

# Sandstorm

A web column of commentary and analysis from Martin Kramer

**Friday, March 17, 2006. Stephen Walt's World.** *There is much ado today about "The Israel Lobby," a long [essay](#) written by Stephen Walt of Harvard University and John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and published in the London Review of Books. The bottom line is simple and familiar: the Israel lobby has taken over Washington. Within the academy, it's the sort of thing that Juan Cole and Rashid Khalidi have been claiming all along, without getting any traction. And it's what Walt himself argued in a few pages of his book, [Taming American Power](#), which appeared last fall, and which also got very little traction.*



*It's that simple: Stephen Walt*

*This newest article, obviously the work of Walt more than Mearsheimer, cobbles together a lot of half-truths and untruths that have been out there on the far fringe, and gives them "academic respectability" (which, as I have shown time and again, is usually a contradiction in terms when it comes to the Middle East). In particular, the authors have put together an [unedited version](#)," in which the notes are as long as the text, and which carries the title of a Kennedy School of Government "Faculty Research Working Paper." This is presumably intended to make the study appear even more "academic." But it's really a piece of journalistic sensationalism, reminiscent of the 1987 book [The Lobby](#) by Edward Tivnan. The Washington correspondent of Haaretz called the new article "academic garbage" in his [blog](#) this morning, and offered it as an example of "the decline of academic values and the misuse of academic titles by contemporary American pseudo-scholars." That it is, but it's got plenty of competition.*

*Back in the fall, a donor to Harvard asked me to counter Walt's argument that Israel is a liability. So I wrote a short rebuttal, sent it off, and filed it away. I have no idea whether it went any further, or whether it reached Walt himself. But now seems a perfect moment to resurrect it, so here it is, just as I wrote it in October. It doesn't address all the arguments made in the new essay, because Walt didn't make all those arguments in his book. But it will do for now.*

Fortunately we do not live in Stephen Walt's world, where shared values with others are meaningless, and cerebral mandarins make foreign policy by fiat. We live in a real world, where real people respond to other real people who share history and values, and where foreign policy is the result of a tumultuous interaction of interests, ideas, and emotions. Walt would have the United States make its foreign policy like Syria and Egypt do. It's not going to happen.

But let's enter Walt's World, and accept its presumptions, for argument's sake—and for the sake of an argument about Israel. Let's set aside the claim that Israel and the U.S. share democratic values, rooted in a common tradition. Let's set aside the fact that the American public has a genuine regard for Israel, shown in poll after poll, which prevents it from ever seeing Israel as one more Norway. (Walt: if Israel tries to impose an "unjust solution" on the Palestinians, the United

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States should reduce its support for Israel to "the same way that we support a Norwegian state.") Let's just ask his simple question: is Israel a strategic asset or a strategic liability for the United States?

To recap: Walt thinks that by any objective measure, U.S. support for Israel is a liability. It causes Arabs and Muslims to hate America. Since he thinks the United States should disengage from the Middle East, and follow a policy of "offshore balancing," he believes America needs to cultivate a sense of shared purpose with Arabs and Muslims, many of whom detest Israel or 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 the United States to find local proxies and clients 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 AIPAC, The Washington Institute, and—yes—even the Brookings Institution. Have I simplified Walt's argument? Probably not as much as you might think.

To answer Walt's simple argument, I'll respond with a simple question. If you need an ally somewhere, don't you want it to be the smartest, most powerful, and most resourceful guy on the block, who also happens to admire you? And what is the point of having an ally who's backward, weak, irresolute, and thinks in his heart of hearts that you're his enemy? That's the choice the United States faces in the Middle East.

It took the United States some twenty years to figure this out. Between 1948 and 1967, it believed in Walt's zero-sum concept of the Middle East. The United States recognized Israel in 1948, but it didn't 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.

So Israel went elsewhere. It got guns from the Soviet bloc, and fighter aircraft and a nuclear reactor from France. It even cut a deal with old adversary Britain at the time of the Suez adventure. Israel wasn't in the U.S. orbit, and it didn't get significant American aid, but it grew ever stronger. It even became a nuclear state. Then came June 1967, and Israel showed its stuff. In October 1973, it achieved what military analysts have called an even greater victory, repulsing and reversing a surprise attack that might have overwhelmed a less determined and resourceful people.

It was then that the United States began to look at Israel differently: as a potential ally. The fact that the United States hadn't backed Israel before 1967 didn't prevent key Arab capitals from falling into the Soviet orbit. To the contrary: along with Nasser, they tried to play Washington off Moscow, with a preference for Moscow since it made policy by uncomplicated diktat. America's Arab allies were in a precarious position, and in 1958 it had to send the Marines to Lebanon to bail some of them out.

In 1967, Israel showed itself to be stronger than the whole lot of its neighbors, transforming U.S. perceptions. Israel looked to be the strongest, most reliable, and most cost-effective ally against Soviet penetration of the Middle East, because it could defeat any combination of Soviet clients *on its own*. It could humiliate them, and in so doing, humiliate the Soviet Union and drive thinking Arabs out of the Soviet camp. That worked: expanded U.S. support for Israel persuaded Egypt to switch camps, winning the Cold War for the United States in the Middle East. Egypt thus became an American ally *alongside* Israel, not *instead of* Israel, and became integrated into an overall Pax Americana. The

zero-sum theory of the Arabists—Israel or the Arabs, but not both—collapsed. U.S. Middle East policy underwent its Copernican revolution.

