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The Other Pro-Israel Lobby: The Mearsheimer and Walt Controversy and the Rise of J Street

Maya Spitzer

University of Pennsylvania, mayaspitzer@gmail.com

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Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate the influence of the pro-Israel lobby, as a means of assessing more generally the role of interest groups in shaping American public policy, and whether the so-called “lobbies that can’t be beat” are truly unassailable. First, I probe the prevailing treatise on pro-Israel lobby influence, which portrays the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as the nerve center of a pro-Israel lobbying network that almost never fails to coerce policymakers to bow to its will. I ask two distinct but related questions: do AIPAC and the other groups depicted as the “Israel lobby” wield as much power as the authors’ claim, and how accurately do they illustrate the means and mechanisms through which such influence is exercised? Second, I present a case study of a pro-Israel organization, J Street, at cross-purposes with the centrist pro-Israel lobby whose founding and expansion challenge the perception of pro-Israel lobby cohesion and dominance that pervades the existing literature.

In the first chapter, I summarize John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt’s *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* and conduct a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the controversy aroused by the book. I present the foremost academic, media, and other responses elicited by the treatise to distill a ‘conventional wisdom’ on the pro-Israel lobby. While I find the perception of pervasive pro-Israel lobby influence in policymaking and public discourse is largely accurate, I nonetheless conclude the book’s empirical claims on pro-Israel lobby influence are exaggerated and bordering on fallacious. Further, I conclude the book’s claims regarding how lobby influence is gained and exercised and the extent to which such influence operates are, in light of the paucity of systematic empirical evidence provided in the book, imprecise.

In the following chapter, I present a preliminary case study of J Street, a dovish pro-Israel lobbying organization which rose to prominence after Mearsheimer and Walt’s treatise was published. I detail how J Street came to be and how it has already begun to make its mark on the American Jewish community, established pro-Israel lobbying groups, and U.S. policy toward Israel, tracing the organization’s successes and struggles through its first four years of existence. I find that Mearsheimer and Walt, and their panoply of critics, minimize the profound changes taking place in the Jewish community regarding Jewish communal affiliation and attachment to Israel; they also underestimate changes in American society generally regarding American relations with Israel and the perception of the deleterious influence of the pro-Israel lobby on policymaking and public discourse.

It is this disregard that prevented Mearsheimer and Walt and their various critics from anticipating the advent of J Street. Though still a fledgling organization, J Street has begun to transform the pro-Israel landscape by broadening the tent of acceptable pro-Israel discourse within the Jewish community, and by becoming an increasingly well-heard, if not always heeded, lobbying presence on Capitol Hill. J Street’s founding and organizational expansion renders Mearsheimer and Walt thesis increasingly void, above and beyond the faults exposed by its multitude of critics.

This thesis is intended to contribute to the larger literature on interest-group politics by demonstrating that the “pro-Israel lobby” is neither monolithic nor invincible. The pro-Israel lobby, led for decades by AIPAC and other centrist groups, did not win every legislative battle, and has had to accept major compromises to maintain its significant influence. No more than the NRA, AARP, or U.S. Chamber of Commerce—in their respective spheres of policy influence—is the pro-Israel lobby a lobby that can’t be beat, or an influence network that prospers without effecting compromises and bargains.

My main point is that AIPAC and the rest of the centrist pro-Israel lobby are *not* the whole story. The

influence of the pro-Israel lobby cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the increasingly weighty role and countervailing political influence of the *other* pro-Israel lobby in the policy subsystem that crafts U.S. policy toward Israel. While this thesis is hardly a definitive exposition of pro-Israel lobby influence on American life, I argue that the analyses, arguments, and findings proffered present a compelling counterpoint to *The Israel Lobby*.

Keywords

Israel, Israel lobby, Mearsheimer and Walt, J Street, AIPAC, Social Sciences, Political Science, John Dilulio, Dilulio, John

Disciplines

American Politics | Jewish Studies | Political Science

THE OTHER PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY:

THE MEARSHEIMER AND WALT CONTROVERSY AND THE RISE OF J STREET

Maya Spitzer
Undergraduate Honors Thesis in Political Science
University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Dr. John J. DiIulio
April 1, 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Looking back on the process of researching, outlining, writing, and editing my thesis, I can't believe I actually pulled it off. When I embarked on this project, I wasn't sure how I could ever write a 60-page research paper; little did I know my paper would end up more than double that. Many thanks to all the people who have made this process an academic dialogue rather than a solitary undertaking.

First, I would like to thank my brother Gideon, who pushed me to write a thesis, insisting that it would be a rewarding academic challenge. I would also like to thank Dr. Doherty-Sil, who showed me that academic writing is a social process, and helped me situate my thesis topic within its respective kitchen conversation. Gratitude is also due to my thesis buddies—Scott Lee, Matt Valdespino, and Ryan Kuo—with whom I spent many Tuesdays and Thursdays in the library, procrastinating and occasionally getting thesis work done. Many thanks too to my mom and dad for their unwavering love, support and confidence in my academic endeavors.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. John J. DiIulio, whose mentorship was instrumental in helping me bring my ideas to fruition, and who inspired me to make this thesis the best piece of work I possibly could. I would like to thank Dr. DiIulio for giving so generously of his time in the production of this thesis. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to collaborate with a scholar of such stature and insight, and a human being as demanding yet supportive. Writing this thesis has been far and away my most rewarding academic endeavor, an apt culmination of my four years at Penn.

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INTRODUCTION

Since I read the *Federalist Papers* at the beginning of college, I have been fascinated by the benefits and dangers presented by the “multiplicity of factions” inherent in the American political system, and the modern day role of interest groups in shaping American public policy.¹ In my political science studies, I have become particularly interested in the scholarly debates regarding whether certain interest groups or lobbying organizations have the ability to dictate policymaking in their respective subsystems. In my course readings, I have encountered a number of oft-cited examples of “lobbies that can’t be beat,” such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) on gun control policies, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) on policies affecting entitlement programs for the elderly, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on policies concerning taxation and regulation of big business, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on U.S. policy toward Israel.

The recurring theme of unassailable organized interests has led me to question whether any of these lobbies is truly dominant in its particular policy domain. Despite the abovementioned organizations’ reputations for invincibility, based on my general knowledge on the subject—drawn primarily from James Q. Wilson’s *American Government* and Schlozman, Verba, and Brady’s *The Unheavenly Chorus*—none of these lobbies has unchecked power.²

The NRA, which advocates for gun ownership as a civil liberty provided by the Second Amendment and opposes gun control legislation, has been exceedingly influential in getting “shall-carry” laws enacted in nearly every state and in thwarting gun control legislation.

¹ Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. Ed. Isaac Kramnick. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.

² Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012.
Wilson, James Q., John J. DiIulio, and Meenekshi Bose. *American Government: Institutions & Policies*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2013.

Nonetheless, it has lost several key federal policy battles. For example, the 1993 Brady Bill, a gun control measure, was enacted over the strong opposition of the NRA, and its provisions went far beyond what the organization had anticipated. In addition, the NRA failed to block the passage of a 1994 assault weapons ban, though it was able to delay the decision and narrow the scope of the gun control stipulations of the bill. Moreover, although the NRA managed to block the renewal of the assault weapons ban in 2004, in the 2000s, a number of states and localities resisted NRA pressure and adopted tough anti-gun laws.³

The AARP, which lobbies for the federal provision of financial benefits and services to people ages 50 and older, is the leading lobby on issues related to federal entitlement programs and the dominant force behind successive national health care policy debates. Though the AARP has certainly won more battles than it has lost, it has had more success in blocking legislation than in getting its policies enacted.⁴ Additionally, the AARP has lost major policy fights on programs like Medicare, and found itself particularly embattled in the early 2010's as House Republicans crusaded to cut back Medicare spending and several states reduced funding to the portion of Medicaid that provides for long-term nursing care.⁵

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce represents thousands of businesses in hundreds of cities. Though the Chamber's close to a billion dollars spent on lobbying between 1998-2010 places it in a league of its own and while its affiliated business interests currently outspend pro-labor groups by about 15 to 1, it nevertheless is not all-powerful.⁶ Following the 2007 recession, for

³ Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 294, Wilson, DiIulio, and Bose, 279.

⁴ Wilson, DiIulio, and Bose, 279.

⁵ Lichtbau, Eric. "With a Major Push, AARP Returns to a Hard Line Against Cuts in Benefits." *The New York Times* [New York] 15 Dec. 2012: n. pag. *Www.nytimes.com*. 14 Dec. 2012. Web.

Pear, Robert. "States Can Cut Back on Medicaid Payments, Administration Says." *The New York Times* [New York] 26 Feb. 2013: n. pag. *Www.nytimes.com*. 25 Feb. 2013. Web.

⁶ "Business-Labor-Ideology Split in PAC & Individual Donations to Candidates, Parties Super PACs and Outside Spending Groups." *OpenSecrets.org: Money in Politics*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Mar. 2013. Wilson, DiIulio, and Bose, 274.

example, the 2010 federal Dodd-Frank law, though tempered to accommodate the Chamber's policy preferences, contained numerous provisions strongly opposed by the Chamber and its allied interest groups.⁷

For two reasons, however, it was the example of AIPAC that particularly sparked my interest. First, while there has been abundant scholarship and journalistic evidence suggesting that AIPAC reigns no more supreme in dictating U.S. policy toward Israel than the NRA has on gun control, the AARP has on entitlement programs, or the Chamber has on business-related legislation, the single most widely-referenced scholarship on the subject portrays AIPAC as the nerve center of a pro-Israel lobbying network that almost never fails to coerce policymakers at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, and in both parties, to bow to its will. Second, as a young American Jew and unabashed Zionist, who has spent time living in Israel, working as a reporter for a leading Israeli newspaper called *The Jerusalem Post*, and studying at an Israeli university, the topic was especially salient to me, as a matter of both intellectual interest and of personal sentiment.

Thus, for my political science honors thesis, I have chosen to critically probe the principal scholarly work on pro-Israel lobby influence, and specifically AIPAC influence, on U.S. policy toward Israel. In doing so, I will ask two distinct but related questions in relation to that treatise: do AIPAC and the other groups depicted as the "Israel lobby" wield as much power and influence as the authors' claim, and how accurately do they illustrate the means and mechanisms through which such influence is exercised? I attempt to answer both questions and critically probe that leading tract from two directions.

⁷ Prottess, Ben. "Court Ruling Offers Path to Challenge Dodd-Frank." *The New York Times* [New York] 17 Aug. 2011: n. pag. *Dealbook.nytimes.com*. Web.

In the first chapter, I summarize John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* and conduct a comprehensive review of the literature surrounding the controversy aroused by the book. I endeavor, with as much equity and objectivity as I can muster, to present the foremost academic, media, and other responses elicited by the treatise in order to distill a 'conventional wisdom' on the pro-Israel lobby. In conducting this literature review, I find that the perception of pervasive pro-Israel lobby influence in policymaking and public discourse prevails much as the book depicts. Nonetheless, I conclude that the book's empirical claims on pro-Israel lobby influence are largely exaggerated and bordering on fallacious. Further, I conclude that the book's claims regarding how lobby influence is gained and exercised and the extent to which such influence operates are, in light of the paucity of systematic empirical evidence provided in the book, imprecise.

