

**THE PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY:
MYTH AND REALITY**

INTRODUCTION

Dov Waxman

Pro-Israel advocacy in the United States has come under a great deal of critical scrutiny in recent years. Denunciations of the excessive influence of the “Israel Lobby” on US foreign policymaking toward the Middle East, allegations of espionage leveled against high-ranking employees of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and arguments over whether pro-Israel organizations adequately represent American Jewish opinion have all served to put the pro-Israel lobby in the public spotlight. A lot of the attention it has received has been highly negative and critical. Driving much of this criticism is the belief that the pro-Israel lobby in the United States exercises a detrimental influence on US foreign policy, especially with regard to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Critics charge that pressure from the lobby—especially from AIPAC—has prevented the American government from successfully serving as a mediator or even an arbitrator in the bitter and violent dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. According to this view, the pro-Israel lobby’s influence in Congress and in the White House has ensured almost completely uncritical US support for Israel, at expense of the Palestinians. Moreover, because adherents of this view tend to hold that for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to succeed the United States must act as an “honest broker,” in so far as the pro-Israel lobby prevents the United States from performing this critical role, it effectively serves as an obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace. Hence, the pro-Israel lobby is indirectly responsible, at least in part, for the prolongation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In this special section of *Israel Studies Forum* devoted to examining the myth and the reality of the pro-Israel lobby, Jonathan Rynhold directly challenges this view. He argues that the pro-Israel lobby should not be blamed for America’s inability to successfully broker Middle East peace agreements. According to Rynhold, the pro-Israel lobby does not significantly constrain American diplomacy concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict, as its critics claim. Rather, the biggest impediment that the United States faces in its efforts to achieve regional peace is the simple fact that the parties involved have much more at stake in any peace agreement than the United States does, and they will therefore not submit to American pressure.

My own contribution to this special section puts the pro-Israel lobby under the microscope. Contrary to the common tendency to depict the pro-Israel lobby as a monolithic unitary actor, my article disaggregates the pro-Israel lobby into three

different lobbies with competing political agendas, and looks at the many groups that make up these lobbies. By presenting the pro-Israel lobby as heterogeneous and deeply divided into different camps, I hope to counter the prevailing conception of the “Israel lobby” and replace it with a more nuanced and accurate one.

The final contribution to this section is a blistering critique by Donna Robinson Divine of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt’s highly controversial book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Although criticisms of the activities of the pro-Israel lobby and its impact on U.S. foreign policy date back many years,¹ the publication of Mearsheimer and Walt’s best-selling book brought greater attention to the issue than ever before. For Robinson Divine, this has been an unwelcome development, only adding to the already polemical nature of the domestic American debate about US Middle East policy. She assails Mearsheimer and Walt for their poor scholarship in the book and for their subsequent failure to adequately respond to their many critics.

Whether or not you agree with all the arguments presented, as editor of this special section I hope that you will find these articles timely, relevant, and thought provoking.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Paul Findley, *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel’s Lobby* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1985); Edward Tivan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1983); Richard Curtiss, *Stealth Pacts: How Israel’s American Lobby Took Control of U.S. Middle East Policy* (Washington, DC: American Educational Trust, 1990).