



Episode 7: A Must Read Book on the Israel Lobby

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John Mearsheimer: Hello, this is John Mearsheimer. And in today's episode, I would like to talk about the new book on the Israel lobby by Eli Clifton and Ian Lustick. It's called *Israel's Lobby: America in the Grip of a Foreign Power*. I think this is a truly important book. And I hope that all of the viewers go out and buy a copy and read it very carefully. Of course, this is a subject that's dear to my heart, because along with Steve Walt, I wrote an article and a book on the subject of the Israel lobby back in 2006, 2007. Steve and I wrote the article, which appeared in the *London Review of Books* in 2006. And then, of course, our book came out, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* in 2007. And what I'd like to do is tell you why I think that the new book by Eli Clifton and Ian Lustick is so important. And in the process, I want to do that by comparing it to the book that Steve and I wrote. This book is not just an updated version of what Steve and I wrote, this book has all sorts of new insights in it that people should consider very seriously. And the way I'd like to proceed is, first of all, I'd just like to talk about what the basic arguments are in the two books. Then I'd like to talk the underlying conceptual framework that has to underpin any discussion of the Israel lobby and, of course, underpins both the book Steve and I wrote and the book that Eli and Ian wrote. And then I want to talk about the nitty gritty changes that have taken place since 2006, 2007, that, of course, heavily inform this new book called *Israel's Lobby*.

Let me just start off with the core arguments. Both books argue that there is an Israel lobby that is very powerful. Now, it's very important to emphasise that in both books, the authors go to great lengths to make it clear that this is not a Jewish lobby by any means. It's an Israel lobby. Not all Jews by any means belong to the Israel lobby, and the Israel lobby, of course, includes many non-Jews, Christian Zionists, for example. So this is not the Jewish lobby. It's the Israel lobby. Now, the principal argument that Steve and I made was that the lobby is bad for American foreign policy. It's bad from a strategic point of view and from a moral point of view. And in the absence of the lobby, the United States, we argued, would have a very different foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. We did not say much in our written work about the importance of the lobby for Israel, nor did we say much about the importance of the lobby for the American Jewish community, nor did we say much, if anything, about the impact that the lobby has on American liberal democracy or on American political

institutions. But it's important to understand the book by Eli Clifton and Ian Lustick, not only argues that the lobby is bad for American foreign policy, it argues that it's bad for Israel. It argues that it's bad for American Jews. And very importantly, it argues that it now is in a position where it's undermining liberal democracy. So the charge in the new book is much broader than the charge in the book that Steve and I wrote.

Now, what about the underlying conceptual framework? Any time you think about the lobby, you have to think about its influence on the discourse. This is the discourse about Israel, the discourse about the US-Israeli relationship, and the discourse of the lobby itself. So the question is, how does the lobby influence that discourse? Then there's the issue of actual policy. And the question is, how does the lobby influence policy, which is different from the question of how does the lobby influence discourse? Our argument back in 2006, 2007 was that the lobby did a very effective job at, in effect, controlling the discourse, or if you want to put it in slightly different words, policing the discourse on Israel. And we described in great detail how the lobby did that. We tried to account for the success that the lobby had had up to that point in managing the discourse in ways that were favourable from the lobby's perspective. And with regard to policy, there was just no question that the lobby had a hammerlock on US Middle East policy. This is not to say it got its way every time, but it got its way almost every time. And oftentimes when it didn't get its way, it ended up forcing the administration to change its policy to accommodate Israel and the lobby. So the basic argument that Steve and I made was that the lobby was very successful in terms of controlling the discourse, policing the discourse and certainly in terms of influencing policy in ways that the lobby wanted that policy to go.