In the following chapter, I present a preliminary case study of J Street, a pro-Israel lobbying organization at cross purposes with AIPAC, which rose to prominence after Mearsheimer and Walt's treatise was published. I draw on archival evidence, mostly from news sources, and first-hand interviews that I conducted with J Street staff members. *Prima facie*, if Mearsheimer and Walt were correct with respect to the extent and mechanisms of influence of AIPAC and the rest of the affiliated pro-Israel lobby, then J Street ought not to exist today.

Through my investigation, I find that Mearsheimer and Walt and the entire spectrum of their critics minimize the profound changes taking place in the Jewish community regarding Jewish communal affiliation and attachment to Israel; they also underestimate the changes in wider American society regarding American relations with Israel and the perception of the deleterious influence of the pro-Israel lobby on policymaking and public discourse. It is this disregard that prevented Mearsheimer and Walt and their various critics from anticipating the

advent of J Street. It is precisely this state of flux that allowed J Street to come about and begin to transform the dynamics of pro-Israel discourse in the Jewish community and on Capitol Hill. In tracing J Street's political and communal activities and impact, I find that, although it is still in an embryonic stage of organizational development, J Street is becoming increasingly established as a pro-Israel player, rendering the Mearsheimer and Walt thesis increasingly void, above and beyond the faults exposed by its multitude of critics.

In the concluding section, I briefly summarize my findings in the previous two chapters, and outline some potential avenues for further research to assess interest group influence on U.S. policy toward Israel. While I certainly do not claim that the findings I have arrived at in this thesis are at all definitive or that they put to rest the matter of pro-Israel lobby power, I do believe that my research has raised enough concerns that Mearsheimer and Walt's tract can no longer be accepted uncritically—even by readers who might yet be disposed to agree with the book's empirical claims or with its stated preferences regarding the need to overhaul American policies toward Israel.

CHAPTER 1

THE PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY: HOW POWERFUL IS IT AND HOW DOES IT EXERCISE POWER?

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY

The American pro-Israel lobby is commonly viewed as a highly organized, unitary political body aligned with Israel's right-wing Likud party. The pro-Israel lobby, however, is not monolithic or unified, and includes many groups with conflicting agendas and points of view.⁸ The rich diversity of opinion among organizations contradicts the perception of the pro-Israel lobby as a right-wing colossus.⁹ Nevertheless, that diversity is not so readily apparent in the lobby's public presence, which is shaped by a handful of large centrist groups. Pro-Israel groups are united, generally, in their devotion to Israel's survival as a Jewish state, although they disagree about how best to ensure Israel's security.¹⁰

The pro-Israel community can be divided roughly into three categories: centrist, left-wing, and right-wing.¹¹ The centrist lobby includes the largest, well-established pro-Israel organizations, such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The centrist lobby is defined by its consensus politics, meaning that it aims to present a united Jewish front, it eschews taking strong positions on controversial issues, and it supports the sitting Israeli government's policies (though to varying degrees). The centrist lobby is primarily concerned with sustaining the alliance between the U.S. and Israel as the linchpin of Israel's security, and is therefore opposed

⁸ Waxman, Dov. "The Israel Lobbies: A Survey of the Pro-Israel Community in the United States." *Israel Studies Forum* 25.1 (2010): 5-28. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

to U.S. pressure on Israel, which could attenuate that alliance. For centrist groups, the peace process is of lesser importance than protecting Israel's security, especially because of the perception that diplomacy might necessitate concessions which may imperil Israel's safety.¹²

By contrast, the left and right wing lobbies advocate approaches that conflict with the centrist consensus and the Israeli policies it echoes, striving to "save Israel from itself." The left-wing is the smallest segment of the pro-Israel lobby, including groups such as Ameinu, Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, Israel Policy Forum, and Americans for Peace Now. These groups favor diplomacy, engagement, and compromise with Israel's adversaries. They also generally oppose Israel's occupation of the West Bank and support a two-state solution. As opposed to centrist groups, left-wing groups deem the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as paramount, and the U.S.-Israel bond as secondary. The right-wing lobby takes a polar opposite stance in its hawkishness, its suspicion of diplomacy and engagement, and its opposition to any Israeli concessions. Groups such as the Zionist Organization of America, Americans for a Safe Israel, American Friends of Likud, and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) support the Israeli occupation, oppose a two-state solution, and view Palestinians as callous enemies with whom peace cannot be forged.¹³

Among these categories, the centrist pro-Israel lobby has long been the frontrunner in pro-Israel lobbying, with the greatest resources, community support, and political clout. Centrist dominance reflects of the broad desire among American Jews for cohesion, and their discomfort with challenging Israel, which could inadvertently work to the advantage of Israel's foes. Within the centrist lobby, AIPAC is by far the largest and most influential organization, said to rival the AARP and NRA in lobbying might. As of 2010, it had a \$140 million endowment, over 100,000

¹² Ibid, 11.

¹³ Ibid, 12.

dues-paying members, an even larger number of grassroots volunteers and eight regional offices.¹⁴

MEARSHEIMER AND WALT'S THE ISRAEL LOBBY AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

The academic dialogue on the pro-Israel lobby has been enmeshed in controversy over John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* since its publication in 2007. Mearsheimer and Walt level a comprehensive critique against the pro-Israel lobby, claiming that it is a highly organized, powerful machine that acts counter to American interests and has a pernicious stranglehold on American domestic discourse and foreign policy. In their view, the pro-Israel lobby is responsible for suffusing a pervasive pro-Israel bias in American policymaking, disallowing pressure or criticism to be voiced against Israel, and strengthening American support of Israeli military aggression and human rights abuses. Their arguments have come to dominate the academic discussion on the pro-Israel lobby, and despite their highly contentious reception, their claims have come to redefine conventional wisdom on the lobby. In the next section, I will outline *The Israel Lobby's* key arguments.

Mearsheimer and Walt's analysis begins by surveying the history of Jewish persecution, and the canards and calumnies about them which developed throughout that history, in order to differentiate their analysis of the pro-Israel lobby from such illegitimate, anti-Semitic discourse. While dismissing charges of dual loyalty against American Jews as inappropriate, they contend that pro-Israel groups are not neutral, promoting policies on behalf of the Israeli government

¹⁴ Ibid, 13.

which are often not in America's interest, thus making it both reasonable and necessary to assess the lobby's impact.¹⁵

Mearsheimer and Walt define "Israel lobby" expansively, as a loosely bound collection of groups working to promote a pro-Israel orientation in U.S. foreign policy. That definition includes pro-Israel organizations, PACs, and many organizations not involved in formal lobbying activities, including think tanks, academics, journalists, and politicians. In their view, the lobby's base includes not only engaged Jews, but also Christian Zionists and neoconservatives. Despite varying policy positions, the majority of pro-Israel groups and individuals support unconditional U.S. diplomatic, military, and economic support for Israel.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the characterization of the lobby as a diverse collection of groups, it is presented as a unified body by frequent reference to those groups as a single unit. The lobby's large organizations have amassed remarkable resources and expertise, with the ability to organize and coordinate quickly across the country.¹⁷

Mearsheimer and Walt describe the mainstream pro-Israel groups as increasingly conservative and controlled by hardliners closely allied to hawkish Israeli leaders, a transformation at odds with the liberal-minded community those groups claim to represent.¹⁸ They note the distinction with left-wing groups, which are small, command few resources, and are not seen by politicians as speaking for the American Jewish public, leaving the liberal views of the majority of American Jews largely unrepresented.¹⁹

As Mearsheimer and Walt see it, the pro-Israel lobby is primarily interested in self-aggrandizement, rather than motivated by the convictions of the American Jewish community.

¹⁵ Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 12-14.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 112-114.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 141.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 128.

For example, some pro-Israel groups have shifted their stances rightward and fanned the flames of concerns about Israel’s vulnerability and growing anti-Semitism in order to ensure their organizational existence and inflow of donations.²⁰ Even more revealing, many of the large pro-Israel groups have forged unholy alliances with neoconservatives and Christian Zionists to strengthen the pro-Israel bloc, though their agendas are at variance with those of most American Jews. Neoconservatives view spreading democracy and maintaining U.S. hegemony as key, and favor the use of unilateral military force to attain those objectives. Seeing Israel as the bulwark of U.S. dominance in the Middle East, they have aligned themselves with the Israeli right wing, supporting the Israeli settler movement and opposing diplomatic resolution of the conflict or a two-state solution.²¹

Christian Zionists similarly are seen by Mearsheimer and Walt as supporting a far-right agenda out of their religious belief that the Jewish state is a harbinger of the Second Coming, and that achieving “greater Israel” (a single state encompassing all of historical Israel) will hasten the process.²² They note that much of the Jewish community is skeptical of Christian Zionists because of their enunciated aim of eventually converting all Jews to Christianity, and their doctrinaire positions on Israel. Mearsheimer and Walt conclude that both neoconservatives in the Bush administration and Christian Zionists in Congress have reinforced hardline attitudes and made it more difficult for policymakers to apply pressure on Israel. Their outspoken non-Jewish voices underscore to American policymakers the notion of a societal predisposition to support Israel.²³

²⁰ Ibid, 127.

²¹ Ibid, 129-130.

²² Ibid, 132-134.

²³ Ibid, 137-138.

The overarching goals of the pro-Israel lobby, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, are to frame the public discourse in Israel's favor through promoting its own strategic and moral justifications, and to shape U.S. policymaking in a manner beneficial to Israel.²⁴ In framing the public discourse, the lobby is seen as fostering popular sympathy for Israel by suppressing public criticism and portraying Israel in a positive light.²⁵ Within the Jewish community as well, the pro-Israel lobby polices public criticism of Israeli policy, only allowing such dialogue behind closed doors. Those who come out against Israeli policy or the U.S.-Israel alliance are often ostracized from the mainstream pro-Israel groups and the wider Jewish community. Mearsheimer and Walt point to the example of Breira, a liberal group formed in 1973, incited the rancor of the Jewish community and was eventually compelled to disband because of its calls for Israeli territorial concessions and an immediate peace settlement incompatible with the mainstream pro-Israel consensus.²⁶

According to Mearsheimer and Walt, in government, pro-Israel groups aim to constrain the policies leaders are inclined to consider, making staunch support for Israel the “smart” political move.²⁷ Ordaining the conditions to make siding with Israel the default position is helped by the absence of effective organized opposition by Arab Americans, Arab oil states, or “big oil” lobbies.²⁸ In this view, because of the lobby's success at constraining the choices of policymakers and framing the public discourse in Israel's favor, criticism of Israel is virtually absent from Capitol Hill. Israel's favorable reception is further amplified by the fact that a number of prominent legislators are key players in the pro-Israel lobby, such as Sen. Charles

²⁴ Ibid, 151.

²⁵ Ibid, 109.

²⁶ Ibid, 122-123.

²⁷ Ibid, 151.

²⁸ Ibid, 141-145.

