

Introduction

The United States and Israel have long had a “special relationship.” In May 1948 the United States became the first country in the world to recognize the Zionist state, and has been a critical ally and benefactor ever since. One measure of the special relationship is financial. The small state of Israel, with a population of about 8.5 million, is “the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign assistance since World War II.”¹

This book analyzes the foundations and early history of a critical component of the special relationship: the pro-Israel lobby. The lobby has proven to be a controversial topic, and perhaps for that reason it remains understudied. One result of the absence of historical analysis is the tendency to associate the Israel lobby with the more recent past. In fact, however, the extensive lobbying efforts of American Zionists predate the creation of Israel and flourished throughout the first generation of the special relationship. The Israel lobby today is broadly based, well funded, and more powerful than ever, but from the outset it has played a crucial role in mobilizing US support for the Zionist state.²

The “Israel lobby” can be defined as a continuous campaign of advocacy on the part of Israel and its American supporters to secure US foreign policies that are perceived as favorable to the Israeli national interest. The lobby is both highly structured – including well-organized and well-funded entities, notably the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) – but also decentralized, encompassing a broad array of individuals and groups, Christian as well as Jewish, which offer spontaneous support of Israel. AIPAC and its precursors, backed by local councils and advocates across the United States, have long lobbied the president, members of Congress, and ultimately the public in order to secure political

support and financial and military assistance. The lobby stresses Israel's vulnerability to various neighboring regimes while emphasizing that Israel seeks to live in peace, shares common goals and values with the United States, helps anchor security, and is the "sole democracy" in the Middle East. Finally, the lobby condemns critics of Israel. When they perceive political threats to Israeli interests, lobby supporters strive energetically to limit or obstruct debate.

The Israel lobby is "widely viewed as the most powerful diasporic lobby seeking to shape US foreign policy."³ Thus, no other country's partisans in the history of US foreign policy – including the venerable China Lobby, Irish-Americans, or the influential Miami-based Cuban-Americans – have had a commensurate impact on American diplomacy. As the most influential pressure group associated with another nation in the history of American foreign relations, the Israel lobby clearly merits sustained analysis.

This study offers a foundational history that illuminates the broad trajectory of pro-Israel influence throughout the course of the special relationship. Rooted in documentary evidence drawn from multiple US archives, this book weaves the activities of the Zionist lobby into the diplomatic history of the first generation of the Palestine conflict. Covering the period roughly from World War II through the pivotal June 1967 War and its aftermath, the work draws extensively on Department of State (DOS) records and the archives of four American presidents (Truman through Johnson) and their aides to assess the diplomatic history. It also exploits multiple sources on the Israel lobby, notably the papers of Isaiah Leo Kenen. From the time of Israel's creation to his death in 1988, "Si" Kenen was a tireless advocate for Israel and the workhorse of AIPAC and its precursors. By the 1970s, as he was introduced at speaking engagements, presenters noting that Kenen went by the initials I. L. became fond of declaring, "Everybody knows what I. L. stands for. It stands for 'Israel Lobby!'"⁴

During the formative years studied here, Kenen and his colleagues organized and campaigned in support of Israel to counter various US diplomatic initiatives in the Palestine conflict. On multiple occasions, American diplomats, advisers, and all four presidents became frustrated and angry at the pressures placed upon them by Israel and its domestic supporters. Yet whenever US leaders or diplomats appeared to challenge Israeli actions and policies, the lobby counterattacked and typically proved highly effective in achieving its aims.