Now, the argument in the Clifton-Lustick book is very different. Their argument is that the lobby has lost its ability to control the discourse, but it has not lost its ability to control policy. So you see the fundamental change between our book and their book – and it has to do with the discourse. Let me give you a sense of how I see the discourse having changed since we wrote the book back in 2007, and the article, of course, before that in 2006. When we wrote the book, it was almost impossible to talk about dual loyalty. And if you did talk about dual-loyalty, you had to deal with it very carefully, very gingerly. It was a remarkably hot topic. If you look at the discourse today, people not only talk about individuals having dual loyalty, they talk about "Israel-Firsters". The term "Israel-Firster", in other words, someone who privileges Israel's interests over America's interests, is a term that's used all the time. In fact, many prominent American Jews who are pro-Israel are referred to as Israel-Firsters. This was not an argument anyone, including Steve and I, would want to make in 2006 or 2007. But the discourse has changed to the point where you can make that argument. To take what's going on in Gaza, the lobby and Israel have gone to enormous lengths to say that this is not a genocide, what the Israelis are doing in Gaza against the Palestinians. A center for Jewish studies at Brandeis just recently released a report that shows that 74 % of college students think that what Israel is doing in Gaza against the Palestinians is a genocide. This is remarkable. And this is evidence that the lobby has lost its ability to control the discourse. And of course, you see this with people like Tucker Carlson and Candice Owens and so forth

and so on. There's just no question that the discourse today is fundamentally different than it was in 2006, 2007.

With regard to policy, there's a question as Ian and Eli make clear – that the lobby still has a stranglehold on US-Middle East policy. And the issue that they raise, of course, which is a fascinating issue, is whether or not – and I'll talk more about this at the end – you can sustain a situation where Israel loses control of the discourse and people in the public domain talk about Israel in ways that are at odds with policy toward Israel. In other words, it's very hard to have a special relationship with Israel where you give Israel unconditional support when so many people in the body populace have a negative view, a hostile view in many cases of Israel. So, the story that Ian and Eli are telling is that the discourse has changed fundamentally since when Steve and I wrote our book, but the policy has not. Now, let's talk about the specifics. Let's talk about what has actually happened to change the discourse. And let's then switch gears and talk about how the lobby has reacted to this deteriorating situation from their point of view in terms of the discourse, how the lobby is reacting to that and how the Lobby is working overtime today to make sure that it maintains its profound influence on US Middle East policy. In other words, the United States remains firmly committed to giving Israel unconditional support. What is the lobby, Israel's lobby doing today to ensure that happens?

So let's just start by talking about what has changed, and here we're focusing on the discourse. At the risk of sounding engaged in self-promotion, I do think Steve and I, with our article and with our book, played a key role in opening up the discourse on Israel. Of course, there were all sorts of other people who wrote before us and after us who helped in that endeavour. But I think there's no question that the discourse was helped by our article and then by our book. And I would marry this to the coming of the internet. The internet has been a huge problem for Israel. And what's going on here is that in the past, before the coming of the internet, almost everybody relied on the mainstream media for their news about the Middle East, for their news about Israel, for their about the US-Israeli relationship. And there's no question the lobby had a profound influence on what was said in the mainstream media. But with the coming of the internet, you have the growth of all sorts of platforms, the growth an alternative media, an alternative to the mainstream medium, where it's possible to say things that are critical of Israel, to post videos of what Israel is doing in Gaza – which is guaranteed to make Israel look bad and guaranteed to change the discourse on the US-Israel relationship, and on the lobby itself. So one cannot underestimate the importance of the internet, the importance of platforms like TikTok, of YouTube, of Substack for allowing criticism of Israel and the US-Israeli relationship and the lobby itself to percolate out into the discourse, the mainstream discourse. So the internet has really mattered.

What's also really mattered, obviously, is Israeli behaviour. And Clifton and Lustick are really good on this whole issue. And in fact, they have a chapter on Israel as a crazy state that everybody should read very carefully. What's going on here? First of all, as a result of October 7th, 2023, Israel set out to expel the Palestinians from Gaza. And in the process, it ended up executing a genocide. And this was a genocide that virtually everybody on the

planet watched on the internet. It was perfectly obvious what the Israelis were doing. And furthermore, a discourse began to open up about Israeli policy towards the Palestinians over time. This is a discourse that hardly anybody in the public knew about. But it became clear to all sorts of people that if you look at Israeli behaviour towards the Palestinians over time, at least going back to 1948 when the state of Israel was created, that the Israelis often treated the Palestinians in absolutely horrible ways. And then, of course, you've got a genocide on top of that. So I think if you look at what the Israelis were doing, not just in Gaza, but beyond Gaza, if you look at what they're doing in the West Bank today, it's hard not to be super critical of Israel. And this, of course, is exactly what happened. You want to remember, I said that this Brandeis Center did a survey that showed that 74 % of college students think that Israel is committing a genocide in Gaza. There's a reason for this, and that is that I am sure most of those students have watched what's happening in Gaza and read about what's happening in Gaza on TikTok or YouTube or Substack. This is a huge problem for Israel. So what I'm saying here is that it's Israeli behaviour, coupled with the internet, that has really changed how people think and talk about Israel.