Schumer, Rep. Henry Waxman, and Christian Zionists such as Rep. Tom DeLay and Rep. Richard Arme^y.²⁹

Mearsheimer and Walt then turn to AIPAC, “the most effective general-interest group ... across the entire planet,” according to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, which exerts incredible influence in Congress.³⁰ They contend that its impact is due to its power to reward politicians who support its agenda and retaliate against those who do not through campaign contributions. According to Mearsheimer and Walt, AIPAC tacitly supports candidates by providing them with donors and funding through its national network of affiliated pro-Israel PACs.³¹ Between 1990-2004, pro-Israel PACs spent \$57 million in political campaigns.³² For legislators it seeks to punish, AIPAC directs contributions toward their opponents to drive them out of office, such as the now infamous defeat of Sen. Charles Percy in 1984, provoked by his not signing a letter in 1975 urging Pres. Ford to rethink his Middle East policy, and his overly sympathetic view of Yasser Arafat, head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. That episode demonstrated to politicians that if they flout the pro-Israel lobby, they’d be next on the chopping block.³³ The authors contend further that AIPAC inserts itself directly into the legislative process with issue analyses, legislation, talking points, and speeches at the ready for legislators. That assistance conditions legislators to turn to AIPAC first for information on Middle East issues.³⁴ Its unrivaled influence over Congress is exemplified by its annual policy conference, to which multitudes of politicians of all stripes flock to lavish praise on Israel, hoping to curry favor with Jewish lobbyists, voters, and most especially, donors.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid, 152-153.

³⁰ Ibid, 153.

³¹ Ibid, 154.

³² Ibid, 156.

³³ Ibid, 158.

³⁴ Ibid, 161.

³⁵ Ibid, 160.

As Mearsheimer and Walt would have it, while the executive branch is less under the thumb of the pro-Israel lobby than Congress, the lobby nonetheless is influential, by virtue of the Jewish electorate's clout in high turnout rates and sizeable donations, making presidential contenders eager to attract support from the lobby.³⁶ In their view, during the Clinton and Bush years, the strongest impact came from the presence of pro-Israel individuals inside the administration who helped shape policy decisions with a decidedly pro-Israel bent. For example, Martin Indyk, on the National Security Council, ambassador to Israel, and assistant secretary of state under Pres. Clinton, who had been a deputy director of research and AIPAC and co-founder of Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy (WINEP), and Dennis Ross, Clinton's special envoy to the Middle East, who later joined WINEP, were central to the Oslo peace process. They closely coordinated the U.S. position with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and may have hindered the process through their reluctance to press Israel to compromise.³⁷ In addition, Elliott Abrams, a key figure in Bush's National Security Council, and other neoconservatives in the administration such as David Wurmser and John Bolton, were instrumental in ensuring the U.S. backed Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War.³⁸ Elliott too, who had ties to Prime Minister Olmert, is said to have worked closely with Olmert's staff to minimize Bush's efforts to restart the peace process.³⁹

Outside of government, Mearsheimer and Walt note that the pro-Israel lobby strives to influence the discourse about Israel in the media, in think tanks, and in academia to shape public opinion. According to these authors, because of the lobby's ability to marginalize those with less

³⁶ Ibid, 163-164.

³⁷ Ibid, 165-166.

³⁸ Ibid, 310.

³⁹ Ibid, 223.

supportive coverage, the American media has developed a pronounced pro-Israel bias.⁴⁰ As a result, they contend that pro-Israel views have become the default at the nation's leading think tanks such as the Brookings Institute and the Heritage Foundation, which are quite influential in informing policymaking.⁴¹ In addition, the lobby has been assertive in fostering student support for Israel on college campuses, and has gone to great lengths to suppress open debate on Israel by attempting to influence faculty hiring practices and selection of campus speakers.⁴² There are even instances of pro-Israel activists going to inappropriate lengths to muzzle critics, like when the Polish Consulate canceled an event after pressure by individuals from the ADL because Tony Judt, an NYU history professor critical of Israel, was scheduled to speak.⁴³

Mearsheimer and Walt accuse the pro-Israel lobby of combatting critics by blackballing them as anti-Semites or self-hating Jews. According to them, the lobby has a long history of exploiting fears of new anti-Semitism to protect Israel from censure.⁴⁴ For example, Pres. Jimmy Carter was demonized as a Jew hater for his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, critical of the Israeli occupation.⁴⁵ Another common retort is that critics hold Israel to an unfair standard, or unjustly question its legitimacy as a state, silly claims considering that Israel is only being held to its own liberal democratic values and universal human rights norms, and that questioning does not imply illegitimacy.⁴⁶

Because of the success of pro-Israel lobbying, Mearsheimer and Walt conclude the U.S. gives Israel aid and protection above and beyond that of any other country. Israel is the largest recipient of U.S. aid, receiving \$3 billion annually, in addition to other funding for special

⁴⁰ Ibid, 168-169.

⁴¹ Ibid, 175-177.

⁴² Ibid, 178-179.

⁴³ Ibid, 185.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 190.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 193.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 190.

defense projects, such as the Iron Dome missile defense system.⁴⁷ The U.S. also incentivizes Egypt and Jordan to get along with Israel by providing them aid packages, which have increased in size with their signing of peace treaties and friendly overtures to Israel. The most remarkable aspect of U.S. aid to Israel is that it is unconditional, even when Israel acts counter to U.S. interests and directives.⁴⁸

Mearsheimer and Walt note that America has upheld Israel's military ascendancy in the region through bankrolling Israeli weapons development, sharing intelligence, and by tacitly condoning Israel's nuclear arsenal.⁴⁹ In addition, the U.S. has for decades shielded Israel from censure on the world stage by vetoing scores of UN Security Council resolutions disparaging Israeli conduct.⁵⁰ America has also acted as Israeli counsel in peace negotiations, placing Palestinians always on the losing side.⁵¹ However, according to the authors, there is no satisfactory strategic or moral basis for such American backing.⁵²

The Israel Lobby attempts to eviscerate the strategic and moral rationales promoted by the pro-Israel lobby and internalized by U.S. policymakers, depicting Israel as a "strategic liability" and having at best a "dwindling moral case" for U.S. support. Pro-Israel groups tout America and Israel's common global threats, their alliance in the war on terror, Israel as a mainstay of "Pax Americana" in the Middle East, Israeli's strategic value, and its military and technological strengths.⁵³ Yet, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, whatever strategic value Israel held disappeared after the Cold War, and even then the U.S.-Israel alliance drove Arab

⁴⁷ Ibid, 26-28.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 40-41.

⁵¹ Ibid, 46.

⁵² Ibid, 48.

⁵³ Ibid, 50.

states into the Soviet's arms, bred anti-Americanism throughout the Middle East, and damaged the U.S. economy through the 1973 oil embargo.⁵⁴

The authors contend that, despite claims to the contrary, the U.S. and Israel are not “partners against terror” in a Huntington-esque clash of civilizations. In their view, the U.S. and Israel have distinct terrorist threats, Israel's in essence a subject versus occupier resistance. Besides, they claim U.S. patronage of Israel has exacerbated America's terrorist problem.⁵⁵ Israel is also strategically deficient in its inability to safeguard America's supply to oil in the Persian Gulf, a top U.S. priority in the region.⁵⁶ Moreover, Mearsheimer and Walt contend Israel has destabilized the region by causing both intifadas and other regional wars, and was a burden to the U.S. in the 1991 Gulf War.⁵⁷ On top of that, they see the claim that Israel is a vital ally for dealing with regional rogue states as illogical; America's commitment to Israel is the only reason those states are perceived as threats in the first place.⁵⁸ Finally, they conclude that in spite of all the U.S. backing, Israel acts primarily in its own interest, like when it has sold weapons in violation of U.S. law, conducted espionage against the U.S., and continued settlement expansion despite U.S. objections.⁵⁹

Mearsheimer and Walt also claim that the moral rationale for the “special relationship” between the U.S. and Israel is flawed. The pro-Israel lobby asserts that Israel deserves U.S. support because it is vulnerable amidst enemies determined to destroy it, and because of its democratic values, its morally-superior conduct to that of its Arab adversaries, and the history of Jewish persecution.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the authors contend that Israel has always been stronger than

⁵⁴ Ibid, 52-54, 77.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 59-60, 63.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 56, 58.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 60, 72.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 75.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 78-79.

its adversaries, and is indisputably the greatest military power in the region. Arab leaders' rallying cry to "drive the Jews into the sea," according to them, was never in earnest, as they merely aimed to capture Palestinian territory and reclaim areas Israel had wrested from them.⁶¹ They conclude that Israel's focus on Jewish demographic dominance, its denial of equality in law to non-Jews, and its human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories repudiate any basis of support for Israel's democratic values.⁶²

Mearsheimer and Walt go further, asserting that Israel's founding involved crimes against Palestinians, in pursuit of "greater Israel," a dream which still underlies Israel's reluctance to offer the Palestinians a viable state.⁶³ They claim Israel too has not manifested its alleged restraint or purity of arms, and that its conduct against adversaries since its founding has been reactionary and shown little concern for human rights or loss of life, such as the gruesome violence its soldiers committed against civilians in both intifadas.⁶⁴ On top of those dwindling moral claims, the authors maintain that the dispensationalist belief promoted by Christian Zionists to justify support for Israel is an entirely inappropriate basis for foreign policy decisions. Besides, they claim, Christian Zionist support for Israel is imprudent, as Israel's oppression of Palestinians contradicts Christian morality.⁶⁵

According to *The Israel Lobby*, in addition to strategic and moral hoodwinking, pro-Israel activists have perverted U.S. policies in the Middle East to suit Israel's preferences, though in a manner detrimental to both American and Israeli interests. In their view, the U.S.'s chief concerns in the Middle East include keeping oil from the Persian Gulf flowing, discouraging

⁶¹ Ibid, 81, 83-84.

⁶² Ibid, 87-91.

⁶³ Ibid, 92, 94, 97.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 98-101.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 107-108.

nuclear proliferation, and reducing anti-American terrorism originating there, to which the pro-Israel lobby pays no heed.⁶⁶

In confronting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, former President Bush advocated a two-state solution and issued the Road Map initiative to that end, called for Israel to withdraw from some of the West Bank, dispatched Sec. of State Colin Powell to initiate the peace process, and later dispatched Sec. of State Condoleezza Rice to restart negotiations after Israel's unilateral disengagement plan imploded. On each occasion, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, the pro-Israel lobby foiled the administration's efforts by sponsoring open letters and resolutions in Congress, marshaling sympathetic officials to their aid, and writing press releases and op-eds.⁶⁷ As a result, Bush was bullied into backing up Israeli hardline policies and rationales that the pro-Israel lobby promoted.⁶⁸ In the end, Bush allowed Israel to trample on the Road Map. They contend that at the behest of pro-Israel activities, he okayed unilateral disengagement from Gaza that evaded final status negotiations requisite to a two-state solution, thus enfeebling Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas; allowed settlement expansion to continue; and did not press Israel to accept the Arab League's 2007 Peace Initiative.⁶⁹

Mearsheimer and Walt maintain that U.S. interests were damaged by undermining moderate Arabs like Mahmoud Abbas and the Arab League, thereby strengthening extremist groups like Hamas.⁷⁰ The inability to get Israel to negotiate, facilitated by the pro-Israel lobby's blocking, was another strategic setback for the U.S.. Israel's itself was damaged by the prolongation of the conflict with the Palestinians, intensifying anti-Israel sentiment.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid, 199.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 227-228.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 204.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 217-218, 222.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 223

⁷¹ Ibid, 226.

