

Missing the Point

by [Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](/experts/ben-fishman)

Aug 27, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ben Fishman \(/experts/ben-fishman\)](/experts/ben-fishman)

Ben Fishman is a Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Articles & Testimony

Copies of the highly anticipated new book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt arrived on bookshelves in Washington late last week despite a reported "embargo" from the publisher until its official September 4 release. In a sign of the book's controversial nature, the *New York Times* reported on August 16 that organizations such as the Chicago Council on Global Affairs have canceled scheduled events with Mearsheimer and Walt. This new debate about the rights of the prominent political scientists to present their critique of Israel adds to the question of whether their work is anti-Semitic -- a claim made against the professors' original "Israel Lobby" paper published last March. Rather, the central issue on which reviewers of Mearsheimer and Walt's book should focus is whether the evidence the professors present supports their arguments about the significant influence of the Israel lobby on U.S. foreign policy decisions.

Despite well over one thousand endnotes and updated chapters on the lobby's role in influencing the Bush Administration's approach to Israel, Iraq, Syria, Iran and the Lebanon War of 2006, the book consistently misrepresents U.S. decision-making in the Middle East. Mearsheimer and Walt manufacture causal connections between the lobby's activities and American actions that Bush Administration insiders rebuke.

Unfortunately, the book does not include any interviews with current or former government officials about the lobby's influence on foreign policy. (The one interview cited in the endnotes refers to the departure of Flynt Leverett from the Brookings Institution. Leverett, who served on the National Security Council staff during the Bush Administration's first term and has been an ardent critic of its policies since, is not quoted about his views on the lobby's influence or the Bush Administration and the Middle East). Earlier this year, Mearsheimer and Walt argued that they did not need interviews since "we felt we already had sufficient information about the lobby's operations" and additional research "would not have altered our conclusions." In fact, what Mearsheimer and Walt would have discovered, as I did, is that their interpretation of events does not accord with how Bush officials characterize the reasons for policy decisions and their interactions with the Israel lobby.

Before addressing the flaws in Mearsheimer and Walt's claims and the specific cases they misinterpret, it is first essential to understand their core argument: The Israel lobby acts not just as one important voice informing government officials, but consistently shapes American foreign policy decisions. Originally, they asserted, "the overall thrust of U.S. policy in the region is due almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics, and especially to the

activities of the 'Israel Lobby.'"

That sentence has disappeared from the 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." 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." And on Syria, they state, "absent the lobby, there might already be a peace treaty between Israel and Syria."

At a minimum, Mearsheimer and Walt depict the Israel lobby as guiding American policy decisions toward Israel and throughout the Middle East. Maximally, the professors portray presidents and secretaries of state as subservient to the executive director of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and neoconservative sub-cabinet officials.

Responding to each of these charges, and the five chapters in which they present their evidence, would require significant space. However, a close examination of the critical period of U.S.-Israel relations from 2001-2002 -- the period that motivated Mearsheimer and Walt's work on this subject -- reveals that events on the ground in the Middle East drove the administration's policies, not the activities of the Israel lobby.

In the months following the September 11 attacks, Mearsheimer and Walt claim, "American policy makers believed that shutting down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or at least making an attempt to do so, would undermine support for terrorist groups like al Qaeda." To achieve this, "President Bush began pushing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to show restraint in the Occupied Territories," and soon Bush "said publicly for the first time that he supported a Palestinian state." However, this version of events reverses the impact of 9/11 on the Bush Administration and ignores the role played by Saudi Arabia during this period.

In the weeks preceding September 11, the Bush Administration faced a growing crisis in its relations with Saudi Arabia because it had not placed enough emphasis on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah refused to meet Bush until the administration changed course. According to a Washington Post report, Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin Sultan delivered a message to the President from Crown Prince Abdullah, stating that since American "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."

Because of this potential rift with the kingdom, President Bush wrote to the Saudi crown prince pledging to work toward alleviating Palestinian suffering. As Bruce Riedel, the senior National Security Council official for the Middle East at the time, later told me, "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."

While Mearsheimer and Walt claim that the United States was busy trying to appease Arab opinion after 9/11 by pressuring Israel, administration officials explain the opposite was taking place. One senior State Department official told me, "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." Finally, the president's first official announcement in support of a Palestinian state was not pressure at all, since Ariel Sharon had already accepted the concept of Palestinian statehood. Riedel explained, "We weren't going to get in trouble for supporting something Sharon already supported."

