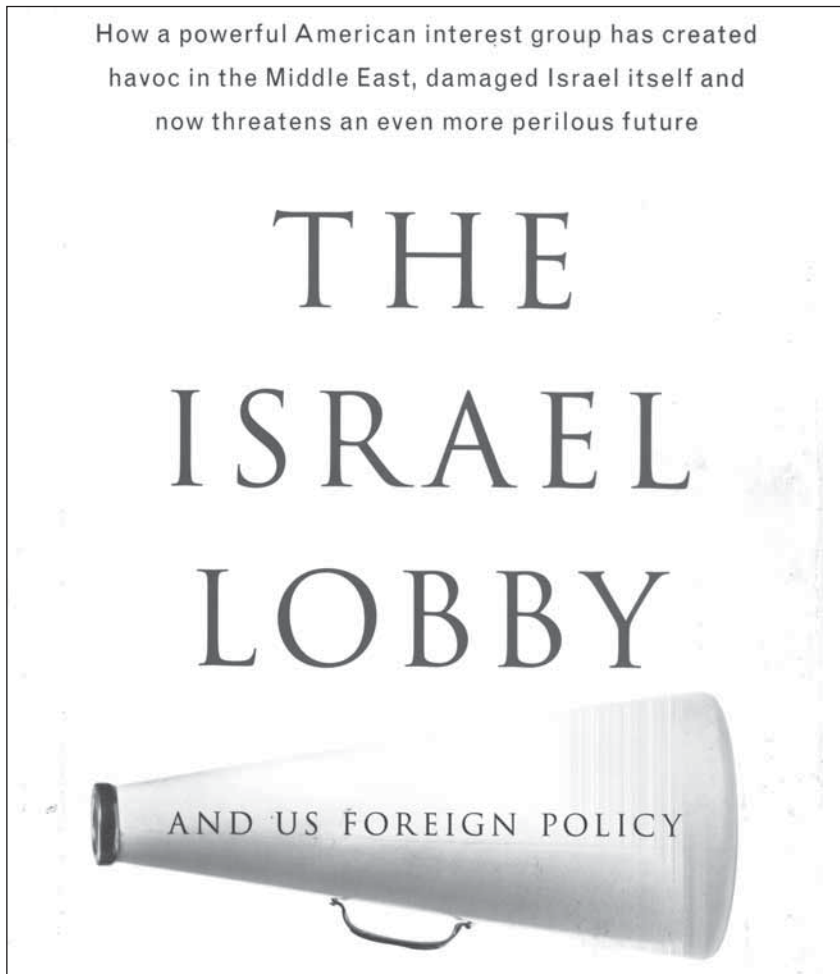


Review

The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy

(John J Mearsheimer and Stephen W Walt, Penguin/Allen Lane, 2007)

Reviewed by Alan Lipman



London Review of Books carried their essay on the firmly established USA-based Israel Lobby. The book under review has grown from that to cover recent events and, in doing so, sharpen its arguments. Mearsheimer and Walt, professors of political science and international affairs at the universities of Chicago and Harvard, have also attempted to attend to the abuse thrown at them.

The book provides a wealth of widely researched, critically analysed, fluently written material which, despite the authors' academic backgrounds, few need fear is beyond their grasp.

There is an informative Preface, an Introduction that offers an insightful overview and 11 searching chapters, ending in the 'Second Lebanon War' of 2006. A pointed, Conclusion links all the chapters to clarify their connections and sketch proposals for improving Middle East relations.

Then there are more than 100 pages of close-printed Notes dealing in detail, but not exclusively with the authors' source material. These come with crisp acknowledgments and a helpful index.

For some, this may seem formidable. I can, though, assure would-be readers that the clearly written text makes for an always beckoning rather than a forbidding read. As I became and remained gripped, it had me ever-eager for what was yet to come.

A book-review necessarily fails to match the authors' wide coverage. So, for the sake of brevity, I shall restrict myself to commenting on the twin aspects of the title – the Israel Lobby and its negative consequences for US foreign policy.

This is an explosive book, not only for its content but also for the inflammable responses it might stir.

The authors argue that the unstinted support which US administrations have expressed for Israeli policies has at the same time operated against the American people and the small but powerful Israeli state. They claim that much of this continuous backing is due to the activities of the 'Israel Lobby', a collection of groups and individuals

who seek to shape US foreign policy.

These lobbyists are known principally for the explosive nature of their hostile reaction to critics. As those who have experienced this response will surely agree, it often takes the form of bitter personal attacks. They include accusations of demonic 'islamo-fascism', 'self-hating Jewry', 'crypto-Nazism', 'anti-Semitic Semites' and other offensive denunciations.

