syrian reactor, after which Israel remained silent and, tellingly, so did the Arab regimes, with none condemning the action, indicating their displeasure with Syria's growing ties to Iran.

Second, the Arab reaction to Hezbollah's triggering of a war with Israel in 2006. Arab states led by Saudi Arabia were horrified that Hezbollah went to war without the vote of the Lebanese government -- it was a unilateral decision, facilitated by Iranian weapons. Many Arab regimes were distressed by Israel's lackluster military performance and the inconclusive outcome of this war: the Arabs wanted Hezbollah to be defeated, not to emerge stronger from the conflict, as they fear the emergence of Iran-backed Islamist militias that are used as instruments for upending the existing order in the region.

In an unprecedented fashion, Arab regimes publicly blamed Hezbollah for being reckless in launching the 2006 war against Israel -- a dramatic stance in a region where the regimes reflexively blame Israel for confrontations with Arabs and have historically justified "resistance" against Israeli occupation.

Third, Iran's support for Hamas has added to Arab regimes' fears of Iran. When this support is combined with Iran's emerging nuclear program, Arab leaders see an Iran that appears to be on the march, without hesitation to do all it can to put pressure on them. At the start of the Gaza conflict last December, Egyptian and Saudi foreign ministers publicly blamed Hamas as being responsible for the crisis. Egypt, the only country to have a border with Gaza, refused -- and still refuses -- to open it to Gaza.

(In the same context, there is also an unstated convergence of interests between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, since both regard Hamas as an enemy, and work toward curtailing its economic and military efforts.)

And fourth, Israel and the Arabs have a shared desire to curb Iran's sphere of influence. It is widely believed that an Iran with nuclear weapons will lead Egypt and Saudis (as well as the non-Arab Turkey) to go down that same path.

The Arab states also fear that if Tehran gained a bomb, it could even lead to the provision of nuclear materials to non-state actors by Iran. They also recognize that a nuclear Iran would have a shield behind which it could engage in much greater coercion of its neighbors with little fear that there would be recourse against it.

U.S. Role Key

All of the above suggests that the reality is more complex than either Mearsheimer or Walt care to depict or

understand. Arab and Israeli interests often converge, and their differing levels of cooperation successfully constrain various radical organizations.

Note that Arab wars against Israel stopped after 1973, in part because in the eyes of Arabs they became too costly, both militarily and economically, and in part because the strong military ties between the United States and Israel made such wars unthinkable today.

Close U.S.- Israel ties avoided bloodshed, led both Egypt and Jordan (which fought in 1948 and 1967 but not in 1973) to solve their conflicts peacefully with Israel, and helped bring Syria to the peace table. Poor U.S.- Israeli relations would have sent the opposite signal, certainly opening the door to incessant fighting.

In looking more closely at the period after the 1973 war, it is striking how wrong the Arabist arguments turned out to be. Rather than harming U.S. relations with the Arabs -- the essence of the Arabist assumption -- steps toward Israel benefited America. Ironically, it was precisely the close U.S.- Israeli relationship after the war that enabled the United States to become a decisive diplomatic player in the Middle East.

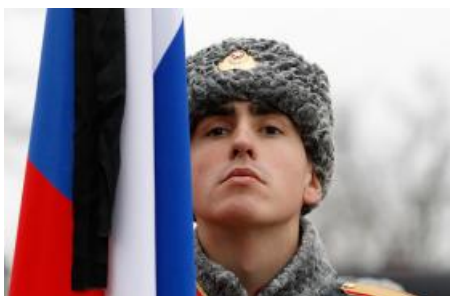
Finally, consider how would American commitments be viewed if we walked away from Israel? If, as Mearsheimer and Walt want, the United States distanced itself from Israel, why would any Arab regime believe that a U.S. commitment to its nation could be counted on? This question would be asked by ally and adversary alike. It would be the greatest windfall imaginable to the strongest Islamist elements, whether al Qaeda or Iran, who would see it as a validation. It would lend a sense of momentum or inevitability to their cause, and countries throughout the region would view future U.S. actions through this lens.

Therefore, on a variety of levels, these two professors have it wrong. A strong U.S.-Israel relationship remains key and a cornerstone for Mideast peace. Together, a strong Israel and a strong United States have effectively deterred conflict and prevented bloodshed, and -- hopefully -- will continue to successfully curb radicalism, including the new dangers posed by Iran's search for regional ascendance.

David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65>), is the co-author with Dennis Ross of a new book, [Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310>). ❖

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