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So pro-Israel that it hurts

By Daniel Levy

The new John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt study of "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" should serve as a wake-up call, on both sides of the ocean. The most obvious and eye-catching reflection is the fact that it is authored by two respected academics and carries the imprimatur of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. The tone of the report is harsh. It is jarring for a self-critical Israeli, too. It lacks finesse and nuance when it looks at the alphabet soup of the American-Jewish organizational world and how the Lobby interacts with both the Israeli establishment and the wider right-wing echo chamber.

It sometimes takes AIPAC omnipotence too much at face value and disregards key moments - such as the Bush senior/Baker loan guarantees episode and Clinton's showdown with Netanyahu over the Wye River Agreement. The study largely ignores AIPAC run-ins with more dovish Israeli administrations, most notably when it undermined Yitzhak Rabin, and how excessive hawkishness is often out of step with mainstream American Jewish opinion, turning many, especially young American Jews, away from taking any interest in Israel.

Yet their case is a potent one: that identification of American with Israeli interests can be principally explained via the impact of the Lobby in Washington, and in limiting the parameters of public debate, rather than by virtue of Israel being a vital strategic asset or having a uniquely compelling moral case for support (beyond, as the authors point out, the right to exist, which is anyway not in jeopardy). The study is at its most devastating when it describes how the Lobby "stifles debate by intimidation" and at its most current when it details how America's interests (and ultimately Israel's, too) are ill-served by following the Lobby's agenda.

The bottom line might read as follows: that defending the occupation has done to the American pro-Israel community what living as an occupier has done to Israel - muddied both its moral compass and its rational self-interest compass.

The context in which the report is published makes of it more than passing academic interest. Similar themes keep recurring in influential books, including recently, "The Assassin's Gate,"

"God's Politics," and "Against All Enemies." In popular culture, "Paradise Now" and "Munich" attracted notable critical acclaim. In Congress, the AIPAC-supported Lantos/Ros-Lehtinen bill, which places unprecedented restrictions on aid to and contacts with the Palestinians, is stalled. Moderate American organizations such as the Israel Policy Forum, Americans for Peace Now and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom - each with their own policy nuances - have led opposition to the bill and Quartet envoy Wolfensohn has seemed to caution against it. In court, two former senior AIPAC officials face criminal charges.

Not yet a tipping point, but certainly time for a debate. Sadly, if predictably, response to the Harvard study has been characterized by a combination of the shrill and the smug. Avoidance of candid discussion might make good sense to the Lobby, but it is unlikely to either advance Israeli interests or the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Some talking points for this coming debate can already be suggested:

First, efforts to collapse the Israeli and neoconservative agendas into one have been a terrible mistake - and it is far from obvious which is the tail and which is the dog in this act of wagging. Iraqi turmoil and an Al-Qaida foothold there, growing Iranian regional leverage and the strengthening of Hamas in the PA are just a partial scorecard of the recent policy successes of AIPAC/neocon collaboration.

Second, Israel would do well to distance itself from our so-called "friends" on the Christian evangelical right. When one considers their support for Israel's own extremists, the celebration of our Prime Minister's physical demise as a "punishment from God" and their belief in our eventual conversion - or slaughter - then this is exposed as an alliance of sickening irresponsibility.

Third, Israel must not be party to the bullying tactics used to silence policy debate in the U.S. and the McCarthyite policing of academia by set-ups like Daniel Pipes' Campus Watch. If nothing else, it is deeply un-Jewish. It would in fact serve Israel if the open and critical debate that takes place over here were exported over there.

Fourth, the Lobby even denies Israel a luxury that so many other countries benefit from: of having the excuse of external encouragement to do things that are domestically tricky but nationally necessary (remember Central Eastern European economic and democratic reform to gain EU entry in contrast with Israel's self-destructive settlement policy for continued U.S. aid).

Visible signs of Israel and the Lobby not being on the same page are mounting. For Israel, the Gaza withdrawal and future West Bank evacuations are acts of strategic national importance, for the Lobby an occasion for confusion and shuffling of feet. For Israel, the Hamas PLC election victory throws up complex and difficult challenges; for the Lobby it's a public relations homerun and occasion for simplistic legislative muscle-flexing.

In the words of the Harvard study authors, "the Lobby's influence has been bad for Israel ... has discouraged Israel from seizing opportunities ... that would have saved Israeli lives and shrunk the ranks of Palestinian extremists ... using American power to achieve a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians would help advance the broader goals of fighting extremism and promoting democracy in the Middle East." And please, this is not about appeasement, it's about smart, if difficult, policy choices that also address Israeli needs and security.

In short, if Israel is indeed entering a new era of national sanity and de-occupation, then the role of the Lobby in U.S.-Israel relations will have to be rethought, and either reformed from within or challenged from without.

Daniel Levy was an advisor in the Prime Minister's Office, a member of the official Israeli negotiating team at the Oslo B and Taba talks and the lead Israeli drafter of the Geneva Initiative.

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