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The Israel Lobby?

Noam Chomsky

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I've received many requests to comment on the article by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (henceforth M-W), published in the London Review of Books, which has been circulating extensively on the internet and has elicited a storm of controversy. A few thoughts on the matter follow.

It was, as noted, published in the London Review of Books, which is far more open to discussion on these issues than US journals — a matter of relevance (to which I'll return) to the alleged influence of what M-W call "the Lobby." An article in the Jewish journal Forward quotes M as saying that the article was commissioned by a US journal, but rejected, and that "the pro-Israel lobby is so powerful that he and co-author Stephen Walt would never have been able to place their report in a American-based scientific publication." But despite the fact that it appeared in England, the M-W article aroused the anticipated hysterical reaction from the usual supporters of state violence here, from the Wall St Journal to Alan Dershowitz, sometimes in ways that would instantly expose the authors to ridicule if they were not lining up (as usual) with power.

M-W deserve credit for taking a position that is sure to elicit tantrums and fanatical lies and denunciations, but it's worth

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noting that there is nothing unusual about that. Take any topic that has risen to the level of Holy Writ among “the herd of independent minds” (to borrow Harold Rosenberg’s famous description of intellectuals): for example, anything having to do with the Balkan wars, which played a huge role in the extraordinary campaigns of self-adulation that disfigured intellectual discourse towards the end of the millennium, going well beyond even historical precedents, which are ugly enough. Naturally, it is of extraordinary importance to the herd to protect that self-image, much of it based on deceit and fabrication. Therefore, any attempt even to bring up plain (undisputed, surely relevant) facts is either ignored (M-W can’t be ignored), or sets off most impressive tantrums, slanders, fabrications and deceit, and the other standard reactions. Very easy to demonstrate, and by no means limited to these cases. Those without experience in critical analysis of conventional doctrine can be very seriously misled by the particular case of the Middle East(ME).

But recognizing that M-W took a courageous stand, which merits praise, we still have to ask how convincing their thesis is. Not very, in my opinion. I’ve reviewed elsewhere what the record (historical and documentary) seems to me to show about the main sources of US ME policy, in books and articles for the past 40 years, and can’t try to repeat here. M-W make as good a case as one can, I suppose, for the power of the Lobby, but I don’t think it provides any reason to modify what has always seemed to me a more plausible interpretation. Notice incidentally that what is at stake is a rather subtle matter: weighing the impact of several factors which (all agree) interact in determining state policy: in particular, (A) strategic-economic interests of concentrations of domestic power in the tight state-corporate linkage, and (B) the Lobby.

The M-W thesis is that (B) overwhelmingly predominates. To evaluate the thesis, we have to distinguish between two quite different matters, which they tend to conflate: (1) the

Another problem that M-W do not address is the role of the energy corporations. They are hardly marginal in US political life — transparently in the Bush administration, but in fact always. How can they be so impotent in the face of the Lobby? As ME scholar Stephen Zunes has rightly pointed out, “there are far more powerful interests that have a stake in what happens in the Persian Gulf region than does AIPAC [or the Lobby generally], such as the oil companies, the arms industry and other special interests whose lobbying influence and campaign contributions far surpass that of the much-vaunted Zionist lobby and its allied donors to congressional races.”

Do the energy corporations fail to understand their interests, or are they part of the Lobby too? By now, what’s the distinction between (1) and (2), apart from the margins?

Also to be explained, again, is why US ME policy is so similar to its policies elsewhere — to which, incidentally, Israel has made important contributions, e.g., in helping the executive branch to evade congressional barriers to carrying out massive terror in Central America, to evade embargoes against South Africa and Rhodesia, and much else. All of which again makes it even more difficult to separate (2) from (1) — the latter, pretty much uniform, in essentials, throughout the world.

I won’t run through the other arguments, but I don’t feel that they have much force, on examination.

The thesis M-W propose does however have plenty of appeal. The reason, I think, is that it leaves the US government untouched on its high pinnacle of nobility, “Wilsonian idealism,” etc., merely in the grip of an all-powerful force that it cannot escape. It’s rather like attributing the crimes of the past 60 years to “exaggerated Cold War illusions,” etc. Convenient, but not too convincing. In either case.

alleged failures of US ME policy; (2) the role of The Lobby in bringing about these consequences. Insofar as the stands of the Lobby conform to (A), the two factors are very difficult to disentangle. And there is plenty of conformity.

