

## The Israel Conspiracy

By Bret Stephens, *The Wall Street Journal*

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Imagine a conspiracy so vast the only person not in on it is you. In 1998, Hollywood indulged that conceit in "The Truman Show," a film about a reality show so all-encompassing that its unwitting hero, Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), has no idea the very world he inhabits is a stage. Now imagine a conspiracy that makes Trumans of us all. According to professors John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard, it's called "The Israel Lobby".

The professors make their case in an extensively footnoted "working paper" from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, a revised version of which is published in the current issue of the *London Review of Books*. Their premise is that Israel is a huge strategic liability for the U.S., which wrecks our reputation in the Arab world, complicates our diplomacy at the U.N., inspires Islamic fanaticism and terror, goads us into misbegotten wars and makes us complicit in Israeli human-rights abuses, all the while costing some \$3 billion a year. But here's a puzzle: If Israel is so damaging to U.S. interests, why do consistent and broad majorities of Americans support it? A Gallup poll from last month shows that Americans are more sympathetic to Israelis than to Palestinians by 59% to 15%. Among Americans who claim to follow world affairs "very closely," Israel's favorable ratings rise to 66%. I went back over polling data since the mid-1970s, and the percentages hold roughly constant. Americans also tell pollsters that Israel deserves support even if it puts the U.S. at greater risk of oil boycotts or terrorist attacks.

The answer, according to Messrs. Mearsheimer and Walt, is "the unmatched power of the Israel Lobby," which they define as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to steer U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction".

They might have underlined the word loose. In their reading, the Lobby comprises much more than just the American-Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) and other pro-Israel lobbies. It also pairs such opposites as the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*; the right-of-center American Enterprise Institute and the left-of-center Brookings Institution; Republican Tom DeLay and Democrat Joe Lieberman; Bush Administration ambassador John Bolton and Clinton Administration ambassador Martin Indyk. These aren't your usual political bedfellows. But for Israel, it would seem, they come together in a sordid cause.

What are the Lobby's methods? Money, political and academic infiltration and moral blackmail. Drawing on some boastful self-appraisals by AIPAC staffers, the professors paint a picture of an organization able to funnel untold sums of money to elect or defeat political candidates virtually at whim. Capitol Hill is said to be swarming with Jewish staffers, who all but write the script on Israel policy. The proliferation of "Israel Studies" curricula is seen as an insidious propaganda effort. Those who depart from the approved line on Israel are said to run the risk of being labeled anti-Semitic.

Finally there is the Israel Lobby's control of the media, which in the Mearsheimer-Walt telling is near-total. "The Lobby doesn't want an open debate," they write, "because that might lead Americans to question the levels of support they provide [to Israel]." Cowed or complicitous publishers and editors are alleged to act as gatekeepers for the Lobby.

By now the gist of the Mearsheimer-Walt hypothesis should be clear. So should its pedigree. The authors are at pains to note that the Israel Lobby is by no means exclusively Jewish, and that not every American Jew is a part of it. Fair enough. But has there ever been an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that does not share its basic features? Dual loyalty, disloyalty, manipulation of the media, financial manipulation of the political system, duping the goyim (gentiles) and getting them to fight their wars, sponsoring and covering up acts of gratuitous cruelty against an innocent people . every canard ever alleged of the Jews is here made about the Israel Lobby and its cause. No wonder former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke was quick to endorse the article, calling it a "great step forward".

I do not mean to suggest that Messrs. Mearsheimer and Walt are themselves anti-Semitic. But as outgoing Harvard President Larry Summers once noted, what may not be anti-Semitic in intent may yet be anti-Semitic in effect. By giving aid and comfort to people who have no trouble substituting the word "Jews" for "Israel Lobby," the Mearsheimer-Walt article is anti-Semitic in effect.

It is also incredibly dumb, as an anecdote well-known to the staff of this editorial page will illustrate. Our late editor, Robert Bartley, is cited by Messrs. Mearsheimer and Walt as among the more notorious fellow travelers of the Israel Lobby. "[Yitzhak] Shamir, [Ariel] Sharon, Bibi [Netanyahu] . whatever those guys want is pretty much fine by me," the article quotes him as saying.

I can vouch for that quote, since Bartley said it to me. But what the authors take as evidence of the thrall in which the Israel Lobby held the editor of The Wall Street Journal was closer to the opposite. "My support for Israel," he once half-jokingly remarked to his staff, "is directly proportional to their willingness not to meet with me."

Robert Bartley was a man of modest Christian beliefs and principled political convictions. He supported Israel for much the same reason he supported Great Britain, Poland and Taiwan because they were friends of the United States, because they were democracies, because they were places where his core beliefs in free men and free markets held sway.

In this respect, and like so many of us who are friends of the Jewish state, he was not privy to an Israeli conspiracy but part of an American consensus.