

# The American Interest

*Martin Kramer*

The question of whether Israel is or is not an asset to the United States is one we rarely bother to ask ourselves. Time and again, we see prominent Americans—presidents of the United States at the forefront—emphasizing their special relationship with Israel. In polls of American public opinion, Israel scores very high marks, while sympathy for the Palestinians, never very high, continues to drop. Why should we even ask ourselves whether Israel is an asset or a liability to the United States? Isn't the answer obvious?

Most supporters of Israel, when pressed to go a bit deeper, will give two prime rationales for why the United States should back Israel. One is a moral obligation to the Jewish people, grounded in the history of Jewish persecution and culminating in the Holocaust. Israel, so this thinking goes, is something the civilized world owes to the Jewish people, having inflicted an unprecedented genocide upon it. This is a potent rationale, but it is not clear why that would make Israel an asset to the United States. If supporting Israel is an obligation, then it could be described as a liability—a burden to be borne. And of course, as time passes, that sense of obligation is bound to diminish.

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Another powerful rationale is the fact that Israel is a democracy, even an outpost of democracy, in a benighted part of the world. But the fact is that there are many non-democratic states that have been allies of the United States, and important assets as well. Quite arguably, the Saudi monarchy is an asset to the United States, because it assures the flow of oil at reasonable prices, a key American interest. In contrast, the Palestinian Authority and Iran, which have many more democratic practices than Saudi Arabia, are headaches to the United States, for having empowered the likes of Hamas and Ahmadinejad through elections. So the fact that Israel is a democracy is not proof positive that it is an American asset.

Nevertheless, the Holocaust argument and the democracy argument are more than sufficient for the vast majority of Americans. On this basis alone, they would extend to Israel support, even unqualified support. And there is an important segment of opinion in America, comprising evangelical Christians, who probably do not even need these arguments. Israel is, for them, the manifestation of a divine plan, and they support it as a matter of faith.

But everywhere in the West, there is a sliver of elite opinion that is not satisfied with these rationales. It includes policymakers and analysts, journalists, and academics. By habit and by preference, they have a tendency to view any consensus with skepticism. In their opinion, the American people cannot possibly be wiser than them—after all, look whom they elect—and so they deliberately take a contrary position on issues around which there is broad agreement. In this spirit, many of them view U.S. support for Israel as a prime focal point for skepticism.

In March, two American professors subjected the U.S.-Israel relationship to a skeptic's examination. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, the former from the University of Chicago, the latter from Harvard, published a paper under the title "The Israel Lobby: Israel in U.S. Foreign Policy." One version appeared in the *London Review of Books*; a longer, footnoted version was posted on the website of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. The paper caused a firestorm.

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Mearsheimer and Walt are academic oracles of the so-called realist school in international relations. Realism, in its policy application, is an approach that seeks to isolate the conduct of foreign affairs from sentimental moral considerations and special interests like ethnic and commercial lobbies, and to base it instead on a pure concept of the national interest. Realists are not interested in historical obligations, or in whether this or that potential ally respects human rights. They see themselves as coldly weighing U.S. interests, winnowing out extraneous considerations, and ending up with policies that look out solely for number one: The United States.

Realist thinkers are not isolationists, but they are extremely reluctant to see U.S. power expended on projects and allies that do not directly serve some U.S. interest as they define it—and they define these interests quite narrowly. Generally, they oppose visionary ideas of global transformation, which they see as American empire in disguise. And empire, they believe, is a drain on American resources. They are particularly reluctant to commit American troops, preferring that the United States follow a policy of “off-shore balancing” wherever possible—that is, playing rivals off one another.

These were the principles that guided Mearsheimer and Walt when they examined the United States-Israel relationship. And this was their finding: By any “objective” measure, American support for Israel is a liability. It causes Arabs and Muslims to hate America, and that hate in turn generates terrorism. The prime interest of the United States in the Middle East is the cultivation of cooperation with Arabs and Muslims, many of whom detest Israel, its policies, or both. The less the United States is identified as a supporter and friend of Israel’s five million Jews, the easier it will be for it to find local proxies to keep order among the billion or so Muslims. And the only thing that has prevented the United States from seeing this clearly is the pro-Israel lobby, operating through fronts as diverse as the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and so on.

