

The Obama Administration and the Israel Lobby

Written by Jerome Slater

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JEROME SLATER, JAN 21 2013

In light of Israeli rigidity and continuing expansion into the Palestinian territories of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, it is clear that there is no chance for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement in the absence of serious and sustained U.S. pressures on Israel. Mere verbal admonitions and even diplomatic pressures would almost certainly be insufficient, for nothing would be likely to bring about a radical change in Israeli policies short of a simple and blunt message from the Obama administration: either comply with the international consensus, pay serious attention to critical U.S. national interests (not to mention Israel's own rational self-interest), end the occupation and repression of the Palestinians, and agree to a genuine two-state settlement—or forfeit all U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military support.

No serious observer of the situation expects such pressures to materialize, despite the clear damage to American national interests in the Mideast that is an inevitable result of the nearly unconditional support that the U.S. provides for Israeli policies. What accounts for this remarkable and probably unprecedented abdication by a superpower of its high national interests on behalf of a relatively minor state— a state, moreover, whose policies and behavior are not only a moral disaster, but are irrational in terms of its own true national interests? Or, more simply, how is it that the tail can continue to wag the dog?

The Israel Lobby Theory

Perhaps the most familiar and widely believed explanation—especially since the publication of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007)—is that of the power of the Israel lobby in determining US policy in the Middle East.

How persuasive is that argument? The heart of the issue is not whether there is an organized, well-financed, and politically powerful Israel lobby—mostly organized Jewish groups, but also including Christian fundamentalists, sometimes referred to as the “Christian Zionists”—since that is beyond serious dispute. Rather, the question is the *extent* of the Israel lobby's power: is it the master variable explaining US policies towards Israel and elsewhere in the Middle East, or is it just one—an important one, to be sure—of a number of factors that explain those policies?

It is important to distinguish between the power of the lobby in Congress and its power over the presidency and the executive branch. There is no doubt that on issues pertaining to the Middle East—particularly about Israel—that the lobby has enormous influence in Congress, which almost invariably has bowed to its position. Given the importance of Jewish electoral contributions as well as the potentially decisive impact of the Jewish/Christian Zionist vote in close Congressional elections, there is little reason to expect any change in Congressional obeisance to the lobby.

The influence of the lobby over presidents and the executive branch, however, has always been far more limited—and it is presidents and their appointees, not Congress, that are the locus of power over most foreign policy issues. To begin with, the Jewish vote is much less important in presidential than in congressional elections, for most presidential elections are not decided by small minorities in a handful of key states (the 2000 election being one of the few exceptions). To be sure, Jewish money may be more important than votes; some estimates are half or more of the Democratic Party's electoral funds come from Jewish contributors. Yet, neither votes nor money can explain the policies of Republican presidents, who get far less of both than do the Democratic presidents — during their

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presidencies, Nixon, Reagan and George W. Bush, all of whom got less than a third of Jewish votes, were regarded, in turn, as the most “pro-Israeli” presidents ever.

The Israel Lobby in the Past

This is not to deny that the lobby often has considerable influence with presidents—including Obama—and within the executive branch, but it is striking that whenever U.S. presidents have decided to defy the position of the Israel lobby, they invariably have prevailed. There are a number of examples:

*Despite the anger of American Jewish groups, during the 1973 Israeli-Egyptian war, the Nixon administration placed heavy pressures on Israel, including delays in replacing Israeli weapons losses, in a successful effort to stop Israel from completely defeating Egypt and instead accept a ceasefire that left Egyptian forces in control of parts of the Sinai Peninsula.

*Despite being forced to compromise on some issues, the Carter administration repeatedly defied the Jewish lobby on others: on publicly supporting the creation of a homeland for the Palestinians, on the need for Israeli withdrawals from the Egyptian and Syrian territory it had conquered in the 1973 war, in making diplomatic overtures to the PLO and Syria, and on its sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia.

*During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Ronald Reagan successfully pressured Israel not to invade Beirut or destroy the PLO in Lebanon, on pain of a reassessment of overall US policy towards Israel.

*In 1991, despite its heavy pressures the lobby was unable to stop George H. Bush from withholding \$10 billion in U.S. loan guarantees to Israel, because of its continued expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories.

*Throughout the administration of George W. Bush, the Israel lobby unsuccessfully pressed for more severe U.S. economic sanctions against Syria and for the military destruction of Iranian nuclear facilities. To be sure, the lobby did press for an American attack on Iraq in 2003, but that doesn’t necessarily demonstrate the power of the lobby, for there were a number of other factors that taken together might be more than sufficient to explain the war: among others, the intensification of concern over terrorism after 9/11 and the belief that Saddam Hussein might be supporting Islamic terrorism; the fear—however wrong—that he might already or soon be developing nuclear weapons; and the administration’s goal—however misguided—of promoting democracy throughout the Middle East.

