



**"THE ISRAEL LOBBY AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY":
A WORKING PAPER THAT DOES NOT WORK**

by Harvey Sicherman

Harvey Sicherman, Ph.D., is President of the Foreign Policy Research Institute and former aide to three U.S. secretaries of state.

John J. Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and Stephen M. Walt, Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, have stirred great controversy with their attack on the "Israel Lobby." One version of their indictment was published in the *London Review of Books* on March 26, 2006. The other, longer, footnoted version appeared under the Faculty Research Working Papers Series of the Kennedy School.

When I read the full text of both short and long versions I found a disconcerting pattern of large assertions supported by little or no evidence. On the very first page, for example, Mearsheimer and Walt declare, "The combination of unwavering U.S. support for Israel and the related effort to spread democracy throughout the region has inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardized U.S. security" (long version). The shorter one contains an even larger charge: ". . . and jeopardized not only U.S. security but that of much of the rest of the world." No evidence is provided for either claim.

This was a surprisingly poor start for an academic work. I read both short and long versions closely, hoping to understand exactly what the authors intended to accomplish. What I found was a polemic that utterly failed the tests of scholarship.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH INTEREST GROUPS?

Mearsheimer and Walt approach the Israel Lobby from the perspective of the realist, neorealist, or structural realist school of international relations. Their view of the world posits an anarchic condition characterized by ceaseless state competition for security, especially through military power. The competition creates a pattern, almost a set of natural laws, susceptible to discovery, testing, and codification. The key that opens the door to understanding individual state behavior is the pursuit of the national interest, a compulsion that exerts its magnetic influence regardless of personality, party, or ideology. The statesman's highest calling is to understand the national interest and to pursue it.

Some states, however, deviate from the national interest as understood by the "realists." How to explain it? There are three answers. The first is that the policymakers are too stupid to understand the real national interest. Those with experience in government know that stupidity is a factor much underestimated by outside analysts. But it is very difficult to determine the mental acuity of leaders, especially for analysts without access to high-level meetings.

A second explanation is that leaders define the national interest differently from the professors. It is just possible, of course, that the policymakers are correct. Suffice to say that the professors do not prefer this answer.

A third explanation—the preferred one—is that the leader agrees with the professors but is prevented from pursuing the correct national interest by domestic politics, namely, interest group "lobbies."

Professors Mearsheimer and Walt see the Israel Lobby, defined broadly as those actively supporting Israel's cause, in this light. Hobbled by a captive Congress, president after president succumbs to electoral politics, the Lobby's blend of financial pressures and intellectual intimidation, making the national interest the victim. For a realist, this is a statesman's ultimate dereliction. Crime would not be too strong a word. Perhaps, this accounts for the heated language that permeates the working paper and its shorter version.

MAKING AND UNMAKING THE CASE

Mearsheimer and Walt know that when one charges a president, and in this case, every president since 1967 with deviation from the national interest, examples must be supplied. These cases must show that an administration wished to act in the correct way but was forced by the Lobby to act in the incorrect way.

For my money, the authors' case is made or unmade by the most incendiary examples chosen. Chief is the Iraq War. The authors depict Israel and the Lobby as desperate to get the United States into war against Saddam. They offer numerous

quotations to this effect but are careful to state, "Clearly it would be wrong to blame the war on Jewish influence. Rather it was due in large part to the Lobby's influence, especially that of the neoconservatives within it" (p.16, short version).

Then I read the next paragraph. The lobby failed to persuade President Clinton to make war. Then this sentence: "They were no more able to generate enthusiasm for invading Iraq in the early months of the Bush Administration. They needed help to achieve their aim. That help arrived with 9/11. Specifically, the events of that day led Bush and Cheney to reverse course and become strong proponents of a preventative war."

So you see, the war was "due in large part to the Lobby's influence" except that the influence failed until 9/11 changed the President's mind, that is, his concept of what the national interest required. Elementary logic demands this conclusion: the Iraq war should be put on Osama bin Laden's account, not AIPAC's or Israel's. The authors, however, seem so anxious to make their case for the Lobby's baleful influence, they have unmade it themselves. A blunder of this kind would flunk a freshman.

Another major case concerns the events of Spring 2002 when Ariel Sharon ordered Israeli forces to seize West Bank cities they had vacated seven years earlier, and besiege Arafat in his Ramallah headquarters. Mearsheimer and Walt say that George W. Bush "had very significant means at his disposal" (p. 13, short version), including public support for a reduction of aid to Israel if Israel resisted his post-9/11 plan for the creation of a Palestinian state. (They might have added that Bush also owed little to Jewish voters.) Nonetheless, they attribute to the Lobby Bush's reluctance to meet with Arafat or establish some relationship with him. And when Bush attempted to force a withdrawal of Israeli forces after March 2002, the Lobby prevented him, although this complicated the American effort to build an anti-terrorist coalition (pp. 26-27, long version). But by February 2003, the U.S. and Israeli policies had been aligned: "The main reason for the switch is the Lobby" (p. 26, long version) or "thanks in part to the lobby" (p. 13, short version), as reflected by key congressional resolutions. A secondary reason was the U.S. military victory in Afghanistan which supposedly lessened the need to recruit the Arabs against al Qaeda.