Mearsheimer and Walt accuse the pro-Israel lobby of having been instrumental in the U.S. decision to attack Iraq. They contend that members of the pro-Israel lobby, especially high-ranking neoconservatives in the Bush administration, Pentagon, and Vice President Cheney's staff, had been angling for the U.S. to attack Iraq long before 9/11 in hopes of initiating a process of regional democratic transformation and enhancing Israel's strategic position by eliminating one of Israel's key regional adversaries. Though they sold the war as a solution to America's post-9/11 terrorist problem, strengthening Israel was a crucial pillar of the rationale for war. As Sec. of State Rice stated in 2002, "the real threat" Saddam Hussein posed was "the threat against Israel."⁷²

The authors contend that pro-Israel neoconservatives teamed up with Israel to sell the war to the Bush administration. In this view, in promoting war, Israel provided inflated intelligence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction with its allies in the Pentagon and vice president's office while Israeli statesmen engaged in a media blitz to highlight the threat posed by Iraq. The mainstream pro-Israel organizations, according to Mearsheimer and Walt, quietly supported the war, and even when public opinion soured, with 77% of American Jews opposed, the lobby refused to come out against the war out of its concern for Israel's material security.⁷³ Later, when Bush was under public pressure to withdraw from Iraq, the pro-Israel lobby pressed him to finish what he'd started so to not imperil Israel's security.⁷⁴

The authors conclude the war in Iraq was an albatross for the U.S. interests in the region, and unintentionally benefited Iran by eliminating its main regional adversary. A strengthened

⁷² Ibid, 230-233.

⁷³ Ibid, 242-243.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 260.

Iran also did injury to Israel's security, as did the uptick in domestic terrorism incited by the war.⁷⁵

All told, according to *The Israel Lobby*, the inflammatory policies the pro-Israel lobby has promoted in the Middle East in line with Israeli preferences have damaged both American and Israeli strategic interests. The authors believe those policies have fueled anti-Americanism, frustrated American efforts to collaborate with Arab countries to deal with Iraq and Iran, and prevented American policymakers from realizing policies consistent with American objectives. They conclude that the pro-Israel lobby has provided cover for Israel to pursue destructive policies, in indirectly underwriting Israel's settlement of the Occupied Territories, and letting Israel evade peace negotiations and deny the Palestinians their legitimate national aspirations, leaving Israel more embattled and reviled than ever.⁷⁶

QUALIFYING MEARSHEIMER AND WALT'S ARGUMENTS

Mearsheimer and Walt's publication of *The Israel Lobby* working paper in 2006, and of the book by the same name one year later, sparked a vigorous debate about the nature of the pro-Israel lobby and the impact its constituent groups have on American political and communal life.⁷⁷ Not since Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" has an academic publication ignited such controversy.⁷⁸ While *The Israel Lobby* has prompted a range of opposing, moderate, and favorable responses, vehement opposition has dominated the discourse.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 259.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 336.

⁷⁷ Walt, Stephen and John J. Mearsheimer. "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy." KSG Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP06-011, March 2006.

Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. Print.

⁷⁸ Massing, Michael. "The Storm over the Israel Lobby." *The New York Review of Books* 08 June 2006. www.nybooks.com. Web.

The vast literature that proliferated in response to *The Israel Lobby* does not confine itself to assessing the authors' core claims—that is, to whether the authors' are correct in their portrayal of the scope of the pro-Israel lobby's power and the mechanisms through which its power is exercised. Based on my evaluation of the responsive literature, it appears that the analysis of *The Israel Lobby* exaggerates the extent of the lobby's power, in that it unduly discounts evidence that negates lobby supremacy. The analysis is also imprecise about the application of the lobby's power, in that it fails to substantiate its claims with empirical evidence and underplays the impact of Jewish communal pluralism and Jewish-led groups with agendas at odds with those of the Jewish 'establishment' on which the book dwells.

ALL-OUT CRITICS

A myriad of American public figures have spoken out against Mearsheimer and Walt's findings. David Gergen, a political commentator and former presidential advisor, denounced Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments as "wildly at variance" with his personal recollections from working in four administrations. Congressman Jarrod Nagler also did not mince words in deriding *The Israel Lobby* as a "meretricious, dishonest piece of crap." Professor Marvin Kalb of Harvard's Kennedy School even went so far as to say that the publication tarnished the Kennedy name.⁷⁹

Leading figures of the organized Jewish community have led the charge, bringing the most scathing indictments against *The Israel Lobby*. The arguments presented by Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL, and Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, a prominent American defender of Israel, encapsulate the anger and distress that *The Israel Lobby* has provoked in the Jewish community. These critics charge Mearsheimer and Walt with cloaking old anti-Semitic canards and conspiracy theories in an academic and pseudo-objective

⁷⁹ Ibid.

framework, grounding sweeping claims about the pro-Israel lobby on shoddy research and dubious sources, making erroneous claims about Israel, and neglecting to consider relevant context and counterarguments. While these Jewish critics have each seized on different aspects of Mearsheimer and Walt's argument, they have spoken largely in one indignant chorus in condemning *The Israel Lobby*.⁸⁰

Lamenting that *The Israel Lobby* has indeed convinced many readers of its thesis, Dershowitz and Foxman denounce the book as "a sloppy diatribe ... of half-truths, falsehoods, and innuendos," a "compilation of old, false, and authoritatively discredited charges dressed up in an academic garb."⁸¹ They indict Mearsheimer and Walt for including no original research, using quotes in isolation to obscure their original meanings, misrepresenting the historical record, making factual errors, and employing faulty logic.⁸² They further condemn the authors for what they argue are disingenuous claims of fairness and objectivity. Dershowitz and Foxman conclude that *The Israel Lobby* is constantly one-sided, exaggerates the lobby's power, makes

⁸⁰ Cohen, Eliot A. "Yes, It's Anti-Semitic." *The Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 5 Apr. 2006: n. pag. *Wwww.washingtonpost.com*. Web.

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Wisse, Ruth R. "Israel Lobby." *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition* 22 Mar. 2006: A16. *EBSCO MegaFILE*.

⁸¹ Dershowitz, Alan M. *Debunking the Newest—and Oldest—Jewish Conspiracy: A Reply to the Mearsheimer-Walt "Working Paper"* [Cambridge, MA]: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government Website, 2006. 4.

Foxman, Abraham H. *The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 53.

⁸² Dershowitz, 5-6.

false claims about the lobby's control of government, and overlooks widespread American support for Israel and the American interests served by the U.S.-Israel alliance. All told, they believe that Mearsheimer and Walt's text is based upon "a culpable degree of bias."⁸³

The Israel Lobby is particularly troubling to Jewish critics because it breathes new life into Jewish scapegoating. In Foxman's view, enduring anti-Semitic ideas, held by about a third of American adults, makes Jewish advocacy inherently suspect to many.⁸⁴ Both he and Dershowitz assert that while Mearsheimer and Walt are not necessarily anti-Semitic, they nonetheless recapitulate classic anti-Semitic myths, singling out Jews for accusations of subversion and disloyalty.⁸⁵ In the eyes of most Jewish critics, though Mearsheimer and Walt deny subscribing to anti-Semitic canards, condemning pro-Israel lobbying that aims to sway U.S. foreign policy, or questioning Israel's legitimacy as a state, their arguments have the effect of doing just that.⁸⁶ Foxman argues, for example, that blaming pro-Israel lobbying for the U.S. invasion of Iraq and for the threat of Islamic terror fits all too well into the history of blaming Jews for American involvement in foreign wars.⁸⁷ He cautions that such scapegoating may be a convenient way to deflect attention from American faults of morality and judgment and reduce the need to contemplate domestic concerns, but may spell disaster for Jews as it has so often in the past.⁸⁸

According to Foxman, because Mearsheimer and Walt are respected academics, and because of the credibility established by affiliation with their home institutions, their book has

⁸³ Foxman, 64, 80.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 48.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 55, Dershowitz, 42.

⁸⁶ "In Dark Times, Blame the Jews." Editorial. *The Jewish Daily Forward* [New York] 24 Mar. 2006: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

⁸⁷ Foxman, 30.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 96, 217.

been widely accepted as scholarly literature.⁸⁹ Both he and Dershowitz assert that such a reception is unwarranted, as much of the book's evidence is drawn from illegitimate sources.⁹⁰ Dershowitz notes, for example, that the authors cite as fact fallacious claims by Alexander Cockburn, a notorious anti-American and anti-Semitic columnist, and of Norman Finkelstein, a historian discredited for unfounded conspiratorial, anti-Zionist claims. Foxman also relates that the book has earned the praise of extremists and anti-Semites, such as former Klu Klux Klan leader David Duke, and has caused a sensation on extremist websites.⁹¹ For Dershowitz and Foxman, *The Israel Lobby's* use as a rallying cry for hatred and bigotry speaks volumes about the invalidity of its content.

Jewish critics also deconstruct *The Israel Lobby's* reading of Israeli history, laying bare the many errors and mischaracterizations in the text's historical account. Foxman contends that Mearsheimer and Walt show clear bias in portraying as fact disputed moral crimes committed against Palestinians in Israel's War of Independence, while overlooking concomitant Arab aggression.⁹² He also decries the absence of context that is key to appreciating Israel's situation and mindset during the War of Independence, including the Holocaust; the unwillingness of states to accept the masses of Jewish refugees; Arab rejection of every partition plan proposed while Zionists accepted them all, no matter how miniscule and indefensible the resulting Zionist state; and the support of leading statesmen of the time for Israel's creation.⁹³

In addition, echoing the sentiments of many Jewish critics, Dershowitz and Foxman disparage Mearsheimer and Walt's improper and inaccurate portrayal of Israel's "apartheid" status in 1948; by this account, Jews were the minority population and landholders in mandatory

⁸⁹ Ibid, 49.

⁹⁰ Dershowitz, 5-6.

⁹¹ Ibid, 17-18, Foxman, 81-82.

⁹² Foxman, 56.

⁹³ Dershowitz, 24-25.

Palestine. This portrayal, Dershowitz and Foxman argue, overlooks the fact that Jews were the decisive majority in the Jewish state under the UN-approved partition plan. Moreover, Dershowitz and Foxman maintain that the authors skew the record of the 1948, 1967, and 1973 wars, in an attempt to show that Israel was the aggressor, that its military superiority was evident at the time, and that it won painless victories, none of which is true; on each occasion, Arab antagonism provoked war, Israeli military superiority was by no means a given, and high casualty rates crippled the fledgling state.⁹⁴ In addition, Dershowitz and Foxman, along with many other Jewish critics, condemn the authors for taking quotes about Palestinians by legendary Israeli leaders David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir out of context, in order to imbue them with false malice.⁹⁵

Dershowitz also seizes upon Mearsheimer and Walt's crude depiction of Israel as a strategic liability during the Gulf War, a portrayal that disregards that Israel dutifully complied with American requests not to retaliate against the torrent of Iraqi Scud missiles that rained down and paralyzed the country for seven weeks. Even more damning to the authors' claim, Dershowitz argues, is the fact that, had Israel *not* destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, the U.S. would not have been able to confront Iraq at all in 1991.⁹⁶ Foxman, too, derides the authors for relying exclusively on Yasser Arafat's deceitful account (as opposed to those of other summit participants) of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's peace offer at the 2000 Camp David Summit in an attempt to show that Israel was never serious about reaching a two-state solution.⁹⁷

Apart from its historical inaccuracies, most Jewish critics roundly denounce *The Israel Lobby* for its biased and misleading portrayal of the pro-Israel lobby. As an editorial charges in

⁹⁴ Ibid, 22-24.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 20, Foxman, 57.