Now, to take this a step further, in this chapter on Israel as a crazy state, Ian and Eli tell a very interesting story about this whole concept of a crazy state, and they link it very carefully to Israel. When I was young, when I was a graduate student, it was a book that most of my fellow IR students read by an Israeli called Yehezkel Dror, and it dealt with the subject of crazy states. I believe that was the title of the book, *Crazy States*, if my memory's correct. And Dror, who was an Israeli, of course, his basic argument was that there are some states in the system that have almost unlimited goals, unlimited aggressive goals. And they're willing to employ almost any means, no matter how barbaric, to achieve those unlimited goals. And of course, the canonical case here was Nazi Germany. And the argument was, and it was not a difficult argument to make, was that Nazi Germany had extremely ambitious goals. They were horrible goals. They were aggressive goals. And they were willing to employ the most horrendous or barbaric means to achieve those goals. And as Lustick and Clifton point out, the purpose of Dror's book was to make the argument that the Arab states surrounding Israel were crazy states and therefore Israel was justified to do almost anything it had to do to deal with these crazy states. I mean what else could Israel do if it was surrounded by crazy states but behave in the most hard-headed and toughest possible way with these crazy states. And the point that Lustick and Clifton are making is that what's happened over time is it's not the Arab states that surround Israel that have turned out to be crazy states, it's Israel itself that's turned out to be a crazy state. And the argument they make is that if you look at Israeli goals in the Middle East – the emphasis on creating a Greater Israel, the emphasis on wrecking all of Israel's powerful neighbours, and so forth and so on. And then if you look at the means that Israel applies to achieve these goals, starting wars, assassinating leaders, and so forth and on, you see very clearly in their story that Israel has become a crazy state. And this argument is laid out in considerable detail, and it is a very powerful argument. And if you think about it, this behaviour reflects how Israel acts these days. And of course, getting back to what I was saying a minute ago, it's very clear to people who watch TikTok, YouTube, who read Substack posts, and so forth, and so on, that Israel is behaving like a crazy state. And of course, once people become aware of this, the discourse is going to change. And that's really

what's happening here. If you look at Israeli behaviour and you marry that to the fact that this behaviour is apparent to so many people in the West, in the United States in particular, it's hardly surprising what's going on here. It's hardly surprising why Israel is losing the American public.

They also make another very important argument, which you hardly see talked about in the American media, which is worth saying a few words about. And this has to do with Israel's sense of itself. It has to do with Israeli identity. And they point out that this is not only about Israeli identity, it's also about the identity that a number of American Jews have as well. When I was younger, and the first time I went to Israel, which I believe was in 1978, I was of the belief that Israel was striving to become what was referred to at the time as a "normal country". Israel was going to become just another nation state. It was going to be closely affiliated with the West, but it was a normal state. I remember when I went to Israel in 1978, and somebody told me that when it became clear that there were a significant number of Israeli prostitutes, that many Israelis thought that was a good thing because it showed that Israel was a normal country. And it was just another nation state. The Jews were finally getting their own state. Much the way the French had their own state or the Japanese had their state. The Jews now had their own state. It was just another nation state on the planet. Ian and Eli point out that this is only one strand in Israeli thinking. There's another strand, and that strand, which has a rich history, basically argues that Jews as a nation will dwell alone and will not be reckoned among nations. Just think about that rhetoric. Jews are not a normal nation and they will dwell alone and they would not be wrecked among nations, this is not just a normal nations state. And furthermore they point out that part of this world view – this is the opposite world view from the one that Israel is a normal state, this is saying Israel is very special and will dwell alone – is the whole notion that the world is against them. They're out to get the Jews, and they're out to get Israel. And furthermore, and this is rhetoric that they use in the book, the belief is, according to this second worldview, that all gentiles are potential Nazis.