A President who owes nothing to Jewish voters, has "significant means" to sway Israel, and publicly supports a Palestinian state somehow is diverted by the Lobby. Was Bush a coward? Or did he know something the professors did not? I do not know what the professors read about events in late 2001 and early 2002, but somehow they overlooked a key Israeli "ally" who turned George W. Bush toward support of Sharon. His name was Yasser Arafat. Bush had been warned by Bill Clinton that Arafat was untrustworthy. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell has confirmed Arafat's unwillingness to fulfill his promises even after soul-searching handclaps "general to general"—this, despite Bush's endorsement of a Palestinian state in the hope that Arafat would join the war against terror and cease his own encouragement for the suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.

In January 2002, however, the Israelis intercepted the *Karine A*, a Palestinian Authority-contracted ship full of Iranian arms intended to escalate the conflict. Queried urgently by the United States about the vessel, Arafat lied, claiming it was some sort of Israeli plot or a rogue operation. This incident, by all accounts, finished off Arafat with Bush. Our authors, however, do not mention it at all, as if it had no bearing on the case. Nor do they cite the Passover bombing of the Park Hotel or the rising number of suicide bombings in the weeks preceding Israel's invasion of the cities.

In short, Arafat's actions and the suicide campaign are omitted entirely, as if he and the Palestinians were mere innocent bystanders caught up in Sharon's cruelties and Bush's cowardice in dealing with the Israel Lobby. Having flunked the test of logic in the Iraq case, Mearsheimer and Walt now fail the test of historiography.

THE WORKING PAPER DOES NOT WORK

In summary, these two proofs for the idea that the Israel Lobby diverted the Bush Administration from the national interest, namely, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and the Israeli military operations of March 2002, are fatally defective. Mearsheimer and Walt negate their own charge on Iraq; it was 9/11, not the Israel Lobby, that precipitated Bush's decision for war. Their omission of evidence negates the charge that the Lobby prevented Bush from blocking Israel's spring offensive; arguably it was Yasser Arafat's mendacity and Palestinian suicidal terrorism that most disarmed Bush in pressing Sharon.

Both essays are replete with egregious arguments, dubious quotations, and unsupported inferences. But these two examples are enough to establish that the working paper does not work as a serious source of study on the Israel Lobby. It offers only more heat on a subject that needs more light. Perhaps mindful of the polemic nature of their work, Mearsheimer and Walt conclude on a more sober note. "What is needed is a candid discussion of the Lobby's influence and a more open debate about U.S. interests in this vital region. Israel's well-being is one of those interests, but its continued occupation of the West Bank and its broader regional agenda are not" (p. 23, short version). The results of such debate, we are promised, will not only be better for the U.S. national interest but also for "Israel's long-term interests as well" (p. 23, short version).

There is something true here but it is not new. The United States has never supported Israel's occupation of the West Bank or other areas captured in 1967; presidents have always advocated a negotiated withdrawal that results in recognized and secure borders for the Jewish state. That policy, however, requires an Arab partner. Egypt has proven to be one, Jordan another. A Palestinian, however, has been harder to find: once thought to be Arafat, still hoped to be Abu Mazen, and now much in doubt because of Hamas. The United States has also never supported Israel's "broader regional agenda," whatever that might be, although it was certainly not an insistence that Arabs become democrats before peace could be reached. The push for

democracy throughout the Middle East was hatched in Washington, not among the security-minded Israelis who negotiated the peace treaties with President Sadat and King Hussein, or Oslo with Chairman Arafat.

There is also something new here but it is not true. That is the authors' complaint about lack of open debate. Here, too, they offer their own refutation: 211 footnotes attached to the long version of "The Israel Lobby" provide a convenient compendium of criticism of Israel, AIPAC and U.S. policy. These sources were not published in secret and circulated in samizdat. Indeed, anyone wishing to study the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be inundated by the polemics, all too easily available. Every conceivable critique and defense of U.S. and Israeli policy, and some very inconceivable, have been offered.

Finally, I return to the original approach of the realists. Why have American (and Israeli) leaders not been following the national interest as defined by Mearsheimer and Walt? It is not that the policymakers are stupid. Nor have they been diverted from their national interests by the Israel Lobby, which is very influential but not always compelling. It is simply that the policymakers see the national interest in a different way from the professors. And if this paper is any guide, perhaps they are wise to do so.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684.

For information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105 or email fpri@fpri.org or visit us at www.fpri.org