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News

Dean Attacks 'Israel Lobby'

Article co-authored by KSG's Walt stirs uproar; Dershowitz responds

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In an attack on what they termed the "Israel Lobby," the Kennedy School's Stephen M. Walt and the University of Chicago's John J. Mearsheimer argued in a recent article that supporters of Israel have seized control of U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, making it reflect Israel's interests more than those of the U.S.

The article was published last Thursday in the London Review of Books and on the Kennedy School's website as part of the its faculty working papers series. Walt is the Kennedy School's academic dean and a professor of international affairs and Mearsheimer is a professor of political science.

In their piece, the authors criticize those on both the political Left and Right, saying that groups as diverse as the Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute, The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal editorial boards, and Sen. Hillary R. Clinton, D-N.Y., and World Bank President Paul D. Wolfowitz are members of, or are controlled by, the "Israel Lobby."

"The overall thrust of the U.S. policy in the region is due almost entirely to U.S. domestic politics, and especially to the activities of the 'Israel Lobby,'" the authors wrote in their introduction. "[No] lobby has managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest."

The authors also criticized the foreign aid and the reflexive support that the U.S. Congress and the Bush administration give to Israel. They also devoted a section each to what they claimed was the disproportionate influence of the lobby on the media, think tanks, and academia, and wrote that the lobby demonizes Palestinians and comprised the "critical element" in launching the war in Iraq.

Because of the lobby's power, they concluded, American political leaders were likely to "remain sympathetic to Israel no matter what it does."

Included in "the Lobby" was Frankfurter Professor of Law Alan M. Dershowitz, whom the authors isolate as an "apologist" for Israel.

The authors accused Dershowitz of advancing a narrative in which Israel "has sought peace at every turn," while the Arab countries have "acted with great wickedness."

In interviews with The Crimson yesterday, Dershowitz took issue with this characterization, stating that he does not consider himself a member of a monolithic lobby and that he has criticized Israel on several occasions in the past.

Dershowitz, who is one of Israel's most prominent defenders, vehemently disputed the article's assertions, repeatedly calling it "one-sided" and its authors "liars" and "bigots."

He criticized three piece on three grounds, alleging parallels with neo-Nazi literature, saying that Walt and Mearsheimer's characterization that Israeli citizenship is based on "blood kinship" is a "categorical lie," and taking issue with the representation of the lobby as all-encompassing.

Dershowitz said that the article used "quotes from [Israel's first prime minister] David Ben-Gurion and [former president of the World Jewish Congress] Nahum Goldmann that are found repeatedly on hate sites," and that in asserting that the Jewish state was founded on "blood kinship," the authors were mistakenly conflating the right of Jews to immigrate to Israel with citizenship.

Walt and Mearsheimer countered in an interview that "the principle of 'blood kinship' refers to the fact that Israel was explicitly founded as a Jewish state and that whether or not you are Jewish is normally a function of ancestry, especially maternal ancestry."

Dershowitz also disputed the existence of a unified "Lobby," which the authors defined in their piece as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations." He contended that while the authors define the lobby as a "loose coalition" at the start, they expand the definition in the body of the piece, and that in the end, any Jew who supports Israel could be considered a member.

The authors responded that their use of the word "Lobby" is not meant to imply that it is "a unified movement with a central leadership or that individuals within it do not disagree on certain issues."

In response to Dershowitz's challenge to a debate at the Kennedy School—made through The Crimson—Walt and Mearsheimer said that they would be willing to debate Dershowitz "under the appropriate circumstances."

Dershowitz said that he and his staff are preparing a documented response to the Walt and Mearsheimer article, and that he had immediately assigned a research assistant "to check every footnote."

In reaction to the piece, Kennedy School Dean David T. Ellwood '75 released a statement saying that the school "is committed to academic freedom" and that it "does not restrict, interfere with, or take a position on the conclusions reached by its faculty in their individual research."

Several other professors in the history and government departments and at the Kennedy School declined to comment yesterday, saying they had not yet read the article.

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