Before 1973, the Arab states thought they might defeat or destroy Israel by some stroke of luck, and they tried their hand at it in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Since 1973, the Arab states have understood not only that Israel is strong, but that the United States is Israel's guarantor. As a result, there have been no general Arab-Israeli wars, and Israel's Arab neighbors have either made peace with it (Egypt, Jordan), or keep their borders quiet (Syria, Lebanon). The Levant corner of the Middle East, for all the saturation coverage it gets from an overwrought media, has not been a powder keg, and its crises haven't required direct American military intervention. This is due to U.S. support for Israel—a support that appears so unequivocal to Arabs that they have despaired of overturning it.

United States support for Israel has 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 refashion themselves to pass an American test. When they do, the United States sees to it that they are rewarded, and the result has been a network of U.S.-endorsed agreements based on U.S.-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 didn't hold something they want, and if the United States, Israel's ally, were not in a position to deliver it. Walt's notion that Israel has enjoyed total and unqualified support from the United States blinds him to the ways the United States has leveraged its support for Israel into Israeli concessions that are the bedrock of the Pax Americana in the Levant. (It could even be argued—just to be mischievous—that the U.S. interest is best served by a perpetual "peace process," fed by slow and incremental Israeli concessions.)

Compare this to the situation in the Gulf, where U.S. allies are weak. There, the absence of a strong ally has wreaked havoc with U.S. policy, and forced the U.S. to intervene repeatedly. The irresolute Shah, once deemed a U.S. "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 an eight-year bloody war against Iran that produced waves of anti-U.S. terror (think Lebanon), only to turn against the United States by occupying Kuwait, and threatening the utterly 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's precisely because the Gulf doesn't have an Israel—a strong, capable local ally—that Walt's offshore balancing act can't possibly succeed. If the United States is not perceived to be willing to send in troops there—and it will only be perceived as such if it sometimes does send them—then heavily populated and technologically advanced states (formerly Iraq, today Iran) will attempt to muscle Saudi Arabia and the smaller Arab Gulf states, which have the bigger reserves of oil. In the Gulf, the United States has no allies. It has only dependencies, and their defense will continue to drain American resources, until the day Americans give up their SUVs.

In Israel, in contrast, the U.S. is allied to a militarily adept, economically vibrant state that keeps its part of the Middle East in balance. The U.S. has to help maintain that balance, with road maps and diplomatic initiatives, but this is at relatively low cost, and many of the costs flow back to the U.S. in the form of arms sales, useful Israeli technological innovations, etc.

In the overall scheme of the Pax Americana, then, U.S. policy toward Israel and its neighbors over the past thirty years has been a tremendous success. Has the U.S. brought about a final lamb-lies-down-with-lion peace? No; the issues are too complex. Are the Arabs happy about U.S. support for Israel? No; they still dream of pushing Israel off the map. But any time U.S. interests are upheld without the dispatch of U.S. troops, it's a success. That Walt can't see this suggests that his own vision is marred by a bias against Israel, the depth of which only he knows.

Walt's notion that U.S. support for Israel is the source of *popular* resentment, propelling recruits to Al-Qaeda, is of a piece with his argument that the United States is hated for what it *does* (its detested policies), and not what it *is* (its admired values). In fact, America isn't hated for what it does or what it is. It's hated because of what *they* can't do, and what *they* aren't. They can't accumulate power, and they can't handle modernity, and they resent anyone who reminds them of it. How would U.S. abandonment of Israel alleviate this inferiority complex, which has been centuries in the making?

And is it not actually better for the United States to signal the Arabs that until *they* change, Israel will remain America's favorite son? Would this not be doubly so in Walt's preferred scenario of "offshore balancing," in which America would drop its active democratizing altogether? What lever would remain to encourage progressive change in the Arab world, if the United States were to back away from the one democratic, modern, and pluralistic society in the Middle East—the most persuasive and proximate argument made to the Arabs, for the empowering and overpowering might of Western democracy and Western modernity? Would the atrophy of such an Israel not fill the ranks of extremists, much as the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to Hitler did?

Indeed, for argument's sake, let's imagine that we have followed Walt's policy—that we have somehow tumbled back to the pre-Copernican policy. The United States has decided that Israel should "go it alone," since Israel isn't willing to concede all things to the insatiable Arab appetite for Israeli concessions. How long would it be before the Arabs would revert to their pre-1967 fantasy of defeating or destroying Israel? (The medieval-minded Islamists have never abandoned it.) How long would it be before Israel felt compelled, as it did in 1967, to launch a preemptive strike against Egypt, with its massive conventional force, or Iran, which even now rattles a nuclear saber against Israel? Remember, *pace* Walt, Israel isn't Norway: it can and will defend itself against threats, be they real or perceived, present or anticipated. It is populated by the remnant of a people that was nearly obliterated in the twentieth century, and that's unlikely to take chances in the twenty-first. Less American support would mean less Israeli restraint, less Israeli maneuverability, and a quicker Israeli finger on the trigger.

How long would it be before the United States would have to pull out all the stops to defuse gigantic crises, or clean up the mess in the aftermath of another war? How long would it be before the United States would have to deploy forces—to save an Arab regime that didn't join the frenzied free-for-all, or to position peacekeeping forces between hostile armies, or to reassure Israel to keep its nukes in the silos? Why would any serious policymaker even contemplate exchanging the present stability—and the situation *is* stable—for these uncertainties and imponderables? And for what? Some boost for America in Arab

public opinion polls, which seem to have Walt all twisted in knots of anguish?

In short, the Levant in Walt's World would become a far more dangerous place than it is now, for Israelis, for Arabs, and ultimately for Americans. Without a strong Israel, buttressed by the United States, it might begin to look like it did before 1967, or as the Gulf has looked over the last three decades. Why anyone would imagine this to be a feasible U.S. policy option—even at Harvard—is a mystery.

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