Let’s look at (1), and ask the obvious question: for whom has policy been a failure for the past 60 years? The energy corporations? Hardly. They have made “profits beyond the dreams of avarice” (quoting John Blair, who directed the most important government inquiries into the industry, in the ’70s), and still do, and the ME is their leading cash cow. Has it been a failure for US grand strategy based on control of what the State Department described 60 years ago as the “stupendous source of strategic power” of ME oil and the immense wealth from this unparalleled “material prize”? Hardly. The US has substantially maintained control — and the significant reverses, such as the overthrow of the Shah, were not the result of the initiatives of the Lobby. And as noted, the energy corporations prospered. Furthermore, those extraordinary successes had to overcome plenty of barriers: primarily, as elsewhere in the world, what internal documents call “radical nationalism,” meaning independent nationalism. As elsewhere in the world, it’s been convenient to phrase these concerns in terms of “defense against the USSR,” but the pretext usually collapses quickly on inquiry, in the ME as elsewhere. And in fact the claim was conceded to be false, officially, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Bush’s National Security Strategy (1990) called for maintaining the forces aimed at the ME, where the serious “threats to our interests... could not be laid at the Kremlin’s door” — now lost as a pretext for pursuing about the same policies as before. And the same was true pretty much throughout the world.

That at once raises another question about the M-W thesis. What were “the Lobbies” that led to pursuing very similar policies throughout the world? Consider the year 1958, a very critical year in world affairs. In 1958, the Eisenhower

administration identified the three leading challenges to the US as the ME, North Africa, and Indonesia — all oil producers, all Islamic. North Africa was taken care of by Algerian (formal) independence. Indonesia and the ME were taken care of by Suharto's murderous slaughter (1965) and Israel's destruction of Arab secular nationalism (Nasser, 1967). In the ME, that established the close US-Israeli alliance and confirmed the judgment of US intelligence in 1958 that a "logical corollary" of opposition to "radical nationalism" (meaning, secular independent nationalism) is "support for Israel" as the one reliable US base in the region (along with Turkey, which entered into close relations with Israel in the same year). Suharto's coup aroused virtual euphoria, and he remained "our kind of guy" (as the Clinton administration called him) until he could no longer keep control in 1998, through a hideous record that compares well with Saddam Hussein — who was also "our kind of guy" until he disobeyed orders in 1990. What was the Indonesia Lobby? The Saddam Lobby? And the question generalizes around the world. Unless these questions are faced, the issue (1) cannot be seriously addressed.

When we do investigate (1), we find that US policies in the ME are quite similar to those pursued elsewhere in the world, and have been a remarkable success, in the face of many difficulties: 60 years is a long time for planning success. It's true that Bush II has weakened the US position, not only in the ME, but that's an entirely separate matter.

That leads to (2). As noted, the US-Israeli alliance was firmed up precisely when Israel performed a huge service to the US-Saudis-Energy corporations by smashing secular Arab nationalism, which threatened to divert resources to domestic needs. That's also when the Lobby takes off (apart from the Christian evangelical component, by far the most numerous and arguably the most influential part, but that's mostly the 90s). And it's also when the intellectual-political class began their love affair with Israel, previously of little interest to them. They are a

very influential part of the Lobby because of their role in media, scholarship, etc. From that point on it's hard to distinguish "national interest" (in the usual perverse sense of the phrase) from the effects of the Lobby. I've run through the record of Israeli services to the US, to the present, elsewhere, and won't review it again here.

M-W focus on AIPAC and the evangelicals, but they recognize that the Lobby includes most of the political-intellectual class — at which point the thesis loses much of its content. They also have a highly selective use of evidence (and much of the evidence is assertion). Take, as one example, arms sales to China, which they bring up as undercutting US interests. But they fail to mention that when the US objected, Israel was compelled to back down: under Clinton in 2000, and again in 2005, in this case with the Washington neocon regime going out of its way to humiliate Israel. Without a peep from The Lobby, in either case, though it was a serious blow to Israel. There's a lot more like that. Take the worst crime in Israel's history, its invasion of Lebanon in 1982 with the goal of destroying the secular nationalist PLO and ending its embarrassing calls for political settlement, and imposing a client Maronite regime. The Reagan administration strongly supported the invasion through its worst atrocities, but a few months later (August), when the atrocities were becoming so severe that even NYT Beirut correspondent Thomas Friedman was complaining about them, and they were beginning to harm the US "national interest," Reagan ordered Israel to call off the invasion, then entered to complete the removal of the PLO from Lebanon, an outcome very welcome to both Israel and the US (and consistent with general US opposition to independent nationalism). The outcome was not entirely what the US-Israel wanted, but the relevant observation here is that the Reaganites supported the aggression and atrocities when that stand was conducive to the "national interest," and terminated them when it no longer was (then entering to finish the main job). That's pretty normal.