

The Israel Lobby and the U.S. National Interest

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As Realists, Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the U.S national interest should be the main concern in its foreign policy. However, in the Middle East they claim this has not been the case, as the focus of foreign policy has been centred disproportionately on Israel. They claim that it is not due to any moral obligation, or Israel being a strategic asset and has resulted in the US setting aside “its own security in order to advance the interests of another state” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a p1). The resultant damaging situation is due “almost entirely” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a p1) to domestic politics in the United States, which allows special interest groups, in this case the Israel Lobby, to divert foreign policy, an influence that realists despise. They controversially use a wider definition of The Lobby to include a “loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to shape U.S foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a p.14). They insist that “no lobby has managed to divert U.S foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a).

Their work has led to a wide debate on whether the Lobby has indeed “diverted” US foreign policy and to what extent. Problematically they have alone defined what the national interest is and therefore many have contested it. First the claim that US foreign policy is diverted by the lobby, as the empirical evidence shows that there is no moral obligation and that Israel is no longer a strategic asset, has been criticised by supporters of the “special relationship” and more convincingly by writers who are more critical of US foreign policy (Mearsheimer and Walt et al 2006e). Second, the Mearsheimer and Walt illustrate the power of the lobby in process of foreign policy making. However, this too can be criticised as their power is much more limited in the executive branch. Finally, these two academics insist that US foreign policy would have been different if the Israel lobby did not exist. This again has been highly contested by those who claim that the lobby only appears powerful as it is already consistent with the already the foreign policy agenda (Mearsheimer and Walt et al 2006e). Overall, Mearsheimer and Walt present a convincing argument and highlight that there is indeed some influence at the hands of the lobby, however they overemphasize the extent to which this special interest group can divert US foreign policy, they do not acknowledge the importance of a range of factors at play in the making of foreign policy. Additionally their definition of what the national interest is can also be contested.

Mearsheimer and Walt claim Israel has now become a liability. The justification of US support for Israel since the 1990s and after September 11, has been that “both states are threatened by terrorist groups originating in the Arab or Muslim world, and by a set of “rogue states” that back these groups and seek WMD” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a p4). They highlight that this justification is flawed as it fails to recognise that the US and Israel do not face the same terrorist problems. Its alliance, is not the only, but it is an important source of anti-Americanism and lack of popular US support in the region. Also rogue states are not a dire threat to the US interests, and the US’s alliance with Israel makes it difficult to deal with these states. Furthermore, due to fragile relations, the US is not able to rely on Israel’s military capability when dealing with states in the region. They conclude that the empirical evidence shows that Israel is of no strategic value and therefore the force that pushes foreign policy to align with Israel, is the power of the Israel Lobby (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a).

Some have pointed out that it is inaccurate to claim that just because foreign policy has proven strategically damaging, that it must be the Israel lobby diverting foreign policy. There are a variety of influences that create foreign policy.

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Mearsheimer and Walt fail to distinguish misconceptions of the national interest (Slater 2009) or even acknowledge alternative ideas of the national interest such as those in line with American exceptionalism, or the neoconservatives. Past administrations have proven capable of carrying out destructive foreign policy because they believed it to be in the national interest (Zunes 2009).

Many critics of US foreign policy contest this depiction of the US strategic position in the Middle East. Firstly, US foreign policy has rarely tried to win popular approval, but usually support minority regimes or dictatorships that serve its own interests in the region (Massad in Mearsheimer, Walt 2006e). Second, writers point out that the US has been able to be Israel's biggest financier and defender whilst still maintaining a strategic alliance with many Arab dictatorships throughout the region. Indeed US companies still have the most dominant presence in this region, despite its alliance with Israel (Massad in Mearsheimer, Walt 2006e). Mearsheimer and Walt fail to point out the profits made by US corporations because of its alliance, such as the US-Saudi's energy Corporation profits due to Israel's ability to prevent secular Arab nationalism using resources for domestic profit (Chomsky in Mearsheimer, Walt 2006e). Third, the US has been able to use Israel militarily, by using them to carry out policies that would be too controversial for the United States, such as Israel providing weapons to governments and opposition movements supported by the US, such as apartheid South Africa, Iran's Islamic Republic, Guatemala's rightist juntas and Nicaragua's Contras (Zunes 2009). Zunes (2009) has also pointed out the use of Israel during the Gulf War 1991 and Iraq War 2003. Furthermore Zunes (2009) argues that aid given to Israel is not due to the lobby but is a reflection of Israel's strategic importance to the US. These controversial policies therefore are in line with the narrow idea of national interest carried out by US governments, not because the Israel lobby diverted foreign policy.