⁹⁶ Dershowitz, 24.

⁹⁷ Foxman, 59.

The Forward, a leading American Jewish newspaper, the book glosses over distinctions among pro-Israel groups, painting the lobby as a right-wing monolith, while in fact there are many diverse and competing approaches within the pro-Israel universe.⁹⁸ In Dershowitz's estimation, an especially glaring oversight is the omission of high profile, non-Jewish liberal supporters of Israel, like President Bill Clinton.⁹⁹ Foxman also rejects the contention that the lobby stifles criticism of Israel, asserting that the authors' stated examples do not show pro-Israel leaders enforcing ideological conformity. Foxman particularly takes issue with the depiction of how the ADL, the organization he heads, persuaded the Polish Consulate to cancel Tony Judt's speech as an act of vigilante justice, characterizing it instead as a request to include a balancing figure misconstrued as a demand for the event's cancellation.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Foxman rejects the authors' accounts of the lobby punishing rogue politicians, citing leading Illinois politicians who credit the successful Democratic mobilization efforts, and not the lobby's campaign, for Senator Charles Percy's 1984 failed reelection bid.¹⁰¹ Reflecting the opinion of most Jewish critics, Foxman also denies that pro-Israel forces stifle criticism of Israel in the media or on college campuses; indeed, anti-Israel media bias and anti-Israel fervor on college campuses are widespread. In addition, Foxman highlights the absurdity of the claim that the pro-Israel lobby prevents executive branch appointments of individuals critical of Israel, citing prominent administration figures critical of Israel such as James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, and Colin Powell.¹⁰²

Many Jewish critics also cry foul at Mearsheimer and Walt's dismissal of rising anti-Semitism in Europe, a position that disregards the contentions of European leaders such as

⁹⁸ "In Dark Times Blame the Jews", Dershowitz, 12.

⁹⁹ Dershowitz, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Foxman, 65-66, 149.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 67-68.

¹⁰² Ibid, 69-70.

Jacques Chirac and Silvio Berlusconi, who themselves have highlighted the problem.¹⁰³ In Dershowitz's view, minimizing the threat of anti-Semitism reveals the authors' anti-Semitic bent by relying on a common refrain in hate literature of Jews arbitrarily crying anti-Semitism and by upholding the image of an omnipotent Jewish cabal, while disregarding evidence to the contrary.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, Dershowitz and Foxman, mirroring many other Jewish communal voices, indict the authors' faulty logic as smacking of Jewish scapegoating. In their view, it is preposterous to surmise that the mere existence of a pro-Israel lobby pushing for unconditional U.S. support for Israel means that such a lobby is contrary to U.S. interest, or that everything America and Israel do in concert is an Israeli manipulation.¹⁰⁵ It similarly does not follow, Foxman contends, that the Iraq war can be blamed on the pro-Israel lobby simply because neoconservatives, many of whom have ties to the pro-Israel community, were leading proponents of the war. This argument is further undermined, in his view, by the fact that neoconservatives themselves are not a unified group, and had fruitlessly promoted war with Iraq until the 9/11 policy window opened, propelling an Iraq incursion to the top of the national agenda.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, Foxman, reiterating a common refrain among Jewish critics, disparages *The Israel Lobby's* attempt to delegitimize the U.S.-Israel relationship. He alleges that the book attempts to impugn Israeli conduct by dwelling on Israeli abuses and making light of the Palestinian terrorist threat that underlies these purported abuses. Foxman argues that the book, in an attempt to negate that they are partners against terror, also inappropriately bifurcates the terrorist threats that both nations face. In his estimation, both states are denounced by jihadists;

¹⁰³ Ibid, 74.

¹⁰⁴ Dershowitz, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 39, Foxman, 72.

¹⁰⁶ Foxman, 75-76.

Islamic terrorism seeks out Western targets in general, not only those related to the conflict; and no terrorist group has ever arisen solely to punish the U.S. for its alliance with Israel.¹⁰⁷ In addition, Foxman claims that the book unduly justifies Arab obstinacy, hatred, and violence toward Israel and America by depicting the Islamist movement as driven chiefly by anger over Israeli treatment of Palestinians, and by presenting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the leading issue in the Middle East. According to Foxman, while resolving the conflict is crucial, it is not a panacea for Middle East peace.¹⁰⁸

A number of Jewish critics have also indicted the book's fallacious claims about Israeli democracy as a subterfuge to undermine Israel's merit as a U.S. ally. Dershowitz points out that Israeli citizenship is not based on blood kinship, as Mearsheimer and Walt claim; in fact, all citizens enjoy the same rights and liberties. Dershowitz also notes that the authors highlight certain sections of the Or Commission Report to expose Israel's "undemocratic" nature, while excluding other sections that affirm that Arab equality is central to Israeli democracy.¹⁰⁹ On top of the misstatements to which Dershowitz calls attention, Foxman argues that Israeli interests demonstrably do not control U.S. foreign policy, citing instances of the U.S. acting counter to Israel's agenda, such as when President George H.W. Bush withheld \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel in 1991.¹¹⁰

Jewish communal critics have been especially strident in their defense of the strategic and moral grounds for U.S. support for Israel, against Mearsheimer and Walt's indictments of Israel as a "strategic liability" with a "dwindling moral case" for U.S. patronage. Foxman asserts that Israel is a strategic asset as the only major democracy in the Middle East, and the greatest source

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 60-62.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 227-228.

¹⁰⁹ Dershowitz, 26-27.

¹¹⁰ Foxman, 127-129.

of regional stability as a strong military power and unconditional U.S. ally.¹¹¹ Besides that, he argues, the U.S.-Israel relationship is undergirded by the history of anti-Semitism, Israel's democratic values, and America's sense of religious kinship with a country founded by pilgrims fleeing religious persecution to their own promised land.¹¹² Foxman insists that the authors' notion that U.S. policy reflects the will of the pro-Israel lobby, and not that of the American public, is simply fallacious, as public support for the U.S.-Israel alliance and favoring Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been remarkably strong and unwavering.¹¹³

Jewish communal voices have also vigorously attacked what they perceive as the book's slander of the pro-Israel lobby. Many Jewish critics contend that the pro-Israel lobby simply does not hold the reins of U.S. policymaking, and that competing interests like the oil lobby, arms and technology companies, and Arabists in the State Department often thwart its efforts.¹¹⁴

According to Foxman, pro-Israel actors do not promote right-wing policies inconsistent with the views of the Jewish public. Echoing the contention of most mainstream Jewish leaders, Foxman claims that the pro-Israel lobby not only practices consensus politics, supporting every Israeli administration regardless of political bent, but that the rightward shift of American Jewish leaders is parallel to the growing conservatism of American Jews.¹¹⁵ Moreover, he asserts that pro-Israel leaders encourage diversity of opinion within the Jewish community, and that robust debate on the merits of Israeli policies is a hallmark of communal discourse. While Foxman concedes that discourse on Israeli policies is more cautious in the U.S. than in Israel, he does not perceive this as symptomatic of the policing of free expression, but as an outgrowth of the

¹¹¹ Ibid, 104-105.

¹¹² Ibid, 97-98.

¹¹³ Ibid, 110.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 116-118.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 119-121.

community's respect for the decisions of Israel's democratically elected leaders, and for Israeli citizens who must live with the consequences of those policies.¹¹⁶

Alongside the comprehensive critique leveled against *The Israel Lobby* by Jewish establishment voices, the book has provoked ire in American academia. Columbia professor Robert Lieberman has led the academic crusade against Mearsheimer and Walt's scholarship, eviscerating what he sees as their flawed methodology, their flawed research design, and the incongruity of their claims with scholarly consensus on the American political system.¹¹⁷

Lieberman ultimately concludes that the authors' evidence and reasoning does not support their central thesis that the influence of the pro-Israel lobby is the primary driver of American policy in the Middle East.¹¹⁸

Lieberman criticizes Mearsheimer and Walt's scholarship primarily for the lack of variation exhibited in its empirical tests, its selection bias, its conceptual ambiguity, and its lack of finite boundaries delineating cause, effect, and process. Instead of analyzing variation to prove causal claims, Lieberman argues, the book exhibits consistent selection bias for cases with high lobbying pressure and pro-Israel outcomes, from which it is impossible to draw causal inferences. In addition, he asserts, Mearsheimer and Walt's failure to specify the model of American policymaking they operate under, and the lack of comparison with alternate models, undermine the validity of their causal arguments.¹¹⁹

Further, Lieberman maintains, the book's distinction between the pro-Israel lobby and government is ambiguous, making causally amorphous claims regarding the lobby's influence on government that are incapable of verification or refutation. Lieberman censures Mearsheimer and

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 112-113, 236-237.

¹¹⁷ Lieberman, Robert C. "The "Israel Lobby" and American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 7.02 (2009): 235-257. 235.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 250.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 240-241.

Walt in particular for misunderstanding how Congress works in their claim that Israel's relative freedom from criticism on Capitol Hill must result from the pro-Israel lobby's constriction of Congress's natural tendency to tackle contentious subjects. Quite to the contrary, Lieberman notes, members of Congress evade potentially explosive issues out of their basic re-election imperative. That is, in the interest of self-preservation, lawmakers are preoccupied with the basic electoral incentive, and are therefore inclined to take conflict-avoidant stances in order to minimize voter alienation or incurred cost.¹²⁰

Lieberman dissects Mearsheimer and Walt's causal arguments, suggesting that in each case the authors fail to furnish evidence to substantiate their claims. For instance, though the authors indicate that Jewish and evangelical members of Congress are instrumental in shaping pro-Israel policy, they provide little evidence connecting those actors to concrete policy outcomes. Lieberman notes that, considering the consistently small number of Jewish Congressional members, a Jewish bloc would be too small to make an impact in policy decisions. Further, he argues that a cursory examination of other models focusing on strategic considerations of policy outcomes, such as the pivotal politics, party, and distributive models, also do not indicate commensurate Jewish influence to drive Middle East policymaking.¹²¹

Lieberman musters evidence to show that Mearsheimer and Walt's claim that pro-Israel campaign contributions are a factor in inducing pro-Israel policymaking in Congress is without any empirical or theoretical basis. According to Lieberman, the authors overlook the fact that the vast majority of pro-Israel funds go to Democratic candidates, which suggests that pro-Israel money would have paltry influence over the Republican-controlled legislatures focused on in their analysis. The authors also fail to mention, he notes, that pro-Israel donations have flat-lined,

¹²⁰ Ibid, 241-242.