The Zionist lobby glossed over Israel's aggressiveness in the Palestine conflict while depicting its own advocacy as purely defensive. Kenen



FIGURE 2 Israeli diplomat Abba Eban (left) and Isaiah L. Kenen (right) were primarily responsible for establishing the Israel lobby. By the time this photograph was taken at a dinner party in the 1970s, the Israel lobby had become by far the most powerful diaspora lobby in American history. Center for Jewish History/New York

entitled his memoir *Israel's Defense Line*, and his mentor, Louis Lipsky, a founding father of the lobby, described it as “the armor Israel cannot get along without.” The lobby insisted that its work was essential to counter the “pro-Arab bias” of American professional diplomats.⁵

The Israel lobby sharply opposed efforts led by US diplomats to forge an “impartial” or “balanced” approach to the Palestine conflict, which from the outset had tilted in favor of Israel. In opposing the tilt toward Israel, the professional diplomats argued that there were many Arab states and one small Zionist state; that the Arabs, if alienated by pro-Israeli US policies, might withhold oil supplies upon which the West was growing dependent; and that they might drift into the Soviet-led communist orbit or succumb to Muslim radicalism. The diplomats also argued that even after Israel had achieved essential security, the Zionist state pursued

aggressive and unreasonable policies concerning borders, Palestinian refugees, nuclear proliferation, and a host of other issues. The diplomats thus focused overwhelmingly on security policy and their perception of national interests rather than being motivated by a “pro-Arab bias” or anti-Jewish prejudices.

The lobby, by contrast, persistently asserted that Israel was isolated, vulnerable, and under constant existential threat from the hostile Arab states. This was an exaggerated claim, but hardly a surprising one coming from people dreadfully traumatized by the Nazi genocide. There was no shortage of Arab hostility, to be sure, though on balance the evidence suggests that beginning in 1949 most of the Arab states were becoming grudgingly more amenable to a possible settlement than is generally acknowledged – and more amenable than Israel. Over the years of this study, the Zionist state, dominated by David Ben-Gurion and other hardliners and militarists, notably Moshe Dayan, showed contempt for Palestinians and other Arabs, equated negotiations with appeasement, and frequently resorted to borderland aggression that typically proved disproportionate to the provocation. Israel was militarily superior to the Arab states, which lacked cohesion in any case, and thus the Zionist state faced no actual threat of being driven, as the cliché would have it, “into the sea.” The fact of Israeli military superiority should come as no surprise, as it was repeatedly borne out by Israel’s domination in the three wars that occurred during this period.

CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS

While the Israel lobby would indeed provide the “armor Israel cannot get along without,” the forces of propaganda, persuasion, and political clout could not have been as successful as they were – and still are today – in the absence of a cultural foundation on which to build. In the United States, immigrants and lobbies with perceived foreign ties traditionally have been viewed with suspicion, “as a reflection of potential disloyalty and a threat to national security.” Thus, diaspora lobbies are able to exert influence on American foreign policy only “when convergent interests and goals become recognized, whether these are preexisting or constructed.”⁶ The Israel lobby built on an existing cultural foundation of US affinity for Zionism while also constructing and reinforcing additional bonds.

Popular support for Israel in part reflected a sense of atonement for American inaction in the face of the Nazi genocide. This factor became increasingly significant, however, in the years after those with which this

study is concerned. It was not until the 1970s that the Holocaust began to be framed as a distinctive phenomenon within the history of global genocide.⁷

American religiosity played a major role in establishing a foundation for the special relationship on which the lobby was able to build.⁸ During the period of this study, the residence in the United States of the world's largest Jewish population was clearly a key factor. Concentrated in New York, accessible to Washington, and holding some influential positions in business and national politics, prominent American Jews were able to exert significant pro-Zionist influence. However, the American Jewish "community" was not monolithic in its support of Zionism. Many American Jews were disengaged, while others opposed the idea of a Jewish homeland and the conflation of Jewish identity with a theocratic state in the Middle East. Even among supporters of Zionism, there was considerable dissension and myriad organizations that often pursued conflicting goals or differed sharply on appropriate strategies and tactics. That said, over time the Israel lobby ultimately proved remarkably successful in linking American Jewish identity with the fate of Israel and marginalizing both Jews and Gentiles who felt otherwise.

