

The Intellectual Assault on Israel and Pro-Israel Advocacy: How the American Jewish Community Should React

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- American support for Israel historically has rested on four main pillars: the high esteem Jews enjoy within American society; the strong base of Christianity within American culture; the kinship Americans have for a fellow democracy; and, especially since 9/11, the common foes that confront both America and Israel. None of these pillars may be taken for granted; nor are they necessarily unequivocal.
- The critical ingredient in the success of pro-Israel advocacy has been the question of how compelling is the case for Israel. One constant of recent American Jewish history has been that for nearly sixty years the idea of Israel has been compelling for Americans generally. The bipartisanship of support for Israel is perhaps the strongest refutation of those who claim that a Jewish minority has hijacked American foreign policy on behalf of Israel's interests.
- The underlying problem pro-Israel advocates face particularly on campus is less hostility to Israel than ignorance or indifference toward it. Not knowing leads to not caring, and not caring leads to questioning why America should support the Jewish state.
- Supporting Israel assumes an American Jewish community that is knowledgeable, committed, and surefooted in its pro-Israel mindset and its Jewish identity. As American Jews become increasingly assimilated, as a distinctive Jewish identity erodes, continued American Jewish support for Israel may well attenuate.

American support for Israel historically has rested on four main pillars: the high esteem Jews enjoy within American society; the strong base of Christianity within American culture; the kinship Americans have for a fellow democracy; and, especially since 9/11, the common foes that confront both America and Israel.

None of these pillars may be taken for granted; nor are they necessarily unequivocal. For example, the base of Christian support for Israel often is accompanied by promillenarian sentiments, with some going so far as to claim that the destruction of Israel may constitute divine retribution for Jewish failures to acknowledge Christ.¹ Moreover, as Boston University professor Richard Landes has noted concerning millenarianism generally, Christian disappointment with failed millenarianism often has translated into scapegoating Jewish behaviors.²

Second, the nature of minority politics in a democratic society mandates that minorities will succeed only to the extent that they can persuade the majority that their cause is both just and consonant with majority values and interests.³ In this context, the case for Israel has never been limited to Jewish concerns. Instead, pro-Israel activists have spared no efforts to demonstrate that friendship for Israel constitutes part of American national interests.

The critical ingredient, however, in securing success in pro-Israel advocacy has been the question of how compelling is the case for Israel. One constant of recent American Jewish history has been that for nearly sixty years the idea of Israel has been compelling for Americans generally. It has captured the support of both a Hubert Humphrey and a Ronald Reagan, or, more recently, a Bill Clinton and a George W. Bush. That bipartisanship of support for Israel is perhaps the strongest refutation of those who claim that a Jewish minority has hijacked American foreign policy on behalf of Israel's interests.

An Intellectual Assault

What, then, constitutes the recent intellectual assault on this pro-Israel consensus? Several years ago Prof. Tony Judt, a distinguished professor of history at New York University, opened the attack on Israel's legitimacy in a widely read article in the *New York Review of Books*. Titled "Israel: The Alternative," it argued that the idea of a Jewish state had already become an anachronism. Since Israel was born as a nation-state in an era of postnationalism, its very creation was a mistake.⁴

To some extent this argument may be understood as a secular equivalent of the doctrine of supersessionism. Israel as a Jewish state may have made sense after the First World War. But by the close of the Second World War, with the decline of empires and nation-states, Israel as a Jewish state had been superseded by the ideas of postnationalism.

Second, Judt argues that the contemporary leaders of Israel are heirs to Zionist "fascism." Those who were not democrats in the 1930s have been succeeded by leaders who continue this tradition uncritically. To describe Revisionist Zionist leaders in the 1930s as fascist constitutes a considerable historical error. To argue that Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert are continuing a tradition of fascism represents malicious falsehood.

Third, Judt dismisses the two-state solution as a chimera. Given the presence of nearly a quarter of a million Jewish settlers on the West Bank, he claims it would be impossible to disengage from the territory and create a Palestinian state.