Mearsheimer and Walt then go on to explain that the claim that foreign policy is driven by moral obligation is again not convincing. Firstly, the claim that the US is backing a weak state faced by aggressive enemies is flawed, however if they were really "backing the underdog" (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a p8), then they would support the Palestinians. Second, the claim that the US is backing a fellow democracy is again unconvincing, as the US has overthrown democratic governments in the past, and Israel's version of democracy is questionable. Third, the claim that foreign policy toward Israel needs to embrace compensation for past suffering again ignores the position of a "largely innocent third part: the Palestinians". Finally, the claim that US support is due to "virtuous Israelis" versus "evil Arabs", ignores the horrific behaviour of the Israeli state. Again they conclude that there is no moral obligation pushing US foreign policy, and therefore it is the Israel Lobby that has diverted it (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a).

Although Mearsheimer and Walt have a strong argument supporters of the alliance with Israel would contest this view, and claim the Americans genuinely feel a moral obligation toward Israel and a cultural affinity, therefore one cannot claim that the Lobby diverts foreign policy but that foreign policy is in line with the beliefs of policy makers and the American public (Slater 2009).

Mearsheimer and Walt give a detailed argument with evidence to illustrate how the Israeli lobby affects the foreign policy process. They say its power derives from its influence in voting behaviour in elections, money, and its efficient organization, its lack of opposition (although Zunes (2009) would argue that the powerful oil lobby plays this role), its ability to stifle public discourse, and its ability to appeal to Jewish officials in positions of power (Slater 2009). Most convincing, is their explanation of the lobby's "raw power" (Slater 2009 p19) in Congress, as it has the ability to punish or reward members. Many have claimed that it has provided an insight into the "consequences of the growing role of lobbies... given the increased inclination of the U.S Congress to become engaged in legislating for foreign policy" (Brzezinski p64), this is reflected in the ability of Congress to pass controversial resolutions which create difficulty for Presidents, such as the resolution to move the US's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a). Mearsheimer and Walt highlight the "influence" the Lobby has in the executive branch. Crucially however, their argument becomes weak as they overemphasize the ability of the lobby to influence the President's decisions on national security and priority foreign policy issues (Slater 2009).

The two academics have been applauded for breaking a taboo (Mearsheimer and Walt et al 2006f), and have shown how important public discourse has been stifled by the lobby's influence in the media, think tanks, and on university campuses, the most effective tool at their disposal being the accusation of anti-Semitism when one criticises US's relationship with Israel (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a). Although some have criticised it is exaggerated (Slater

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2009).

Most importantly, Mearsheimer and Walt go through case studies of US foreign policy in the Middle East such as those toward the Palestine-Israel conflict, Syria, Lebanon War 2006, Iran and Iraq, highlighting the disastrous consequences and come to the conclusion that “the activities of groups and individuals who make up the lobby are the main reason why the US pursues policies in the Middle East that make little sense on either strategic or moral grounds. Were it not for the lobby’s efforts... US policy... would be significantly different than it is today” (Slater 2009 p7). This point has been supported by others who claim that the invasion of Iraq was not motivated by al-Qaeda or even solely oil, and that “an examination of the United States network of capillary power conformed by neoconservatism and the Israel lobby provides a better explanation for the war, since the ideology of these groups has sought to target Iraq, among other countries, long before the events of September 11, 2001”. (Perezalanzo 2006 p2).

However, many others have been highly critical of this assertion, claiming that it frees the US government from “responsibility and guilt that it deserves for its policies” (Massad in Mearsheimer, Walt 2006e). In fact the reality is that US foreign policy in the Middle East is consistent with its policy in many other regions, such as Latin America. This is because it is in line with interests of elites in government and US corporations that work to establish US hegemony (Chomsky 1999), “the unfortunate reality is that the U.S government is perfectly capable of supporting right-wing allies to invade, repress, and colonize weaker neighbours without a well-organized ethnic minority somehow forcing Congress or the administration to do so” (Zunes 2009 p3). As a result the main direction and core substance of US foreign policy would have been the same without the Israel lobby; the only difference may have been details and intensity especially in areas of less concern to the United States interest (Chomsky in Mearsheimer, Walt 2006e).

In conclusion, Mearsheimer and Walt’s arguments have been contested by academics of various positions. The claim that foreign policy toward Israel is not driven by the fact that it is a strategic ally or a moral obligation but due to the power of the Israel lobby has been criticised. Those who are highly critical of U.S foreign policy highlight that the two academics fail to point out how the US controversially benefits from such an alliance in the region and that the relationship of power is the other way around (Zunes 2009). Others would argue that they do not acknowledge that foreign policy makers may still feel moral obligation (Slater 2009). However their work has highlighted how the lobby can work in the political system, the power it can wield, and the damage it can cause, but do not effectively show how this limits the Presidents foreign policy decision making and some say they often exaggerate its power (Slater 2009). The weakest part of their claim is that US foreign policy would have been different in the Middle East, as this completely exaggerates the ability of the lobby and portrays the US government in a false light (Plitnick and Toensing 2007). Overall Mearsheimer and Walt’s illustration of the lobby exaggerates the ability of interest groups to divert foreign policy, and their notion of national interest can be criticised as not in line with those who make foreign policy. They fail to acknowledge a range of factors presented by their critics which also contribute to the US’s foreign policy, of which the role of interest groups is only one part (Slater 2009).

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