My encounter with the authors began in early 2006 when the

Consider first the chapter headed 'What is the 'Israel Lobby'?' This covers the origins, composition and ceaseless pressure its supporters have brought to bear on successive US governments since 1948, when the Israeli state was founded. It also covers the long-term biases of the public media in the US which remains the most powerful military, political and economic state on our planet.

All this is examined in the sober-minded reports that the authors present on page after page. Their case is utterly convincing. As with the constant, aggressive pressure of the US Gun Lobby, this determined pro-Israeli group's influence is everywhere. It is as universal as it is widely successful in promoting its one-sided, always anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, usually anti-Muslim case.

The term 'Israel Lobby' is used in the book as a shorthand for, "the loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction." It is not, the authors emphasise, a conspiracy or cabal: "on the contrary, the organisations and individuals who make up the lobby operate out in the open." They can be readily identified as Mearsheimer and Walt do repeatedly, especially in the many, many notes they so conveniently attach to the text.

Then there are five chapters in which 'The Israel Lobby in Action' is unbundled. This chapter specifically reveals its participants' direct and indirect impacts on the continuing, long-suffering Palestinian people; on the also continuing, murderous Iraqi mis-adventure; on the deadly Israeli-US policies that are directed at the vulnerable population of neighbouring Lebanon and on the threatened nuclear terrors promised for the peoples of Iran and Syria.

Three disastrous wars and two probably devastating assaults! Surprisingly, the treatment of the also ruinous US-led, and now reinforced actions in Afghanistan is less thorough.

That apart, the book studiously traces the alarming and rarely subtle hand of the Lobby with meticulous care. There is little here that is superficial, trivial, hurried or irrelevant.

The authors illustrate – no, they demonstrate – how the Lobby's work has helped over and over again to damage long as well as short-term United States and Israeli interests. By encouraging the virtually unconditional US financial, military and diplomatic underpinning of Israel, by pressing for regular armament supplies to that warring state and by urging vast US deployments for seeking to remake the oil-rich Middle East, the Lobby has put at risk the standing of both the US and Israel. It has helped to entrench the hostile, the justifiably suspect view of the two seemingly inseparable states that exists across the globe.

A strategically positioned Israeli outpost of the US empire appears by the open, and less open, actions of its helpmates in the US imperial heartland, to be calling the tunes danced by the warlike centre. A case of the tail wagging the dog?

Indeed, the authors explain their decision to publish in a similar manner: "If U.S. support for Israel was a significant source of anti-Americanism in the Middle East and a source of tension with key strategic allies, and if pro-Israel groups and individuals were a major influence on U.S. foreign policy in this vital region, then it [is] important to raise the issue openly and encourage public discussion of the lobby's actions and impact."

So, as Shakespeare memorably wrote, "If you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them." Do so for the parties locked in the Palestinian-Israeli war, especially the long-embattled Arab peoples. Weep for the militarily dominant, ever-aggressive Israelis. Grieve for the Palestinians, the oppressed of some 30 and more years of punishing, often deadly struggle.

Having many years ago let slip the dogs of war, there appears to be little for the unevenly matched US and Israel but further to entrench their hostilities. They, seemingly without end, fuel and then refuel the hatred that is maintained by, among other horrors, repeated cycles of suicide and aerial bombings. Each actual or perceived attack deepens the tensions and mistrust including the daily humiliations imposed by an Israeli regime of a ruthless, heartless occupation. Each so-called 'defensive' act calls for retribution, followed by counter retaliation. And so on, and on, and on.

These cheerless thoughts are occasioned by a reading of the book under review: the revealing story of the powerful US Israel Lobby in action. This is a report of deep research into one of the immediate challenges of our day. A challenge that has horrifying parallels with the recent anti-racist struggles from which South Africa has, and yet has not, emerged. There is far too much here that we South Africans can recognise.

As a fellow Jew, but, I imagine, like the authors not a Zionist, I can do no better than conclude by quoting from Mearsheimer and Walt's final page. There they write that Israel's "current policies are at odds with America's own national interests and certain core U.S. values. Unfortunately, in recent years the lobby's political clout and public relations... have discouraged U.S. leaders from pursuing Middle East policies that would advance American interests and protect Israel from its worst mistakes." The Lobby, they declare, has been bad for both countries: "what is needed... is a candid... discussion of the lobby's influence and a more open debate about U.S. interests."

It is to that end that their book is addressed. LB

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