¹²¹ Ibid, 243.

while overall campaign donations have soared, diminishing the relative weight of pro-Israel dollars in campaign coffers. In addition, due to the absence of empirical evidence to back up anecdotes of “revenge campaigns,” Lieberman asserts that Mearsheimer and Walt fail to show that pro-Israel contributions are indeed pivotal in those contests. Lieberman further endeavors to undercut the authors’ claim by noting that it is based on the flawed presumption that campaign contributions guarantee influence, an idea widely disproven in scholarly literature.¹²²

Lieberman attempts to further gut Mearsheimer and Walt’s assertions that pro-Israel influence on the executive branch is derived from the sizeable impact of pro-Israel campaign contributions and the pivotal role of Jewish voters in presidential elections. He points out that the authors erroneously conflate Jewish and pro-Israel campaign donations, skewing the importance of pro-Israel money; while Jewish donations are sizeable, pro-Israel donations are only a tiny slice of that pie. Furthermore, the majority of pro-Israel contributions are often directed toward the losing candidate, which, in Lieberman’s view, further undermines the claim of influence on the executive. He shows, too, that Jewish voting is highly predictable in being consistently Democratic at rates of 60% or higher, thereby limiting the possibility of a decisive role for a Jewish bloc in elections.¹²³ Moreover, he argues, it is especially hard to explain President George W. Bush’s pro-Israel policy preference as pandering to Jewish voters when they were shown to not have been pivotal voters in key states in his 2004 reelection.¹²⁴

Lieberman similarly endeavors to demonstrate that Mearsheimer and Walt’s contention that the pro-Israel lobby stifles debate about U.S. policy toward Israel so as to sustain favorable public opinion and governmental support for Israel lacks systematic data analysis or theoretical underpinning. Given that Mearsheimer and Walt provide no indication that the catalog of pro-

¹²² Ibid, 244-245.

¹²³ Ibid, 245.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 247.

Israel sources they rely upon (including media, think tanks and the like) is representative across relevant venues, Lieberman concludes that their choices of sources are evidently rife with selection bias. In addition, he contends that the examples the authors provide of pro-Israel actors angling to constrict public discourse do not demonstrate that their actions had any effect on the substance or tenor of discourse. Furthermore, Lieberman charges, the assertion that the pro-Israel lobby is able to shape public discourse is at variance with the scholarly literature on the subject. John Kingdon's landmark study on American policymaking, he notes, demonstrated that the media and academia have at most a limited role in shaping the national agenda and the direction of policy. Other studies, he argues, have shown that media does not prompt changes of opinion, but merely frames discussion and may activate latent beliefs.¹²⁵

In a similar vein, Lieberman attempts to show that Mearsheimer and Walt, in arguing that pro-Israel actors shape public discourse by smearing critics as anti-Semites, offer scant empirical evidence to bear out a causal connection between the risk of being labeled anti-Semitic and the conduct of potential critics. In the few examples of high-profile individuals like President Jimmy Carter being publicly indicted as anti-Semitic, he notes, the tactic was unsuccessful, thus arguing against the authors' contention.¹²⁶ Based on Mearsheimer and Walt's exposition of its interest group theory to explain American policy toward Israel, Lieberman is unconvinced that the pro-Israel lobby is the driver of America's pro-Israel policies.¹²⁷

Ben Fishman, a research associate at WINEP, contributed to the academic opposition to *The Israel Lobby* in making the case that the book's case studies misconstrue American foreign policy in the Middle East so as to demonstrate pro-Israel control while, in reality, policy shifts

¹²⁵ Ibid, 247-248.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 248.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 251.

have been dictated by facts on the ground.¹²⁸ He denounces the book as overly polemical, faulting the authors for not collecting first-hand accounts from individuals in the Bush administration, overlooking key considerations in policy choices, using quotes and facts misleadingly, and omitting facts that contradict their propositions.¹²⁹ Fishman contends that, in the book's central case study depicting pro-Israel actors ordaining the direction of U.S.-Israel relationships from 2001-2002, the authors mischaracterized American objectives and conduct by misreading American relations with the Arab world and placing undue emphasis on minor events.¹³⁰ In his estimation, pro-Israel "strong-arming" did not foil President Bush's attempts to reduce anti-American sentiment in the Middle East after 9/11 by pressuring Israel to cease settlement expansion and by advocating the creation of a Palestinian state, nor did it compel Bush's retreat from his initial call for Israel to withdraw from the West Bank following its reoccupation in Operation Defensive Shield.¹³¹

By failing to put these events into context, Fishman argues, the authors overstate American pressure on Israel and distort the administration's policy rationales.¹³² He relates that evidence has shown that the impetus for Bush to engage the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had nothing to do with 9/11, but was in fact aimed at improving relations with Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2001. After 9/11, he claims, contrary to Mearsheimer and Walt's assertion, the U.S. did not apply added pressure on Israel to reconcile with the Palestinians or to show restraint in military operations or settlement building. In fact, 9/11 transformed the administration's view of the Middle East conflict into an ideological struggle between the forces of extremism on the one hand, and the promise of democratic progress, on the other. In turn, the administration

¹²⁸ Fishman, Ben. "The 'Israel Lobby': A Realistic Assessment." *Orbis* 52.1 (2008): 159-80. 169.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 167, 180.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 169.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 167-169.

¹³² *Ibid*, 177.

deemphasized resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in its Middle East calculus. As such, Fishman asserts, Israel was relieved of pressure, both because of this new assessment and because Yasser Arafat was perceived by the administration as being on the wrong side of the ideological divide. Fishman also clarifies that Bush's support for a Palestinian state was not an instance of going rogue, but was consistent with current Israeli policies, and was entirely unproblematic for pro-Israel groups.¹³³

Another major flaw of Mearsheimer and Walt's portrayal, in Fishman's view, is their omission of the efforts of special envoy Anthony Zinni to broker a cease-fire during the Second Intifada, given that these efforts were key to subsequent shifts in American policy. According to Fishman, Zinni's efforts failed after repeated Israeli concessions, mainly due to Arafat's continued intransigence in talks and his unwillingness to put a stop to Palestinian terrorism. Talks were derailed by two watershed events: the Karine-A incident, involving Israeli interception of a ship carrying Palestinian weapons from Iran; and the Passover terrorist bombing that precipitated Israel's Operation Defensive Shield. Fishman asserts that both incidents conclusively demonstrated that the Palestinian leadership would not commit to end the violence. In his view, the experience convinced Zinni that Arafat was the main stumbling block to peace.¹³⁴

According to Fishman, without that context, and without explaining that Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield because of unremitting terrorism culminating in the Passover bombing, Bush's retreat from calling Israel to withdraw from the West Bank is not sufficiently clarified. Fishman asserts that the president's softening was not fueled by pro-Israel pressure, as Mearsheimer and Walt portray it, but rather by sympathy for Israel and identification with its

¹³³ Ibid, 169-172.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 173-175.

counterterrorism efforts.¹³⁵ He ultimately concludes that the authors' claims—that pro-Israel actors fueled policy shifts during that period and that U.S. policies would have been different in the lobby's absence—are entirely lacking in evidence. The pro-Israel lobby, at most, reinforced the administration's prevailing beliefs, as their goals were nearly identical during that period.¹³⁶

Fishman notes that Mearsheimer and Walt make an even more heinous claim in their Iraq case study, wherein they conclude that pro-Israel influence drove the U.S. invasion of Iraq, because they failed to conduct first-hand interviews with individuals involved in that policy decision. In his view, not only do the authors wrongly equate neoconservatives with the pro-Israel lobby, but they also assume that neoconservatives alone pioneered the war effort. Thus, Fishman contends, the authors disregard Bush's singular role in promoting the war and the broad bipartisan support for the war. For Fishman, in the case of Iraq, as in that of the 2001-2002 Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Mearsheimer and Walt's take is so fraught with distortion and error that it is not to be taken seriously.¹³⁷

MODERATE CRITICS

Aside from the seemingly unbroken torrent of backlash against *The Israel Lobby*, a number of academics and journalists staked out somewhat more moderate views on Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments. In these nuanced views, authors express qualified acceptance of certain claims, while rejecting others as inapt, overblown, or erroneous. Dan Fleshler, author of *Transforming the Israel Lobby*, agrees with many of *The Israel Lobby*'s broad assertions, but minimizes the perniciousness of those realities.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 175-176.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 177.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 177-179.

Fleshler affirms that the pro-Israel lobby is prominent and well endowed, and fosters a congressional mentality of fear, ignorance, and sycophancy to attract Jewish money.¹³⁸ In his view, many politicians in Congress reflexively endorse AIPAC-promoted letters and legislation both as the path of least resistance and as a means of wooing pro-Israel donors.¹³⁹ He paints a similar picture to that of Mearsheimer and Walt in terms of the pervasive fear in Congress of being the target of a lobby revenge campaign and having donations pour into an opponent's campaign coffer.¹⁴⁰ Like Mearsheimer and Walt, Fleshler contends that pro-Israel groups are indeed out of step with the Jewish public. He cites survey data showing that the majority of Jews disagrees with communal leaders to the effect that it is only appropriate for criticism of Israel to be aired within the confines of the community, and further supports a more active American role in reaching a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁴¹

Consistent with Mearsheimer and Walt, Fleshler claims that pro-Israel lobbying has made the U.S. an “enabler” of Israeli policies detrimental to American and Israeli interests.¹⁴² He also maintains that America's unwavering support for Israel is a leading cause of anti-American anger in the Arab world, and that it emboldens Islamist terrorism.¹⁴³ While he argues that Mearsheimer and Walt conflate too broadly the pro-Israel lobby and neoconservatives in the Bush administration, he concedes that there is nonetheless a substantive association between the two. Fleshler contends somewhat tepidly that pro-Israel actors were involved in the lead-up to

¹³⁸ Fleshler, Dan. *Transforming America's Israel Lobby: The Limits of Its Power and the Potential for Change*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2009. 219.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

the Iraq war, but denies that Mearsheimer and Walt muster any evidence to show that the war would not have occurred in the absence of the lobby.¹⁴⁴

Apart from these points of qualified agreement, Fleshler rejects the bulk of Mearsheimer and Walt's argument as inaccurate and overblown. He refutes their expansive definition of the pro-Israel lobby as an all-encompassing, menacing bloc, denouncing their disregard for the nuances and complexities within and among groups in favor of broad assertions.¹⁴⁵ To the contrary, Fleshler argues, much of the lobby's impact is derived through its exploitation of "power puffery and widespread misconceptions" of the nature and extent of Jewish influence.¹⁴⁶ In that vein, Fleshler notes that AIPAC's financial network is not nearly as large as the authors portray. He notes that pro-Israel money ranked 40 out of 50 in congressional campaign spending in 2004, that it amounts to 10% at most of any congressional campaign, and that it plays a role in only a select few races—politicians could easily manage without pro-Israel money.¹⁴⁷

Fleshler also rejects the claim that the pro-Israel lobby has a "stranglehold" over U.S. policymaking and media portrayals. He notes that a number of legislators who are too powerful for pro-Israel lobbyists to counter openly defy pro-Israel stances without consequence. This includes Senator Robert Byrd, who has repeatedly railed against U.S. aid to Israel. Moreover, Fleshler contends that kneejerk support for pro-Israel legislation is far from absolute, especially as lawmakers have become increasingly willing to weigh AIPAC requests with U.S. interests.¹⁴⁸ In addition, Fleshler insists that the influence of pro-Israel pressure on the executive is subtler than the authors describe, at most perceptible in the self-restraint of presidential administrations

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 138, 141-142.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 8, 58-59.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 12, 35.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 38-43.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 49-50.

from pursuing certain policies, wary of political fallout from pro-Israel activists and their congressional allies.¹⁴⁹

Fleshler also faults Mearsheimer and Walt for exaggerating the proscription of debate in the Jewish community. He notes, for example, the vocal American Jewish anger over Israel's complicity in the Sabra and Shatilla massacres during the 1982 Lebanon War, which snowballed into calls for Prime Minister Menachem Begin to step down.¹⁵⁰ He also refutes the crude depiction of pro-Israel groups as opposed to territorial compromise and unswervingly aligned with the right-wing Likud party. In 2005, for instance, pro-Israel groups widely supported the unilateral disengagement plan of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, head of the centrist Kadima party.¹⁵¹ In addition, while Fleshler concedes that many Jews are vigilant about looming threats portending another Holocaust, he maintains that such anxiety is not a ploy to drum up support, but is rooted in the quite real memories of elder community leaders, who still view the world through a catastrophic prism.¹⁵²

Professor Walter Russell Mead of Bard College, another moderate voice, has little praise for Mearsheimer and Walt beyond applauding their audacious efforts to bring a controversial topic to the fore.¹⁵³ He ridicules their insensitivity to anti-Semitic connotations in their imprudent phrasing, their overstatement of Jewish power, and their invocation of some of the ugliest stereotypes of the anti-Semitic lexicon. In addition, Mead argues that the authors unduly single out Jews for censure by decontextualizing the activities of pro-Israel actors. Nonetheless, though

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 97.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 119, 122.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 66-67.