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This “Israel Lobby,” with a capital *L*, has effectively hijacked U.S. policy in the Middle East so that it serves Israel’s, not America’s, interests. In one of their most provocative claims, the authors argue that Israel spurred its neo-conservative allies in Washington to press for the Iraq war—a war that served no identifiable U.S. interest, but which was waged largely for Israeli security. And, they continue, the growing drumbeat for an attack on Iran also has its ultimate source in the Lobby. A nuclear Iran would not constitute a threat to the United States, they argue, and military action against Iran would not be in America’s interest, since it would inflame the Arab and Muslim worlds yet again, producing a wave of anti-American terror and damaging the American economy.

**T**he Mearsheimer-Walt thesis is not a new one. What is new is the prestige that they lent to these ideas. Because their paper appeared on the Kennedy School website, it soon became known as the “Harvard study” on the Israel lobby. Harvard is one of the most recognizable names in the world, familiar to every American from high school on up. Their study could not be ignored, and the responses came fast and furious.

Many of them took the form of reiterating the two arguments I mentioned earlier: Israel as a moral obligation of the West, and Israel as a democracy. These arguments are compelling, or at least they are compelling when made well. But for argument’s sake, let us set aside the claim that Israel and the United States share democratic values, rooted in a common Judeo-Christian tradition. Let us set aside the fact that the American public has a deep regard for Israel, shown in poll after poll. Let us just ask a simple question: Is Israel a strategic asset or a strategic liability for the United States, in realist terms?

My answer, to anticipate my conclusion, is this: United States support for Israel is not primarily the result of Holocaust guilt or shared democratic values; nor is it produced by the machinations of the “Israel Lobby.” American support for Israel—indeed, the illusion of its unconditionality—underpins

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the *pax Americana* in the eastern Mediterranean. It has compelled Israel's key Arab neighbors to reach peace with Israel and to enter the American orbit. The fact that there has not been a general Arab-Israeli war since 1973 is proof that this *pax Americana*, based on the United States-Israel alliance, has been a success. From a realist point of view, supporting Israel has been a low-cost way of keeping order in part of the Middle East, managed by the United States from offshore and without the commitment of any force. It is, simply, the ideal realist alliance.

In contrast, the problems the United States faces in the Persian Gulf stem from the fact that it does not have an Israel equivalent there, and so it must massively deploy its own force at tremendous cost. Since no one in the Gulf is sure that the United States has the staying power to maintain such a presence over time, the Gulf keeps producing defiers of America, from Khomeini to Saddam to Bin Laden to Ahmadinejad. The United States has to counter them, not in the interests of Israel, but to keep the world's great reserves of oil out of the grip of the West's sworn enemies.

Allow me to substantiate my conclusion with a brief dash through the history of Israel's relationship with the United States. Between 1948 and 1967, the United States largely adhered to a zero-sum concept of Middle Eastern politics. The United States recognized Israel in 1948, but it did not do much to help it defend itself for fear of alienating Arab monarchs, oil sheikhs, and the "Arab street." That was the heyday of the sentimental State Department Arabists and the profit-driven oil companies. It did not matter that the memory of the Holocaust was fresh: The United States remained cautious, and attempted to appear "evenhanded." This meant that the United States embargoed arms both to Israel and to the Arabs.

So Israel went elsewhere. It bought guns from the Soviet bloc, and fighter aircraft and a nuclear reactor from France. It even cut a deal with its old adversary Britain at the time of the Suez adventure in 1956. Israel was not in the U.S. orbit, and it did not get significant American aid.

Nevertheless, the radical Arab states gravitated toward the Soviet Union for weapons and aid. Israel felt vulnerable, and the Arab countries still

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believed they could eliminate Israel by war. In every decade, this insecurity indeed produced war: 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. The United States was not invested heavily enough to prevent these wars; its diplomacy simply kicked in to stop them after the initial energy was spent.