And the point that Ian and Eli make is that if you look at survey data regarding what is happening inside of Israel, it's very clear that this second view that Israel will dwell alone and that the world is against Israel has taken hold in a serious way. And if anything is likely to become a more potent worldview in the years ahead. This reminds me that I often wonder why the Israelis are not more concerned about the fact that they have alienated so many people around the world, that they have done so much damage to Israel's reputation. If you think about the argument that Ian and Eli are making, it's perfectly understandable in terms of the growing strength of this second sense of Israeli identity, why Israelis don't care very much about what others think about their behaviour because they expect other countries, other nation states, other peoples to be against them. That's just the way the world operates. So the argument here is that what's going on is not only that there has been a fundamental change in Israel's sense of its own identity – and again, this bleeds over into how many American Jews think about themselves and think about Jews in the world, because again, they are making the argument that this line of argument has affected some American Jews as well as Israelis. So you have this phenomenon taking place. At the same time, Israel is behaving in barbaric ways

in places like Gaza. And the West Bank. And this is all taking place in the age of the internet. And as a result of all these factors, what has happened here is that Israel's situation in terms of the discourse has badly deteriorated. The idea that most Americans have a favourable view of Israel and a favourable view of the US-Israeli relationship, which is what existed when Steve and I wrote our article and then our book, has drastically changed. And most Americans now have a negative view of Israel. And if anything, this is likely to change. Certainly, given that Israel, according to Lustick, and Clifton, do not care very much about what the rest of the world thinks, number one. And number two, they feel they're basically free to do as they want in places like Gaza, places like Syria, places like Lebanon, and of course the West Bank as well. So Israel has lost control, and the lobby has lost control of the discourse for all these reasons. And that situation is not likely to change.

Now, as I said to you before, with regard to policy, the policy has not changed. The United States remains firmly committed to supporting Israel unconditionally. There's just no question on that front. So we have this situation today, which Eli and Ian do a brilliant job of describing where the policy and the discourse are out of sync. So the question then is, what is the lobby doing to, number one, try and rectify the discourse or rectify the problem that it faces in terms of the discourse? And then, number two, what is it trying to do to make sure that moving forward there's no change in American policy toward Israel? That the lobby and Israel, working together, continue to maintain a hammerlock on US policy. Let's start by talking about discourse. And with regard to the discourse, really two things are happening here that they describe in considerable detail. One has to do with the definition of anti-Semitism. When Steve and I wrote the book back in 2007, there was a pretty widespread understanding of what anti-Semitism was. And what's happened over time is that the definition of anti-Semitism has been broadened greatly. And today, the lobby and many others, because of the power of the lobby to spread this idea, have this very loose definition of what anti-Semitism is. It's the IHRA definition. You're saying to yourself, what does IHRA mean? It's The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA. And that IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is very broad. And what it effectively means is that criticism of Israel is seen as anti-Semitism. So anybody who is criticising Israel for its genocide in Gaza or its barbaric behaviour in places like the West Bank is said to be an anti-Semite, according to this definition. So what the lobby has tried to do by deploying this IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is make it virtually impossible to criticise Israel without putting yourself in a position where you're labelled an anti-Semite. When Steve Walt and I wrote our book, we had a chapter called The Great Silencer. And we talked in that chapter about how the charge of anti-Semitism is used as the great silencer. And of course, Eli and Ian are talking about exactly that. And they are dealing with this IHRA definition, which is a very important part of the story, which was not part of this story when we wrote our book. So that's the first tool that the lobby uses to combat criticism of Israel. In effect, the aim here is to make criticism of Israel anti-Semitic and therefore silence critics.

