

The Israel Lobby Debate

by Alexander Gelfand
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The political invective flew thick and fast at "The Israel Lobby: Does It Have Too Much Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy?", a debate hosted by the London Review of Books on September 28th in New York City. And that was just among the audience members milling about before the event had even begun.

Sitting in the Great Hall at The Cooper Union, surrounded by animated conversations in English, Hebrew and Arabic – "He's a Zionist, isn't he?...He has the same relationship to Israel that a Muslim has to Communism" – it was easy to imagine that everyone present was sussing out the political inclinations of his or her neighbours: Pro-Palestinian or pro-Israeli? Anti-Arab or anti-Zionist? Friend or foe? By the time the debate began, the atmosphere in the cavernous auditorium more closely resembled that of a prizefight than an academic forum.

The debate's moderator, Anne-Marie Slaughter, dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, announced that there were, in fact, two debates to be had. The first was over the alleged anti-Semitism of "The Israel Lobby", a controversial article by the American academics John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt that was published in March by the London Review of Books, and which portrayed the pro-Israel lobby as a vast and powerful interest group whose influence over American foreign policy serves the interests of neither Israel nor the United States. The second was over America's policies toward the Middle East in general and Israel in particular. In reality, however, the evening unfolded as a series of interrelated arguments over the nature and scope of the Israel lobby in America, its putative power, and its influence over both foreign policy and domestic affairs.

Critics of the article included Martin Indyk, former U.S. ambassador to Israel and research director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC); Dennis Ross, former U.S. peace envoy to the Middle East; and Shlomo Ben-Ami, Israeli foreign minister under Ehud Barak. Those defending and expanding upon the claims made in the article included the British historian Tony Judt, director of the Remarque Institute at New York University; Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University; and Mearsheimer himself.

Indyk, Ben-Ami and Ross pilloried Mearsheimer and Walt for exaggerating the size and power of the lobby, and accused them of anti-Semitism for characterizing it as a sinister, all-pervasive cabal. Mearsheimer, not surprisingly, demurred, while Khalidi tried to reframe the debate by stressing the impact of pro-Israel propaganda on American domestic politics, prompting one audience member to sarcastically invoke the Protocols

of the Elders of Zion and "the Jewish domination of America" during the question period that ended the debate.

Khalidi's emphasis on the domestic impact of "decades of propaganda" by the lobby was part of a larger struggle by both sides to focus selectively on those issues that most played to their advantage. Indyk, Ben-Ami and Ross attacked Mearsheimer for indiscriminately lumping together American neo-conservatives, Israeli officials and diasporic Jews in one monolithic group, and for ignoring the role that competing interest groups, individual leaders and genuine security concerns play in shaping policy. Mearsheimer, Judt and Khalidi, meanwhile, tried to keep the focus firmly on the lobby itself, with Judt and Khalidi arguing that pro-Israel forces influence American actions abroad by manipulating attitudes toward Israel at home – both by quashing criticism of the Jewish state and by persuading Americans that Israel and America share the same values and interests, even when they do not.

There were occasional moments of agreement. While Indyk did not respond directly to Judt's charge that the tendency to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism has stifled open criticism of Israel in America, he did admit that AIPAC has "placed a straitjacket" on successive American administrations. And Khalidi joined Indyk and Ross in refuting Mearsheimer's claim that the lobby played a major role in America's decision to invade Iraq.

In the end, however, these patches of common ground were less important than the simple fact of the debate itself. Freewheeling public discussion of sensitive topics like anti-Semitism and Israeli-American relations is indeed rare in this country, and despite a few flashes of temper, both sides in the debate managed to be remarkably civil without pulling any punches.

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