The second case Mearsheimer and Walt cite as evidence for the effectiveness of the Israel lobby occurred just four months later, at the time of Israel's reentry into West Bank cities in response to a massive suicide bombing that killed thirty Israelis celebrating Passover. Mearsheimer and Walt note that President Bush and senior officials initially urged Israel to withdraw from the West Bank but later ceased such calls and ultimately sided with Sharon,

calling him a "man of peace." The lobby, of course, was responsible for this switch.

Yet Mearsheimer and Walt fail to describe the events leading up to Israel's Operation Defensive Shield. They completely ignore the mission of General Anthony Zinni to renew security cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians during this period-and the envoy's conclusion that Palestinian Authority leader Yasir Arafat was the impediment to progress on the peace process. Zinni made his first trip as envoy in December and returned in January the very day Israel intercepted the ship Karine-A on its way to delivering fifty tons of weaponry purchased by Arafat. (Mearsheimer and Walt write "there was no definitive evidence that directly implicated Arafat" in the weapons purchase, but captured Israeli documents establish that Fouad Shubaki, the director of finances for the Palestinian Authority's security forces, provided the funds for the cargo and the operation.)

Zinni believed that the capture of the Karine-A would end the security negotiations he was pursuing, but found the Israelis continued to be amenable to compromise. When he offered his own "bridging plan" to resolve differences between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators on the parameters for an agreement, Zinni found that the Israelis accepted the plan without reservations. However, Zinni could not get a final answer from Arafat and ultimately concluded, "Arafat was the stumbling block . . . No matter what he told anyone, he would not make compromises." Consequently, Zinni recognized that the Passover bombing had a "9/11 effect" on Israelis, even among the security professionals who had been most forthcoming during his negotiations.

By not even referencing Zinni's mission or the level of terror that provoked Israel's Operation Defensive Shield (63 Israelis had been killed and hundreds injured in suicide bombings since Zinni's first trip as envoy), Mearsheimer and Walt present a particularly one-dimensional view of the president's reaction. Indeed, had they read further into President Bush's remarks when he called for Israel to withdraw from its incursions into the West Bank, they would have discovered the real reason why the administration soon withdrew its demands for a pull-back. The president said,

"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."

Predictably, no one stepped forward and by June the administration called for new Palestinian leadership and would no longer deal with Arafat. The new policy emerged as a result of Arafat's own failings, his unwillingness to halt terror attacks and the frustrations of the administration in dealing with him. According to Bush officials, the Israel lobby played no role in this policy shift.

These examples highlight how the lobby is not the driving force behind U.S. policy toward the Middle East. And if it does not determine U.S. decisions toward Israel specifically, the lobby is highly unlikely to exert greater influence over policy toward other Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria, Iran or Iraq.

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 origin of the Iraq War will likely 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 "a small band of neoconservatives" led the march toward war, which Israeli officials helped sell to the American public.

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld responded best to the charge that Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith from the Pentagon and other neoconservatives from the vice president's office were the "driving force behind the Iraq war", in Mearsheimer and Walt's words. Rumsfeld told the *New Yorker's* Jeffrey Goldberg, "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." Interestingly, Rumsfeld barely appears as a principal actor in Mearsheimer and Walt's treatment

of the events shaping the Iraq War.

Similarly, 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." Once again, by failing to consult officials, Mearsheimer and Walt attribute influence to the lobby when other factors dominated the administration's thinking and actions.

Although *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* appears to contain much clearly documented research, its authors fail to capture the realities of policy formation and present a series of letters, statements and rallies by supporters of Israel as evidence of the lobby's manipulation of Washington. Mearsheimer and Walt would have benefited from conversations with foreign policy officials or representatives of the lobby itself to get a more precise portrayal of the events they describe. Had they done so, they would have found that their description of American foreign policy is often inaccurate or misleading, and their overall thesis is contradicted by central figures in their story.

Ben Fishman is a researcher and special assistant to former Ambassador Dennis Ross at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Read this review at [National Interest Online](http://tniprod.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=15292). (<http://tniprod.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=15292>)

[Subscribe \(https://www.subscription-dept.com/cgi-shl/ifs12a.exe?NATL++++NEWSUB++1\)](https://www.subscription-dept.com/cgi-shl/ifs12a.exe?NATL++++NEWSUB++1) to the National Interest. ❖

National Interest

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)