Lastly, and perhaps most personally, Judt argues that Israel's existence threatens Diaspora Jews. Israel's actions embarrass Diaspora Jews and make them uncomfortable in their own settings. This argument in many respects parallels the protest of Lord Edwin Montagu, British High Commissioner of India in 1917 and heir to a distinguished Anglo-Jewish family, that he could not be expected to represent the British government in India when the Balfour Declaration had informed him that his homeland lies in Palestine.⁵

Judt concludes that the alternative solution is to redefine Israel as a binational state. He thereby resuscitates an older and discredited paradigm. To be sure, he acknowledges that a binational solution will be difficult to implement. Yet he concludes that binationalism is preferable to the other alternatives, which have now been proved failures. His argument echoes that of Israeli post-Zionists as well as the *Future Vision* statement of Israeli Arab intellectuals.⁶ Significantly, Judt provides an American base for these notions. Binationalism would be a disaster for the Jewish people and a tragedy for contemporary Israeli citizens. Nevertheless, the idea of binationalism, considered moribund just a few short years ago, today has considerable backing.

The second major assault on pro-Israel activism originated in an important article in the *London Review of Books* by Profs. Stephen Walt of Harvard University and John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, now released as a book by the prominent American publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Walt and Mearsheimer approach the issue of Israel from the "realist" school of international relations in pronounced contrast to the "idealism" of the Bush administration, which hoped to build democracy in [Iraq](#). They argue that a powerful group of pro-Israel lobbyists essentially has hijacked American foreign policy and held it hostage to Israel's interests. In turn, American pro-Israelism has sparked anti-Americanism in Europe and in the Middle East. This pro-Israel viewpoint dominates the media, the think tanks, and the universities. Lastly, the authors argue that it is virtually impossible to discuss these problems openly and candidly because Jewish intellectuals and communal leaders immediately hoist the charge of anti-Semitism against anyone who chooses to question continued American support for Israel.⁷

This last card of anti-Semitism, albeit somewhat disingenuous, does not in any case provide an effective response to the Walt-Mearsheimer assault. Whether the authors are anti-Semitic is both unprovable and beside the point. The real question for minority politics, as noted, lies in whether the arguments are compelling and whether they are consonant or dissonant with majoritarian values and interests.

Israel as Scapegoat

First, the cause of Israel remains overwhelmingly popular with the American public. Jews would never have been as successful in marshalling support for Israel if the idea of Israel had not been compelling for Americans generally. Walt and Mearsheimer, of course, argue that the Israel lobby is so powerful because it controls the major communications media. But Lincoln's adage remains apt: you can't fool all the people all the time, and pro-Israel opinion has prevailed within American society consistently since 1948.

What the authors have done is attribute America's multiple dilemmas in the Middle East largely to the problem of Israel. Former president Jimmy Carter committed virtually the same error in his recent book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.⁸ If Israel ceased to exist, the problems of oil supplies, terrorism, [Iran](#), Iraq, nuclear proliferation, Shia-Sunni divisions, and preventing the destabilization of moderate Arab regimes would still be in place. Walt, Mearsheimer, Carter, and others all have elevated American support for Israel as exacerbating all the problems confronting American foreign policy in the region. By charging that support for Israel distorts American foreign policy interests, Walt and Mearsheimer challenge the long-held bipartisan consensus that supporting Israel remains the right thing to do.

Moreover, the authors err substantially in treating the Israel lobby as monolithic. Paul Wolfowitz can in no way be equated with AIPAC, nor AIPAC with Christian Zionism; Christian Zionism can hardly be equated with pro-Israel columnists; and the American Jewish Committee can hardly be equated with the Zionist Organization of America (which the authors pointedly do). Rather than being interchangeable entities, these groupings are independent of, and often in disagreement with, one another about various aspects of Israel's policies.

To be sure, Walt and Mearsheimer concede the right of a minority to lobby for the policies it favors. That is essentially what American Jews have done. In turn, they have been responsible for building a special relationship between America and Israel that is not paralleled among other liberal democracies of the West. That is what is meant by a strategic triangle linking Israel, America, and the American Jewish community.

Walt and Mearsheimer do not quarrel with the right of Jews to advocate for Israel's interests. They resent, however, Jewish successes in doing so. Their argument brings to mind an incident recorded by Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews*. When Queen Cleopatra of Egypt invaded the realm of the Hasmonean monarch Alexander Jannai, two Jewish generals in her entourage approached her and urged her to desist lest she incur the wrath of Alexandrian Jewry.⁹ The message of these two generals expresses the political influence of a Diaspora Jewish minority some two thousand years ago that, notwithstanding some changes in context, is by no means irrelevant for contemporary American Jewish leadership.