Only in June 1967, with Israel's lightning victory over three of its neighbors, did the United States begin to see Israel differently, as a military power in its own right. The Arab-Israeli war that erupted in October 1973 did even more to persuade the United States of Israel's power. Although Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel, Israel bounded back to achieve what military analysts have called its greatest victory, repulsing an enemy that might have overwhelmed a less determined and resourceful people.

It was then that the United States began to look at Israel as a potential strategic ally. Israel appeared to be the strongest, most reliable, and most cost-effective bulwark against Soviet penetration of the Middle East. It could defeat any combination of Soviet clients on its own, and in so doing, humiliate the Soviet Union and drive thinking Arabs out of the Soviet camp.

The 1973 war had another impact on American thinking. Until then, Arab-Israeli wars did not threaten the oil flow, but that war led to an Arab oil embargo. Another Arab-Israeli war might have the same impact or worse, so the United States therefore resolved to prevent such wars by creating a security architecture—a *pax Americana*.

One way to build it would have been to squeeze Israel relentlessly. But the United States understood that making Israel feel less secure would only increase the likelihood of another war and encourage the Arab states to prepare for yet another round. Instead, the American solution was to show such strong support for Israel as to make Arab states despair of defeating it, and fearful of the cost of trying. To this purpose, the United States brought Israel entirely into its orbit, making of it a dependent client through arms and aid.

That strategy worked. Expanded American support for Israel persuaded Egypt to switch camps and abandon its Soviet alliance, winning the Cold

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War for the United States in the Middle East. Egypt thus became an American ally alongside Israel, and not instead of Israel. The zero-sum theory of the Arabists—Israel or the Arabs, but not both—collapsed. American Middle East policy underwent its Copernican revolution.

**B**efore 1973, the Arab states thought they might defeat or destroy Israel by some stroke of luck, and they tried their hand at it repeatedly. Since 1973, the Arab states have understood not only that Israel is strong, but that the United States is fully behind it.

As a result, there have been no more general Arab-Israeli wars, and Israel's Arab neighbors have either made peace with it (Egypt, Jordan), or kept their border quiet (Syria). The corner of the Middle East along the eastern Mediterranean has been free of crises requiring direct American military intervention. This is due to American support for Israel—a support that appears so unequivocal to the Arabs that they have despaired of overturning it.

United States support for Israel has also enhanced its standing in another way, as the only force, in Arab eyes, that can possibly persuade Israel to cede territory it has occupied since 1967. In a paradoxical way, the United States has been a major beneficiary of the Israeli occupation of Arab territories: Arab leaders who wish to regain lost territory must pass an American test. When they do, the United States rewards them, and the result has been a network of American-endorsed agreements based on American-mediated Israeli concessions.

It is this “peace process” that has turned even revolutionary Arab leaders into supplicants at the White House door. They would not be there if a strong Israel did not hold something they want, and if the United States was not in a position to deliver it.

Compare this to the situation in the Persian Gulf, where American allies are weak. There, the absence of a strong ally has bedeviled American policy and forced the United States to intervene repeatedly. The irresolute Iranian

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shah, once deemed a United States “pillar,” collapsed in the face of an anti-American upsurge, producing the humiliation of the embassy seizure and a hostile, entrenched, terror-sponsoring regime still bent on driving the United States out of the Gulf. Saddam Hussein, for some years America’s ally, launched a bloody eight-year war against Iran that produced waves of anti-American terror (think Lebanon), only to turn against the United States by occupying Kuwait and threatening the defenseless Saudi Arabia.

Absent a strong ally in the region, the United States has had to deploy, deploy, and deploy again. In the Kuwait and Iraq wars, it has put something like a million sets of boots on the ground in the Gulf, at a cost that surely exceeds a trillion dollars.

It is precisely because the Gulf does not have an Israel—a strong, capable local ally—that the United States cannot balance from offshore. If the United States is not perceived to be willing to send troops there—and it will only be perceived as such if it does sometimes send them—then big, nationalist states (formerly Iraq, today Iran) will attempt to muscle Saudi Arabia and the smaller Arab Gulf states, which have the larger reserves of oil. In the Gulf, the United States has no true allies. It has only dependencies, and their defense will continue to drain American resources until the day Americans give up their SUVs.