American Jews alone could not steer the US ship of state into the welcoming Israeli port. Vastly greater numbers of American Protestants, both modernist and Christian fundamentalists, provided crucial support for Zionism. American religiosity, encompassing widespread and enduring faith in the biblical narrative⁹ and biblical prophecy, undergirded growing US support for Israel and continues to serve as ballast for the special relationship to this day. For many Americans, support for Israel seemed to be the right thing to do, not only because of the legacy of the Nazi genocide, or because Israel was small and appeared vulnerable, but because the Jews belonged in the Promised Land. In this respect, Presidents Truman and especially Johnson, who held such views, proved representative of the broader American public.

Both the Americans and the Zionists viewed themselves as chosen peoples. Both were settler societies fired by perceptions of their "manifest destiny" to inherit a promised land.¹⁰ Ultimately, the special relationship cannot be fully understood apart from the historical and cultural affinities – both "preexisting and constructed" – between the United States and Israel. Indeed, these forces are what made the relationship special – and enduring.¹¹

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF THE “ISRAEL LOBBY”

This study is not the first on the Israel lobby, and it will not be the last, yet the subject is a difficult one and typically there is a price to pay for taking it on. Especially in the United States, critical studies of Israeli policy are certain to be targeted for condemnation. Studies of the lobby are even more susceptible to attack. Paradoxically, the condemnation of these works underscores both the intensity of the special relationship and the clout of the Israel lobby.

In the 1980s, critical studies of Israeli policy and substantive analysis of the role of the lobby began to emerge in the wake of Israel's turn to the right with the electoral triumph of the Likud Party. The Camp David Accords (1978) led to a separate peace with Egypt, but failed to lead to a broader resolution of the Palestine conflict. A longtime proponent of annexing the biblical Israel, Prime Minister Menachem Begin accelerated the development of already proliferating Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories. In 1982, Israel also launched a punishing attack on Lebanon. By this time the lobby had grown powerful and multifaceted, with AIPAC as the spearhead. AIPAC boasted of ousting elected officials critical of Israel, a process book-ended by two chairmen of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC), Sens. J. William Fulbright (D-AR), defeated in 1974, and Sen. Charles Percy (R-IL.), targeted by the lobby and defeated in 1984.¹²

In 1982, Seth Tillman, a former member of the SFRC staff, published a book arguing that “the powerful Israeli lobby” impeded efforts to pursue a Middle East diplomacy grounded in the national interest and dedicated to achieving settlement of the Palestine conflict. Fulbright wrote the foreword to the study. Another critic of US Middle East policy, Rep. Paul Findley (R-IL), who had been targeted by AIPAC and ousted in the 1982 congressional elections, condemned the lobby and lauded its critics in a book published in 1985, *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby*.¹³

More impactful than the early works on the lobby was the broadside delivered by the linguist turned foreign policy critic Noam Chomsky. In *The Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel and the Palestinians*, published in 1983, Chomsky condemned the United States and Israel for the destruction in Lebanon and the ongoing repression in Palestine. The MIT professor acknowledged the clout of the organized lobby, but argued that it was “far from the whole story” and that an excessive focus on it, “underestimates the scope of the ‘support for Israel’ in American

life.” Chomsky explained that one-sided US policies backing Israel sprang from sources “far broader than the Jewish community,” including Christians, liberals, labor unions, the oil and gas industries, and a power elite that benefited from constructing Israel as an American “strategic asset.”¹⁴

Defenders of Israeli policy found Chomsky’s incendiary account difficult to refute and the book became a classic (the latest edition was released in 2015). While Chomsky offered a broad indictment of US and Israeli policies, other works homed in on the Israel lobby. In 1986, political scientist Cheryl A. Rubenberg published a book with a nearly 50-page chapter arguing that pro-Israel advocacy had achieved “a virtual stranglehold” over US Middle East policy. As with Chomsky, critics condemned Rubenberg for her “polemical tone” and alleged animus toward Israel – a familiar refrain.¹⁵