These and other cases aside, there have been cases in which the lobby didn’t even try to pressure the president, for fear of losing the battle or alienating him—the most recent being the nomination by Obama of Chuck Hagel, which will shortly be discussed. And there have been still other cases in which it appears that presidents chose pro-Israel policies not because of the lobby’s pressures but *despite* them. For example, Truman’s biographers agree that he decided to recognize the state of Israel and provide important diplomatic support to it, even though he was quite annoyed about Jewish lobbying on behalf of Israel. Another example might be Richard Nixon’s support of Israel, despite his anti-Semitic inclinations and anger at Jewish lobbying.

The Israel Lobby Today

What about the current situation: does the reelection of Barack Obama demonstrate that the power of the “Israel lobby” in the United States is weakening? Yes and no. On the one hand, the leading Jewish organizations and Christian Zionist groups clearly favored Mitt Romney in the presidential elections—and spent large amounts to back him—because Romney was seen as favoring an even more unconditional “pro-Israel” policy than Obama. Obviously, the lobby didn’t succeed. Moreover, despite the anti-Obama position of the lobby, Obama was supported by some 70% of the Jewish vote.

Perhaps in part because of this clear evidence of the limited influence of the lobby with the Jewish community as a whole, there was a striking difference between the reaction of the lobby to Obama’s choice in his first term of Charles Freeman (one of America’s leading and most respected diplomats) to chair the National Intelligence Council and

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Obama's choice at the outset of his second term of Chuck Hagel to be Secretary of Defense. The Israel lobby was outraged at both nominations, for both Freeman and Hagel were seen—correctly— as less than unconditional supporters of Israeli policy. However, in the case of Freeman the lobby mounted a full campaign in opposition, leading Freeman to decline the post and publicly hold the lobby responsible. What he didn't say, however, was that Obama had clearly folded to the lobby, failing to put up a fight or even to publicly support his own nominee.

During his Senate years Hagel had often infuriated the lobby; among other things, he had decried the power of "the Jewish lobby," as he put it, as well as publicly said that his responsibilities were to the constitution of the United States, not to the Israeli government. This time, however, Obama made it clear that he would fight for his choice; consequently, rather than alienate the just-reelected president at the outset of his term, this time it was the lobby that folded. Once the lobby had backed away from a public campaign to block his nomination, the way was clear for Hagel to be confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

All that said, there is little reason to believe that the Obama administration will put real pressure on Israel to end the occupation and agree to a two-state settlement with the Palestinians. Even if Obama were so inclined, on the merits, to do so—and his history suggests that he isn't—he will not jeopardize his domestic agenda by reversing long-standing U.S. policies. The question here is whether it is the power of the Israel lobby that mainly accounts for this situation.

I think not: the full range of U.S. support for Israel, from 1948 through today, is the result of the convergence of a wide range of factors, of which the existence of an organized "pro-Israel" lobby is only one, and in most cases probably not the most important. The initial reason for the remarkably privileged position that Israel has had in U.S. foreign policy was that after the Holocaust there was a widespread and deeply felt belief among U.S. policy makers and the general public alike that the United States had—and still has—a moral obligation to help Israel defend itself against its Arab enemies.

Second, Israel captured the imagination and sympathy of the American public, which even today views it (however increasingly dubiously) as having created and maintained a Western liberal democracy in a region dominated by despotic autocracies. Third, during the cold war Israel came to be perceived as a strongly anticommunist, pro-American, and militarily powerful ally in countering the threat of Soviet or communist expansionism in the Middle East and even, to a somewhat lesser extent, elsewhere in the global struggle.

A fourth factor is the widespread belief that there were strong normative, cultural and even religious affinities between the United States and Israel: the "Judeo-Christian heritage," as it has come to be regarded. Finally, of course, Israel is seen by most Americans — however erroneously, in light of the fact that Israeli policies actually worsen the problem — as an indispensable ally in the struggle against Islamic radicalism and terrorism.

Put differently, the Israel lobby would have little power if not for the underlying values, ideologies, and perceptions about Israel shared by the public and officials alike. Political science has no persuasive way to disaggregate and assign weights or percentages to all of the factors that account for U.S. policy toward Israel, especially since they all work in the same direction and are not balanced by countervailing factors. Moreover, to add to the complexity, the explanatory factors vary in their importance over time, over different issues, and over whether it is Congress or the executive branch that is the primary policymaking institution. Given this complexity, all we can really say is that the explanation for U.S. policy in the Middle East in general and towards Israel in particular is multi-causal.

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