In this context, the Jewish community should not respond by claiming powerlessness. First of all, there is no virtue in powerlessness. Second, Jews cannot purport, on the one hand, to possess influence, yet retreat the minute someone criticizes that influence. Minorities that attain power and influence do incur resentment, but minorities without influence remain in ever more precarious straits.

An American Jewish Response

How, then, should the Jewish community respond to this intellectual assault? Jews should neither trivialize it by claiming its stupidity nor dismiss it as anti-Semitic. Both those notes were struck when the article first appeared. Neither succeeded in negating the article's significance.

Third, Jews should not claim that American universities have become hotbeds of anti-Zionism or anti-Semitism. American Jews embrace university culture, and with good reason. Jews form 2

percent of the general population but 5 percent of the university-student population, 10 percent of faculty, and 20 percent of faculty at elite institutions. At certain Ivy League institutions the proportion of Jews on campus has been conservatively estimated at 20-25 percent. Such data hardly demonstrate Jewish powerlessness.¹⁰

Nor, as noted, could Jews' pro-Israel advocacy have been so successful if Israel did not appeal so much to Americans generally. Rather than "hijack" American foreign policy, pro-Israel advocates have succeeded in persuading American society that supporting Israel is the morally correct thing to do.

What should concern the community is that Americans do not understand Israel's policies concerning West Bank settlements. Pro-Israel advocates correctly argue that the settlements are hardly the primary obstacle to peace. The reason there is no Palestinian state today is the same reason no Palestinian state was created in 1947: the Arabs rejected a two-state solution then and since. Nevertheless, the weak link in the case for Israel remains the settlement policy. Americans cannot understand why Israel builds settlements in areas that ultimately are expected to form part of the state of Palestine.

No doubt the settlement issue is complex. Many defend settlements as necessary for security, as did the late Prime Minister Rabin for those in the Jordan Valley. Others invoke Zionist values and the principle of the right to settle in any part of the historical Land of Israel. However, Americans are primarily concerned about whether settlements are indeed an obstacle to peace. Do they create facts on the ground that will make Israeli withdrawal from the territories difficult, if not impossible? Israel, too, remains divided over the question of settlements. Many Israelis perceive them as a bargaining chip; others maintain that they inflame the atmosphere between Israel and the Palestinians.

In intellectual opinion specifically, the settlements have been a particular sore point of criticism of Israeli policy. In the eyes of critics such as Walt and Mearsheimer, the settlement policy casts Israel as a colonial power. Defenders of Israel are hard pressed to maintain the moral case for Israel at a moment when Israel expands West Bank settlements. Pro-Israel advocates are reduced to arguing that the settlements remain negotiable; some settlement blocs may be maintained as part of a final agreement, possibly including land swaps; and most important, the settlements themselves are not the critical obstacle to a two-state solution.

Lastly, Walt and Mearsheimer in their book, as well as in the earlier article, manage to ignore the entire context of Arab rejectionism of Israel's right to exist. They treat Arafat as a benign figure who favored a two-state solution and for whom no evidence could actually be found linking him to the *Karine-A*, a freighter captured by the Israeli navy in 2002 bearing 50 tons of weapons and explosives and apparently headed for [Gaza](#) in direct violation of the Oslo accords. Noticeably absent is the record of Arafat's rejection of the offer at Camp David in 2000 without making alternative proposals save to say that he did not believe a Jewish temple had ever existed on the Temple Mount in any case.

By the same token, American Jews are blamed for preventing a peace treaty with [Syria](#). In other words, the authors claim that a less confrontational American policy toward Syria since 9/11 by now "might well have produced a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty," and they blame AIPAC and other American Jewish groups for demonizing Syria. Putting aside questions of Syria's actions in [Lebanon](#) and elsewhere, this analysis blithely assumes Syria's willingness to agree to a full peace with Israel if only American Jews were less forceful in their pressure on Washington.

An Ongoing Commitment?