In 1987, Edward Tivnan secured a major mainstream publisher for his journalistic assessment of the lobby and its influence. Whereas a capsule review in *Foreign Affairs* concluded that Tivnan’s “research is sound and his tone temperate, but somber,” a reviewer in *Commentary*, the magazine of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), declared Tivnan’s account was “so fevered, so riddled with errors of both methodology and substance, so driven by animus, as to render his book useless except to those similarly tormented.” In the *Los Angeles Times*, political scientist Steven Spiegel likewise condemned the book as a “snide, sometimes bitter, largely trivial and even boring account of the role of the American Jewish community’s efforts on behalf of Israel.” Two years previously Spiegel had published his own book on US relations with Israel, which had downplayed the role of the lobby.¹⁶

In a book coauthored with his son in 1992, veteran DOS diplomat George Ball invoked President George Washington, who had warned in his farewell address in 1796 about the pitfalls of developing a “passionate attachment” for any foreign nation. The first president was referring to revolutionary France, but the Balls were targeting Israel and the lobby in a substantive study published by a major mainstream press. They warned that the “passionate attachment” to Israel had produced a morally as well as financially irresponsible foreign policy divorced from the realities of the Middle East conflict. Despite George Ball’s celebrated sagacity for having advised Johnson against escalation of the Indochina War in the mid-1960s, *The Passionate Attachment* was widely ignored.¹⁷

The same was not true, however, of another coauthored and now famous – or, to some, infamous – book: *The Israel Lobby and*

US Foreign Policy, by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. Published by a mainstream popular press, *The Israel Lobby* ignited a vitriolic response from Israel's defenders. The book and its authors – two highly accomplished political science professors from distinguished institutions, the University of Chicago (Mearsheimer) and Harvard (Walt) – became a national if not international *cause célèbre*. Never before was the Israel lobby so widely discussed, nor chroniclers of its influence so bitterly condemned.

The Mearsheimer–Walt thesis was clearly stated, bolstered by evidence, and forcefully driven home in the book. “Today,” they argued,

America's intimate embrace of Israel – and especially its willingness to subsidize it no matter what its policies are – is not making Americans safer or more prosperous. To the contrary: unconditional support for Israel is undermining relations with other US allies, casting doubt on America's wisdom and moral vision, helping inspire a generation of anti-American extremists, and complicating US efforts to deal with a volatile but vital region.

They added, “We believe the activities of the groups and individuals who make up the lobby are the main reason why the United States pursues policies in the Middle East that make little sense on either strategic or moral grounds.”¹⁸

Pro-Israeli public officials, academics, journalists, and pundits tore into the book, setting the tone for a campaign of discrediting the study as simply an anti-Israel, if not anti-Jewish, diatribe, rather than an analysis of one of the most powerful lobbies in American politics. Writing in *The New Republic*, Jeffrey Goldberg equated Mearsheimer and Walt's views of Israel with those of September 11 terrorist Osama Bin Laden. Most Jewish organizations harshly condemned the book, including the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which published its own book in rebuttal, entitled *The Deadliest Lies*. Former CIA Director James Woolsey discerned a “commitment to distorting the historical record,” while Israeli historian Benny Morris, whose work had been quoted in the book, found it “riddled with shoddiness and defiled by mendacity.”¹⁹

Writing in the wake of the public controversy over the book, diplomatic historian Andrew Preston observed, “Many reviews have been so extraordinarily passionate that future historians will undoubtedly study the book's reception as much as they will the book itself.” Preston noted that the book had been “vilified on a deeply emotional level” replete with ad hominem attacks and “spurious charges of anti-Semitism” that ultimately amounted to nothing less than a campaign of “character

assassination” against two scholars whose previous studies, centering on realist diplomacy, had been received with almost uniformly high praise.²⁰

Both the timing of the book and the two authors’ prestigious reputations – which required that they be smeared in order to discredit the work – account for the intensity of the campaign. Raising the stakes, the publication and debate over the book came in the wake of another punishing Israeli assault on Lebanon in 2006 with extensive civilian casualties. Moreover, Mearsheimer and Walt had charged that the pro-Israel lobby had played a critical role in the 2003 US decision to go to war in Iraq, a conflict that had become a quagmire by the time of the book’s publication. Ultimately, the perfervid reaction to the book revealed, as Tony Smith pointed out, that even though the “lobby had always prided itself on its influence in Washington, its attitude changed dramatically when the sinews of power it possessed were clearly laid out by this study for all to see, and when responsibility was assigned to it for getting the American government to march in lockstep with Israeli foreign policy.”²¹