In Israel, by contrast, the United States is allied to a militarily adept, economically vibrant state that keeps its part of the Middle East in balance. The United States has to help maintain that balance with military aid, peace plans, and diplomatic initiatives. But this is at relatively low cost, and many of the costs flow back to the United States in the form of arms sales and useful Israeli technological innovations.

In the overall scheme of the *pax Americana*, then, American policy toward Israel and its neighbors over the past thirty years has been a tremendous success. Has the United States brought about a final lamb-lies-down-with-lion peace? No; the issues are too complex. Are the Arabs reconciled to American support for Israel? No; they are highly critical of it. But according to the realist model, a policy that upholds American interests without the

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dispatch of American troops is a success by definition. American support of Israel has achieved precisely that.

Then there is the argument that American support for Israel is the source of popular resentment, propelling recruits to al-Qaida. I do not know of any unbiased terrorism expert who subscribes to this notion. Israel has been around for almost sixty years, and it has always faced terrorism. Countless groups are devoted to it. But never has a terror group emerged that is devoted solely or even primarily to attacking the United States for its support of Israel. Terrorists devoted to killing Americans emerged only after the United States began to enlarge its own military footprint in the Gulf. Al-Qaida emerged from the American deployment in Saudi Arabia. And even when al-Qaida and its affiliates mention Palestine as a grievance, it is as one grievance among many, the other grievances being American support for authoritarian Arab regimes, and now the American presence in Iraq.

And speaking of Iraq, we are left with the argument that the United States went to war there at the impetus of Israel and the “Israel Lobby.” This is simply a falsehood, and has no foundation in fact. It is not difficult to show that in the year preceding the Iraq war, Israel time and again disagreed with the United States, arguing that Iran posed the greater threat. Israel shed no tears over Saddam’s demise, and it gave full support to the United States once the Bush administration made its choice. But the assertion that the Iraq war is being waged on behalf of Israel is pure fiction.

As for the suggestion that only Israel is threatened by an Iranian nuclear capability, no assumption could be more naïve. True, Iran has threatened Israel, and it is a threat Israel cannot afford to ignore. But it is not the first threat of its kind. In the spring before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, he declared that “we will make fire eat up half of Israel if it tries to do anything against Iraq.” The threat was meant to win him Arab-Muslim support, but his real objective was to stand like a colossus astride the oil-soaked Gulf. And so while he threatened strong Israel, he actually attacked and invaded weak Kuwait.

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This is unquestionably the first ambition of Iran: The wresting of the Persian Gulf from United States domination. A nuclear Iran—the nuclearization of the world’s great oil reservoir—could allow Iran to foment and manage crises almost at will. Iran, without invading any other country, or using a nuclear weapon, could fill its coffers to overflowing simply by rattling a nuclear sabre. Remember that Iran derives more than eighty percent of its export revenue from oil, and its intensified nuclear talk has already contributed to windfall revenues. This year Iran will make \$55 billion from oil; it made only a little more than half that in 2004. Every rise of a dollar in price is a billion dollars in revenue for Iran. A nuclear Iran could rattle nerves even more convincingly, and drive the price to \$100 a barrel.

So Iran has a structural interest in Gulf volatility; the rest of the developed and developing world, which depends on oil, has the opposite interest. The world wants the *pax Americana* perpetuated, not undermined. That is why the Europeans have worked so closely with the United States over Iran—not for Israel’s sake, but for their own.

A nuclear Iran would also be a realist’s nightmare, because it could push the Saudis and other Arabs in the nuclear direction. Israel has a nuclear deterrent, but Saudi Arabia does not. To prevent it from seeking one, the United States would have to put it under an American nuclear umbrella. Other Arab states might demand the same. And so the United States might be compelled to extend NATO-like status to its Arab dependencies, promising to go to war to defend them. If it did not, the full nuclearization of the Gulf would be only a matter of time.

In summation, American support for Israel—again, the illusion of its unconditionality—has compelled Israel’s Arab neighbors to join the *pax Americana* or at least acquiesce in it. I would expect realists, of all people, to appreciate the success of this policy. After all, the United States manages the *pax Americana* in the eastern Mediterranean from offshore, out of the line of sight. Is this not precisely where realists think the United States should stand? A true realist, I would think, would recoil from any policy shift that might threaten to undermine this structure.