¹⁵² Ibid, 128-130.

¹⁵³ Mead, Walter R. "Jerusalem Syndrome: Decoding the Israel Lobby." *Foreign Affairs* 86.6 (2007): 160-68. 161.

he contends that anti-Semites will love the book, he concedes that it is not necessarily anti-Semitic.¹⁵⁴

Mead also indicts the authors' arguments as clumsy and vague, ultimately confusing rather than elucidating the policy debate. In his view, their delineations of the scope and mechanisms of lobby power are ambiguous, and their definition of national interests lacks the detail that foreign policy analysis demands.¹⁵⁵ Like Fleshler, Mead criticizes Mearsheimer and Walt's overly broad definition of the pro-Israel lobby. By including the entire spectrum of pro-Israel actors, he argues, the authors make it impossible to deduce criteria or a political agenda by which to measure the lobby's cumulative impact. Such a picture obscures rather than clarifies the lobby's reach by making it seem as though the lobby never loses, since every policy position could be supported by some pro-Israel contingent.¹⁵⁶

Like Lieberman, Mead also pans the authors' analysis for failing to show that pro-Israel legislative achievements translate into control over the direction of policy. With no account of the overall effect of lobby pressure on foreign aid and arms legislation, and no empirical assessment of the impact of pro-Israel acts and resolutions on policy, the author's claim falls flat.¹⁵⁷ Reinforcing Jewish establishment criticism, Mead condemns the quality of Mearsheimer and Walt's evidence, charging them with perfunctorily accepting any statement from any source that bolsters their argument, including the use of AIPAC's own propaganda to demonstrate the group's power.¹⁵⁸

Moreover, Mead underscores Mearsheimer and Walt's flawed logic in asserting that the U.S.-Israel relationship is not based on strategic or moral rationales, which undermines the very

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 161-162, 167-168.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 160-161.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 162-163.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 163.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 164.

influence the authors are aiming to prove. If Israel is the dominant power in the Middle East and has little need for American support, then U.S. pressure would have negligible impact on its conduct. In turn, U.S. aid would be inconsequential, and the pro-Israel lobby would play no real role in directing regional outcomes. Furthermore, in Mead's view, the authors underestimate the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship to the U.S.; if Israel were to sever ties, it would have a host of great power options to turn to, a potentially disastrous situation for American interests in the region.¹⁵⁹

Professor Dov Waxman of Baruch College does not invalidate Mearsheimer and Walt's positions as other moderate critics do; his critiques qualify their arguments, rather than rejecting them outright, placing him within the moderate camp. Like Fleshler and Mead, Waxman denounces Mearsheimer and Walt's definition of the pro-Israel lobby as overly variable and all encompassing. Only formal organizations that work to influence American policy toward Israel in a direction that they deem favorable to Israeli interests, Waxman asserts, should be included in that definition. Including neoconservatives in the pro-Israel lobby, he argues, is especially knotty considering that American interests, rather than Israeli ones, are their primary focus.¹⁶⁰

Waxman also reiterates Fleshler's claim that the power of the lobby is not unconditional, varying by issue and by context.¹⁶¹ In addition, Waxman reinforces the Jewish establishment claim that American Jewish opinion has shifted rightward in recent years, which he attributes to the community's concern over the Second Intifada, Islamic extremism, and America and Israel's

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 165-166.

¹⁶⁰ Waxman, Dov. "The Israel Lobbies: A Survey of the Pro-Israel Community in the United States." *Israel Studies Forum* 25.1 (2010): 5-28. 8-9.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 6.

shared terrorist problem. Therefore, right-wing pro-Israel leaders are less out-of-step with the Jewish community than Mearsheimer and Walt depict.¹⁶²

Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, by contrast, stands up for Mearsheimer and Walt while simultaneously rejecting their take on the U.S.-Israel relationship. He objects to the Jewish establishment's impeachment of their research as nothing short of a McCarthy-esque ploy, and denies that their work demonstrates anti-Semitism. While conceding that the authors' underlying claim of substantial pro-Israel lobby influence over U.S. foreign policy is indisputable, Cohen nevertheless disputes the claims that Israel's special relationship to the U.S. is solely due to pro-Israel lobbying, and that such a relationship is unjustified. He equates the modest strategic value of U.S. alliance with Britain with that of Israel to show that such bonds are clearly not rooted in strategic considerations alone. In addition, he derides the authors for a multitude of errors in their analysis of that relationship.¹⁶³

The editorial board of Haaretz, a leading Israeli newspaper, has put forth a message of caution regarding the tenuousness of Israel's rationale for U.S. support from *The Israel Lobby*. They assert that it would be foolish for Israelis to dismiss the warning that the book's arguments convey, since the book portends that Israel will not remain "immune for eternity" and receive unconditional U.S. backing, if its policies, especially its settlement activity, are perceived as incompatible with American values and interests. If Israel does not act soon, the editors argue, the authors' arguments may enter the mainstream.

¹⁶² Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁶³ Cohen, Richard. "No, It's Not Anti-Semitic." *The Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 25 Apr. 2006: n. pag. *Www.washingtonpost.com*. Web.

Cohen, Richard. "Rationalizing Israel Out of Existence." *The Washington Post* [Washington, D.C.] 11 Sept. 2007: n. pag. *Www.washingtonpost.com*. Web.

FAVORABLE CRITICS

Full endorsements of *The Israel Lobby* are few and far between outside of unqualified praise found on extremist websites, in and of itself indicative of certain inescapable flaws of Mearsheimer and Walt's research. In order to schematize the range of responses to *The Israel Lobby*, in the following section, I have classified as favorable to the authors' thesis those views that partially endorsed their arguments, but with more supportive bents than those of other moderate critics.

Author and foreign affairs writer Michael Massing portrays *The Israel Lobby* in a positive light, though he acknowledges the book's evident shortcomings. He condemns the book's hysterical reception, and the devolution of criticism into personal, rather than substantive, attacks, bringing out the worst in Mearsheimer and Walt's critics. In his view, the vitriolic campaign against the authors itself demonstrates the pro-Israel lobby's "bullying tactics" at work. Like Mead, Massing also champions the book for shattering the taboo surrounding discussion of the pro-Israel lobby and the U.S.-Israel relationship.¹⁶⁴

At the same time, Massing recognizes that *The Israel Lobby* has significant flaws. He concedes its glaring factual errors, its distorted quotes, and its one-sidedness, especially in highlighting Israel's offenses while minimizing those of its adversaries. He is particularly troubled by the book's thin evidence. He raises as an example the depiction of pro-Israel actors goading the U.S. into war with Iraq, highlighting the insufficient tatters of evidence the authors' stitch together into an argument, and their failure to consider conventional explanations. Like Fishman, Massing faults the authors for relying on published reports instead of first-hand interviews, which gives their work a secondhand feel.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Massing.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Despite his criticisms, Massing contends that Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments have considerable merit. He argues that the policies of leading pro-Israel groups are indeed dictated by right-wing leaders largely unrepresentative of American Jews, who deceptively claim to speak for the entire Jewish community. He also attests to the veracity of the revenge campaigns that the authors portray, claiming that instances of AIPAC sabotaging a given candidate's campaign through punitive campaign financing occur at least once per year. In addition, Massing agrees that the pro-Israel lobby is effective at shaping U.S. foreign policy, though not to the extent that the authors posit. He ascribes such influence to the lobby's prowess in creating background noise, as when pro-Israel groups harped on moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, despite the city's contested sovereignty – a red herring for tacit lobby opposition to the ongoing Oslo peace process. Massing argues that lobby tactics compel politicians to self-censor, constricting the scope of admissible policy options. Moreover, he expounds on the lobby's control in describing the peril of resisting pro-Israel initiatives, not only for politicians, but also for staffers, reporters, and employees of Jewish organizations, whose career advancement could be blocked at the urging of pro-Israel actors.¹⁶⁶

NYU history professor Tony Judt, a controversial critic of Israeli policies and Zionist ideology, is an even more ardent advocate of Mearsheimer and Walt's. Like Massing, he disparages the furor that *The Israel Lobby* has elicited from critics. Disregarding the chorus of critiques to the contrary, he defends the authors' source material as ordinary and uncontroversial. Reflecting on the book's reception, Judt construes the ubiquitous silence of the American media on Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments as indicative of the pernicious impact of pro-Israel tactics on American society. He notes that *The Israel Lobby* has been widely discussed and debated in Europe, and has engrossed American academia and the American Jewish community. It has not,

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

however, penetrated American public discourse, for which Judt blames the potent fear of being labeled anti-Semitic, tacitly suggesting that such fear is a construct of the pro-Israel lobby and thus not a factor constraining free discourse overseas. He argues that such constriction is damaging to the interests of American Jews, Israel, and the U.S..¹⁶⁷

Judt also asks why, after the Holocaust and Cold War considerations have faded from memory, the U.S. has lost touch with the rest of the world in preserving its alliance with such a divisive state as Israel. While neither endorsing outright the authors' claims that unconditional support for Israel has not been in America's best interests, nor explicitly agreeing with the authors that the pro-Israel lobby has skewed U.S. foreign policy, Judt implicitly supports those assertions in branding them as "a straw in the wind." Throughout his evaluation, Judt obliquely impugns the lobby, bemoaning the exact conditions that the authors decry without criticizing any part of their arguments. Ultimately, Judt provides the strongest defense for *The Israel Lobby* within American academia.¹⁶⁸

A NEW 'CONVENTIONAL WISDOM' ON THE PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY: A WEAKENED MEARSHEIMER-WALT THESIS AND JEWISH COMMUNAL PLURALISM

In this section, I will attempt to distill a more nuanced and truthful depiction of the pro-Israel lobby's influence among Jews, among the American public, and in government—and the mechanisms through which it exercises that influence—by reconciling *The Israel Lobby* with the range of responses its publication elicited, as presented in the previous section. As critics of Mearsheimer and Walt have amply demonstrated, their research is rife with scholarly flaws, including instances of outright falsities, quotes taken out of context, evidence mined from

¹⁶⁷ Judt, Tony. "A Lobby, Not a Conspiracy." *The New York Times* [New York] 19 Apr. 2006: n. pag. *The New York Times*. Web.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

illegitimate sources, one-sided and mono-causal analyses, selection bias, conceptual and descriptive ambiguity, and a dearth of empirical evidence underlying causal claims. However, excluded from the critiques to be distilled are supporters of the authors, like Judt, who nonsensically disregard such flaws despite incontrovertible evidence. In addition to the above defects, the authors' apparent anti-Semitic predilection further undermines the validity of their depiction of the pro-Israel lobby as an all-powerful, highly organized association of groups with a stranglehold on U.S. policy and domestic discourse.