The major weakness of the Mearsheimer–Walt book was not its argument that the lobby influenced US policy in a lopsided pro-Israeli direction, to the detriment of the national interest, but rather their inability to acknowledge the broader cultural and historical dimensions of support for Israel. As previously noted, without a cultural foundation rooted in American religious affinity and settler colonization, among other factors, the lobby could not have been as effective as it has been and remains today. Thus, to reiterate, while the Israel lobby plays a monumental role in shaping the pro-Israeli American foreign policy, it does so in dialectical relationship with deeply rooted American religious and cultural forces.

The brutal reaction to the Mearsheimer–Walt book doubtless exerted a chilling effect on scholarship on the lobby. The only major academic study produced since the controversy has been a richly detailed recent book on the origins and evolution of the lobby by Israeli scholar Natan Aridan. *Advocating for Israel: Diplomats and Lobbyists from Truman to Nixon* is especially useful for its exploitation of sources in Hebrew and its elucidation of disputes as well as cooperation between and among the Israeli government and the American lobby.²²

A nationalistic assessment – indeed, virtually a court history – Aridan’s book is the antidote to Mearsheimer and Walt, as it reflexively celebrates Israel and the lobby. Throughout the work Aridan castigates American diplomats and the Arab states for their alleged unprovoked hostility to Israel. The book thus reflects an orthodox school of interpretation of Israeli innocence in the Palestine conflict, thereby eliding two generations

of post-Zionist scholarship. It also appears to aspire to deflect attention from the US lobby by emphasizing the primacy of Israeli *hasbara* (a Hebrew term for generating favorable propaganda for foreign audiences) in propelling Zionist advocacy.²³ As this study will show, Israeli *hasbara* played a crucial role, but key Israeli officials – notably the skilled diplomat Abba Eban – collaborated with the American lobby rather than creating or controlling it.

Originating in 2002, a growing counterlobby has emerged in Washington to challenge the Israel lobby. The Institute for Research: Middle East Policy (IRMEP) has amassed a substantial archive on the Israel lobby, offers polling data and policy analysis on the Middle East conflict, and hosts an annual conference in Washington that is televised by C-SPAN. The IRMEP conference features speakers critical of Israeli policies, and the lobby's role in bolstering them, and is held on the eve of AIPAC's signature annual conference in Washington. IRMEP's full-time director Grant F. Smith has published a series of books analyzing the history and current activities of the Israel lobby.²⁴

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

This book opens with a Prologue analyzing the roots of the Palestine conflict from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire to World War II. The Prologue examines the growing conflict between Palestinian nationalism and the rising tide of Zionist migration to the British mandate. As the title “Erect a Jewish State at Once,” a quote from David Ben-Gurion, suggests, the Prologue explores the intensity of the Zionist commitment to the colonization of Palestine. The Prologue concludes with analysis of the growing strength of American Zionism, which established the foundation of the Israel lobby.

Chapter 1 – “Friendship of the American People for the Zionist Idea,” a quotation of Harry Truman – analyzes the growth of Zionist political influence amid World War II. The chapter explores the role of key figures in the budding Israel lobby, notably Abba Hillel Silver, Isaiah Kenen, Emanuel Celler, Abraham Feinberg, David Niles, and Edward Jacobson. The chapter explains how the lobby drove President Truman's support for settlement of increasing numbers of Jewish refugees in Palestine and ultimately for partition of the British mandate as well as *de facto* recognition of the new state of Israel.

The title of Chapter 2 employs a quotation – “New Forms of Propaganda had to be Found” – from Louis Lipsky, a longtime Zionist