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Among the many perplexing things in the Mearsheimer-Walt paper, certainly none is so perplexing as this. After all, if the United States were to adopt what they call a more “evenhanded” policy, Israeli insecurity would increase and Arab ambitions would be stoked. Were such a policy to overshoot its mark, it could raise the likelihood of an Arab-Israeli war that could endanger access to oil. Why would anyone tempt fate—and endanger an absolutely vital American interest—by embarking on such a policy?

That is why I see the Mearsheimer-Walt paper as a betrayal of the hard-nosed realism the authors supposedly represent. Sometimes I wonder whether they are realists after all. Mearsheimer and Walt urge “using American power to achieve a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians.” Is this realism, or romanticism? After all, “just peace” is purely subjective, and its definition is contested between and among Palestinians and Israelis. Its blind pursuit might be destabilizing in ways which damage American interests. This hardly seems like a cautious and prudent use of American power. The aim of American policy should be the construction of an American peace, one that serves American interests, not the unstable claims of “justice.”

**T**he arguments for supporting Israel are many and varied, and no one argument is decisive. Morality- and values-based arguments are crucial, but a compelling realist argument can also be made for viewing Israel as an asset to the West. It does not take a “Lobby” to explain this to the hard-nosed strategic thinkers in the White House and the Pentagon. Of course, Israel always welcomes help from friends, but it does not need the whole array of organizations that claim to work on its behalf. The rationale for keeping Israel strong is hardwired in the realities of the Middle East. The United States does not have an alternative ally of comparable power. And if the institutions of the lobby were to disappear tomorrow, it is quite likely that American and other Western support would continue unabated.

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That Israel looms so large as a valuable ally and asset, in a Middle East of failed and failing states, is an achievement in which Israel can rightly take pride. But it must never be taken for granted. Israel has come perilously close to doing so in recent years, by unilaterally evacuating occupied territory—first in Lebanon, but more importantly in Gaza. Whatever the merits of “disengagement” in its various forms, it effectively cuts out the United States as a broker, and has created the impression that Arabs can regain territory by force, outside the framework of the *pax Americana*.

The main beneficiaries of this Israeli strategy have been Hezbollah and Hamas, which are the strike forces of anti-Americanism in the region. It is true that American democracy promotion has also been responsible for the rising fortunes of such groups. But Israeli ceding of territory outside the framework of American mediation has marginalized U.S. diplomacy. Israel has made Hamas and Hezbollah, which claim to have seized territory through “resistance,” appear stronger than America’s Arab clients, who had to sign American-mediated peace deals to restore their territory. If Israel is to preserve its value as a client, its territorial concessions must appear to be made in Washington.

For Israel to remain a strategic asset, it must also win on the battlefield. If Israel’s power and prowess are ever cast into doubt, it will not only undercut Israel’s deterrence *vis-à-vis* its hostile neighbors. It will undermine Israel’s value to the United States as the dependable stabilizer of the Levant. Israel’s lackluster performance in its battle with Hezbollah in the summer of 2006 left its many admirers in Washington shaking their heads in disappointment. The United States, which has seen faceless insurgents shred its own plans for Iraq, knows what it is to be surprised by the force of “resistance.” But Washington expected more of Israel, battling a familiar adversary in its own backyard.

If Walt and Mearsheimer were right, the disappointment would hardly matter, since the legendary Lobby would make up the difference between American expectations and Israeli performance. But since the professors are wrong, Israel needs to begin the work of repair. Preserving American

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support comes at a price: The highest possible degree of military preparedness and political resolve, leaving no doubt in Washington that Israel can keep its neighborhood in line. The United States-Israel relationship rests on Israel's willingness to pay that price. No lobby, however effective, can mitigate the damage if the United States ever concludes that Israel suffers from a systemic, permanent weakness.

While many Arabs have rushed to that conclusion since the summer war, Americans have not. But a question hangs over Israel, and it will be posed to Israel again, probably sooner rather than later. When it is, Israel must replace the question mark with an exclamation point.

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