

View from America: American anti-Israel politics

JONATHAN S. TOBIN, THE JERUSALEM POST

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The cliché about academic politics is that it is so bitter because the stakes are so meaningless. That old saw remains true as far as the rivalries that afflict the competition for advancement at any college or university. But the impact of America's tenured radicals on our nation's politics is not quite so trivial.

Hence the focus on two prominent academics this month after a lengthy essay that they co-authored in the *London Review of Books* brought the debate about Israel to a new low.

Simply titled "The Israel Lobby," the piece by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt is, more or less, a compendium of every slander and innuendo that's ever been aired about the supposedly pernicious influence of supporters of Israel on US foreign policy.

As such, it is far from unique. One can find similar screeds, filled with the same sort of obvious factual mistakes punctuated by blatant bias, on any number of extremist Web sites hosted by neo-Nazis or Islamists. Indeed, it is a classic example of what the great American liberal historian Richard Hofstadter once labeled "the paranoid style in American politics."

But what differentiates Mearsheimer and Walt from the 19th-century anti-Semitic populists that Hofstadter wrote about - or even a contemporary example such as Louisiana Klansman David Duke - is their credentials.

Mearsheimer is the Wendell Harrison Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, while Walt is the Robert and Ren e Belfer Professor of International Affairs, as well as academic dean at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Both hold sinecures in the heart of the academic establishment.

Their goal isn't just to attack Israel, but to delegitimize Israel's supporters. The main point of "The Lobby" is to portray the pro-Israel community as a vast conspiracy that controls the media, Capitol Hill and the White House, and which ruthlessly squelches any resistance to Israeli policies.

The truth is less exciting. A consensus of Americans across party-lines and religious affiliation identify with Israel not because they do the bidding of the Elders of Zion, but because they see it for what it is: a democratic state in a sea of Arab tyranny with its roots in a common Judeo-Christian civilization.

No one has to bribe or hornswoggle ordinary Americans to back Israel. Whether they base their support on the Bible (as many American Christians do) or on sympathy with a fellow democracy afflicted by terrorists, the American love affair with the Jewish state has withstood the assaults of a biased media (another point Mearsheimer and Walt get completely wrong) and demagogic attacks from the extreme Left or Right.

AND THOUGH the United States is Israel's only real ally, it is far from obsequious in its dealings with Jerusalem. For decades, Washington has placed constant pressure on Israel to make concessions for the sake of an ephemeral peace process.

Though it has lavished Israel with military and economic aid, unlike our European "allies," Israel has not required America to deploy massive armies in its defense. In fact, if only a percentage of the American money spent on NATO deployments during the Cold War were considered foreign aid, then Germany or France - and not Israel - would be considered the chief recipient of American largesse.

The academic stature of these two men shows how far wacko conspiracy theories about Israel have traveled in the post-9/11 era. This ought to highlight a point that Mearsheimer and Walt hit upon themselves - scrutiny of anti-Israel propaganda in the academy. The two claimed that "The Lobby" has worked to suppress criticism of Israel on the campus, citing a few efforts to respond to intimidation of Jewish students by professors.

In fact, anti-Israel bias at colleges and universities has become so pervasive as to make the views of "The Lobby" authors seem fairly close to the mainstream in the realm of Middle East studies. While Pat Buchanan of the troglodyte Right once falsely referred to Congress as "Israeli-occupied territory," it is the American university that has become more and more a place where pro-Israel students and teachers often feel unable to speak their minds publicly.

If anything, the Mearsheimer/ Walt essay ought to engender even more support for efforts such as the protest movement against anti-Israel incitement at Columbia University and Campuswatch.org, the Web site founded by scholars Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer, mentioned in "The Lobby."

Far from suppressing academic freedom, these are merely isolated counter-attacks on the true monolith of the academy: bias against Israel. It is the "Lobby" conspiracy-mongers who wish to repress not only those few academics such as Pipes and Kramer who have the temerity to stand up for the US-Israel alliance, but the free speech rights of American Jews.

What this incident should also do is to once again alert Jewish liberals to the danger to Israel that is growing on the political Left, whose stronghold is the American university.

While many liberals have focused their attention on the perceived threat to Jews from religious conservatives and deplored the welcome given to right-wing supporters of Israel such as former House majority leader Tom Delay (R-Tex.) by some Jews, they have not paid enough attention to the growth of left-wing academic Israel-bashers.

Rather than worrying so much about the popularity of Israel on the Right, liberals need to start worrying about how unpopular it is on the Left.

The point that so perplexes Mearsheimer and Walt - the pro-Israel consensus - ought to remind us that support for Israel is neither the property of the Left or the Right. It would be just as illogical to reject liberals who love Israel, as it is to condemn conservatives who do so.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the authors of "The Lobby" are the only people with glittering credentials and the ability to influence students who feel as they do. Rather than laugh at them, we should be thinking hard about just how deep the roots of hatred for Israel run in our most prestigious schools. And that is a variety of academic politics where the stakes are very high indeed.

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