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the visibility and prestige of these intellectual assaults on Israel's legitimacy and American support for Israel, American public opinion remains overwhelmingly pro-Israel as it has been consistently since 1948.¹¹ Thus far the attacks have had no popular or

electoral impact. Candidates running for office remain quick to demonstrate their pro-Israel credentials. Americans also have no sympathy for the British-proposed boycott of Israeli universities. Over four hundred American university presidents signed a full-page ad condemning the boycott as a severe violation of the values of academic freedom.¹²

Concerns, of course, remain. For one thing, the views of Judt, Walt, and Mearsheimer may not be popular at present but could become more so in the future. Moreover, they evoke some resonance within key circles in the security and intelligence establishments. Furthermore, a number of high-profile incidents of anti-Zionism on elite campuses have caused considerable agonizing within American Jewish communal circles. In turn, people rightly question whether support for Israel is eroding within American intellectual culture.

These concerns are hardly illusory and require sustained attention. But the underlying problem pro-Israel advocates face on campus is less hostility to Israel than ignorance or indifference toward it. Not knowing leads to not caring, and not caring leads to questioning why America should support the Jewish state.¹³

In other words, the appropriate way to engage the campus on Israel is not through glib slogans or counterpropaganda—no matter how factually accurate. Instead, the campus should be engaged academically through courses, curricula, and scholarship on Israel. If the cause of Israel is just, then more education on Israel will lead both to greater knowledge about it and greater caring.

Concern about Israel's image within American culture, however, raises the question of Israel's image among American Jews. Are American Jews still persuaded that Israel's cause is just? Here, confidence is not in order. Supporting Israel assumes an American Jewish community that is knowledgeable, committed, and surefooted in its pro-Israel mindset and its Jewish identity. It assumes an American Jewish community that is willing to state clearly that it cares passionately about the future of the Jewish state. However, as American Jews become increasingly assimilated, as a distinctive Jewish identity erodes, American Jewish support may well prove to be the real weak link in the case for Israel.

American society at large remains open to persuasion that America's support for Israel is just. Whether the Jews will care enough about their Jewishness to continue to make that case remains an open question. The distancing from Jewish matters in general is at the core of American Jewish distancing from Israel. However remote the possibility may seem today, a Jewish community in danger of losing its Judaic distinctiveness may one day no longer be sufficiently committed to engage in pro-Israel activism.

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Notes

1. Examples of the latter are cited in Eric Sunquist, *Strangers in the Land* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 430, and Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1992), ch. 6.

2. Richard Landes, "What Happens when Jesus Doesn't Come? Jewish and Christian Relations in Apocalyptic Times," in *Millennial Violence: Past Present and Future*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 243-74.

3. Irving Greenberg, *The Growth of an American Jewish Political Culture* (New York: CLAL: The National Jewish Center of Learning and Leadership, 1989), 7.
4. Tony Judt, "Israel: The Alternative," *New York Review of Books*, 25 September 2003.
5. "How could he negotiate with the peoples of India on behalf of His Majesty's Government, if the world had just been told that His Majesty's Government regarded his national home as being in Turkish territory?" cited in Ronald Sanders, *The High Walls of Jerusalem* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), 592. See also Leonard Stein, *The Balfour Declaration* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), 498-99.
6. On post-Zionism, see Rochelle Furstenberg, *Post-Zionism* (New York: American Jewish Committee and Bar-Ilan University, 1997). On Israeli Arab intellectuals, see *The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel* (Nazareth: National Committee for the Heads of Arab Local Authorities in Israel, 2006).
7. Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, "The Israel Lobby," *London Review of Books*, 23 March 2006; idem, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007).
8. Jimmy Carter, *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
9. "For I would not have you ignorant of this, that any injustice you inflict on him [Alexander Jannai] will make all us Jews your enemies," Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Book XIII: 1-2.
10. *American Jewry and the College Campus: Best of Times or Worst of Times* (New York: American Jewish Committee, Koppelman Institute, 2005), esp. 1-2.
11. E.g., see CBS News Poll, 13-14 May 2002. By a margin of 47-17, Americans sympathized with Israel rather than the Palestinians. Available at www.pollingreport.com.
12. *New York Times*, 8 August, 2007, 13. Seen at <http://www.ajc.org/>.
13. Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences?* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press 2001), ch. 10.