The second thing that's happened is that the lobby has used the government to crack down on anyone who criticises Israel. And the best example of that were the protests that took place all across college and university campuses in the United States in the spring of 2024. Remember,

after October 7th, 2023, after the Hamas attack into Israel, Israel went on the offensive and eventually ended up executing a genocide. And unsurprisingly, by the spring of 2024, there were large-scale, if not massive protests on campuses all across the United States. The lobby went to work and put enormous pressure on the US government to shut down those protests. And by the way, this was not the Trump administration, it was the Biden administration, and the Biden administration played ball with the lobby, and those protests were shut down. And if you go to universities, or college campuses today, you'll see remarkably little evidence of any criticism of Israel. It's really quite amazing how good the lobby and the government, working together as a tag team, have been at shutting down criticism of Israel on college and university campuses. And of course, this is linked in part to using that broad definition of anti-Semitism purveyed by the lobby, because if people on college campuses set out to protest Israeli behaviour and criticise Israel or criticise the lobby or criticise US-Israeli relationship, what happens very quickly is that the government defines that as anti-Semitism and goes to work. So this is how the lobby has been trying to police the discourse or to put it slightly differently, to sort of recapture control of the discourse. The fact is it's failed. There's just no question about that. The lobby has been unable to recapture control of the discourses. And the main reason is the internet. It's just almost impossible in the age of the internet to control the discourse the way the lobby once did before the coming of the internet.

Then there's the question of policy. What's going on at the policy level? And there Clifton and Lustick have a very interesting story to tell. First of all, they talk about the growth of plutocracy in the United States, the fact that we have a large number of plutocrats, some of whom are Jewish, and those Jewish plutocrats are willing to expend huge amounts of money to influence elections, both at the congressional level and at the presidential level. And not only that, not only do we have this plutocrat class, that includes wealthy Jews who are deeply committed to Israel, but we also had a Supreme Court decision that was made in 2010. This is the Citizens United decision that basically allowed individuals, in other words, these wealthy plutocrats, to spend almost as much money as they want on congressional and on presidential elections. So you have this situation where someone like Miriam Adelson, who is both an Israeli citizen and an American citizen and who clearly identifies more with Israel than the United States, according to Donald Trump, gave him an enormous sum of money which helped him to get reelected in 2024. And, of course, Miriam Adelson was not the only Jewish plutocrat who was supporting Donald Trump. But the more general point here is that in the United States of America we have a political system where to get elected you need a lot of money. And to get re-elected you need a lot of money. If you have plutocrats who can spend unlimited sums of money helping people get elected who are pro-Israel in their view and can help defeat candidates or incumbents who are viewed as anti-Israel in their view, you're going to quickly reach a situation where most people on Capitol Hill and almost all presidents are going to be afraid to cross the lobby and will do pretty much what the lobby wants. And, of course, you saw this with Joe Biden and you see this with Donald Trump. Neither Biden nor Trump, dare to cross the lobby. This has been true, of course, for a long time in American politics. And the reason is today that you have all these plutocrats who are deeply committed to Israel and can spend endless amounts of money because of the 2010 Citizens United decision by the Supreme Court.

So, what's the bottom line here? The bottom line here is that since Steve and I wrote our book, the discourse about Israel has changed drastically. The public discourse about Israel has changed drastically. As I said before, that's due in large part to the internet coupled with Israeli behaviour and how Israel thinks about itself. Those various factors have led to this fundamental change in the discourse, but the policy has not changed. The lobby is still able to influence policy in ways that the United States maintains unconditional support for Israel. So the big question moving forward, and this will be a question that 20 years from now, the successors to Clifton and Lustick will write about, the question is: how successful will the lobby be in the years ahead at maintaining unequivocal support for Israel at the policy level when, in fact, support for Israel has significantly deteriorated at the popular level? This is really the big question moving forward. This was not a question that Steve and I faced, I want to emphasise that again. When Steve and I wrote, the lobby was pretty much in charge of the discourse and pretty much in charge for policy. But that has changed. The lobby has lost its ability to control the discourse. And again, what you want to think about moving forward is what effect this will have on US policy toward Israel in the years ahead. So on that note, I will conclude. And I just want to say again, I think that people who are interested in US Middle East policy, who are interested and how the lobby influences that policy, you should definitely go out and read this new book by Ian Lustick and Eli Clifton because it's a superb book and it says all sorts of interesting and important things about the lobby and about Israel and about the effect the lobby is having on US democracy. This is not a small issue and this is an issue that I have not dwelled on today but which these two authors spend a lot of time talking about in their new book. On that note, let me close and say thank you for watching this episode, and I look forward to the next episode.

END

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