In light of these glaring deficits, what can be gleaned from Mearsheimer and Walt's assessment and those of their critics on the influence of the pro-Israel lobby? On its face, the sheer volume of reasoned responses to *The Israel Lobby* is indicative that the book is in some fashion revealing as to the nature of the pro-Israel lobby. While the anti-Semitic associations distract from the authors' claims, they do not wholly discredit them. Sadly, such an anti-Semitic slant is an inescapable reality for Jews in a world of enduring anti-Semitic beliefs, and is inextricably linked to the conventional wisdom on the pro-Israel lobby. No matter how vehemently Jews combat these perceptions, latent anti-Semitic stereotypes color the way that many Americans view Jews and, by extension, the lobby. For instance, Massing's allegation that the outcry and name-calling by Jewish figures that *The Israel Lobby* provoked were examples of the lobby's intimidation perverts valid criticisms of anti-Semitic connotations and scholarly flaws made by Jews to reinforce Mearsheimer and Walt's overblown claims. As *The Israel Lobby* has come to frame the national dialogue about U.S. politics and policies regarding Israel, it is imperative that its substantive claims about the pro-Israel lobby be recognized and disentangled from its inappropriate scope and tenor.

In articulating what exactly the pro-Israel lobby encompasses, Mearsheimer and Walt's definition must be deconstructed into its constituent parts, as it has been shown to be broad to the point of meaninglessness. The pro-Israel lobby, as it is commonly understood on Capitol Hill and in the Jewish community, is the centrist lobby, encompassing AIPAC primarily, and other centrist groups to a lesser extent. It is this contingent of groups, not, as Mearsheimer and Walt depict, the entire pro-Israel spectrum, that calls for unconditional U.S. support for Israel. Henceforth, as used herein, the pro-Israel lobby will refer only to centrist groups. Other pro-Israel groups to the left and the right should not be conceptually amalgamated with the centrist lobby, as their objectives and activities are largely distinct. In addition, affiliated groups such as Christian Zionists and neoconservatives may coordinate certain activities with the pro-Israel lobby in pursuing common goals, but their ideologies and overarching goals are not the same as the lobby's, and it would be erroneous to consider their actions as an extension of the lobby's. Similarly, individual pundits and academics, and groups not involved in formal lobbying, should not be seen as part of the pro-Israel lobby. While they certainly contribute to the public discourse surrounding the U.S.-Israel relationship, they are separate from and do not speak for the lobby.

With regard to the validity of the strategic rationale underlying the U.S.-Israel relationship, although the direct utility of an alliance with Israel may have diminished since the Cold War, the Jewish establishment rightly claims that Israel remains a strategic asset to the U.S.. In a region of critical national interest, Israel is a bulwark of democracy and a stabilizing force as the leading military power in the region and as an unconditional U.S. ally. Blaming Israel for regional instability and for the wars to which it has been a party is simply biased and groundless. Furthermore, Israel was not a liability during the Gulf War, as Mearsheimer and Walt attest, but loyally deferred to U.S. directives, and underlay America's ability to invade Iraq

by bombing its nuclear reactor a decade prior. Though Mearsheimer and Walt are correct that Israel and the U.S. face distinct terrorist threats, they overlook the fact that Israel and the U.S. are collaborative partners in sharing intelligence and technology to combat terrorism. America is indeed lucky to have Israel in its court, because if Israel shifted its alliance to another great power, U.S. influence in the region would be ruined.

The strength of Israel's moral rationale for U.S. support lies somewhere in between the viewpoints of Mearsheimer and Walt and those of the Jewish establishment. Israel's western democratic ideals, America's sense of religious kinship with Jews, the history of Jewish persecution, and the recognition of the need for a Jewish state were valid moral underpinnings at Israel's founding, and remain valid today. In addition, since Mearsheimer and Walt's portrayal of Israeli crimes against Palestinians is exaggerated, and since their portrayal of Israel's *de jure* denial of equality to non-Jews is equally false, neither repudiates support for Israel's democracy as they claim. Nonetheless, Israel's failure to negotiate a two-state solution with the Palestinians, its human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories, and its continued settlement activity have begun to erode its moral standing, and will make American support on moral grounds increasingly difficult to rationalize.

Nevertheless, Israel is not wholly or even primarily to blame for its morass. Israeli politics has veered right, a result, in no small part, of the fact that the peace process advocated by the platforms of the centrist and left-leaning parties has proven an utter failure. That failure is not due to any unwillingness on Israel's part to negotiate or compromise, but is a result of the intransigent demands of the Palestinian negotiators who have repeatedly failed to respond to Israeli offers with any form of compromise. The lack of a partner with whom to engage in substantive peace negotiations has rendered a two-state solution practically impossible, thus

mandating that Israel continue to administer the West Bank as an occupying force. The alternative of a unilateral withdrawal, as in Gaza, has proven to be an untenable resolution, leading only to more chaos and power vacuum. In this context, Israel's human rights blunders and eroding moral rationale do not amount to a "straw in the wind" revealing that Israel is devoid of moral basis for U.S. support, as Judt claims, but rather bear out the fact that the moral foundation for supporting Israel, though weakened, remains fundamentally sound.

In assessing the scope and mechanisms of the pro-Israel lobby's influence on American government and society, it is certain that the conceptual muddiness, one-sidedness, lack of context, and selection bias of *The Israel Lobby* distort Mearsheimer and Walt's characterization of the pro-Israel lobby's power in directly influencing the election of congressional candidates, policymaking in Congress, the composition of the executive branch, executive foreign policy, and the depiction of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship in public discourse. Nonetheless, *The Israel Lobby* is illuminating as to the pro-Israel lobby's perceived power, as many of the book's critics concede.

Mearsheimer and Walt rightly state that the pro-Israel lobby exerts influence in Congress by rewarding or punishing candidates through campaign funding, yet the share of pro-Israel money in total election spending is vastly overstated in their analysis; as a consequence, so is the influence that they ascribe to it. As Lieberman has established, there is no basis for the authors' claim that pro-Israel funding causes legislators' pro-Israel stances, which itself conflicts with scholarly consensus on the impact of campaign finance in shaping the opinions of legislators. In addition, though lore on lobby revenge campaigns likely has shades of truth (in light of anecdotal evidence and the widely acknowledged fear on Capitol Hill of being targeted by pro-Israel

actors), such lore remains largely unsubstantiated perception without empirical evidence that these campaigns decisively doom candidates.

There is a general consensus among Mearsheimer and Walt and their various critics that the pro-Israel lobby makes supporting pro-Israel legislation the shrewd political choice for legislators and constrains the consideration of alternatives. Indeed, politicians on Capitol Hill have been conditioned to automatically support AIPAC-sponsored legislation. However, pro-Israel actors do not constrain alternatives to the extent that Walt and Mearsheimer portray. As Fleshler notes, some congressmen buck the positions of pro-Israel advocates and incur no consequences. On top of that, the pro-Israel lobby does not exist unopposed; it is but one influence of many, and it is issue and context dependent. Clearly, pro-Israel lobbying is effective, as demonstrated by AIPAC's reputation as one of the mightiest lobbies alongside the NRA and AARP; by the slew of AIPAC-sponsored resolutions, amendments, and "Dear Colleague" letters that pass by huge margins; and by anecdotal evidence that members of Congress rely on AIPAC for information and talking points on the Middle East.

Nonetheless, reputation, symbolic support, and instrumental cooperation do not prove that the pro-Israel lobby has any real influence on policies. Neither Mearsheimer and Walt nor their critics put forth empirical evidence demonstrating lobby control of congressional policymaking on the Middle East. Without a rigorous analysis of the success of pro-Israel actors in passing advantageous legislation and foiling unfavorable legislation, and of the effect of pro-Israel legislation in determining the direction of U.S. foreign policy, the true impact of pro-Israel lobbying on policymaking remains unknown. What can be said, however, is that there exists a strong pro-Israel bias in Congress attributable to some extent to the activities of the pro-Israel

lobby, and that, consequently, the U.S. has enabled Israel to pursue policies not always in its own or America's best interests.

Despite Mearsheimer and Walt's claims, there is no evidence to show that the pro-Israel lobby has an impact on the composition of the executive branch in holding the keys to top administration appointments. A handful of high-ranking individuals in the Clinton and Bush administrations were closely associated with the pro-Israel lobby, including Martin Indyk, Dennis Ross, and Elliott Abrams who, according to some accounts, promoted pro-Israel approaches in the Oslo Accords and in deciding to invade Iraq. Even so, there is no indication that their appointments were a result of lobby pressure, or that those individuals conclusively diverted U.S. policy away from U.S. interests in order to benefit Israel. Based on the meager evidence proffered, it is dubious that the pro-Israel lobby exerts any power whatsoever on executive appointments.

In fact, *The Israel Lobby's* principal claim that the influence of the pro-Israel lobby is the main driver of U.S. policy in the Middle East is the book's flimsiest case, supported neither by evidence nor by logic. Mearsheimer and Walt attempt to show that the pro-Israel lobby derives much of its influence on the executive branch, which holds the reins of foreign policy, from the dual effects of pro-Israel presidential campaign donations and Jews' pivotal roles in presidential elections, both of which claims Lieberman convincingly repudiates. Moreover, as Fishman demonstrates, the authors' primary empirical case involving pro-Israel actors strong-arming U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 2001-2001, is a thoroughly erroneous account. The authors' other main empirical case, involving the pro-Israel lobby steering the U.S. to invade Iraq, was shown by multiple critics to be equally unfounded.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Fishman, 177-179, Fleshler, 138, 141-142, Foxman, 75-75, Massing.

In light of The Israel Lobby's essentially fictionalized accounts of the impact of the pro-Israel lobby on U.S. policy toward Israel and Iraq, as well as the lack of a popular construct of the lobby's influence in this arena distinct from its role in lobbying Congress, nothing from Mearsheimer and Walt's area case studies can be deduced as to the lobby's role in the formation of foreign policy through the executive. What remains is the common *perception*, as voiced by a number of Mearsheimer and Walt's critics, that the pro-Israel lobby indirectly causes presidential administrations to exercise restraint in policy formulation by shaping policy discourse and creating background noise on Capitol Hill.

Notwithstanding the Jewish establishment's depiction of the Jewish community as a welcoming setting for debate and criticism of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship, Mearsheimer and Walt, along with a number of their moderate critics, correctly negate that portrayal. Undeniably, internalized communal norms enforced by pro-Israel groups encourage uncritical support for Israel and discourage debate and criticism, ignoring the moral repercussions of occupation. Despite this, as Fleshler notes, the intra-communal taboo against open discourse is much exaggerated by Mearsheimer and Walt; indeed, individuals and groups to the left and right of the centrist lobby have long existed in the Jewish community, promoting ideas at odds with mainstream community positions on Israel.

In evaluating whether the pro-Israel lobby's rightward shift is inconsistent with the American Jewish public, the answer lies somewhere between the claims of Mearsheimer and Walt and those of the Jewish establishment. While Jews are one of the most consistently liberal demographics in the U.S., recent survey data has shown that Jewish opinion on Israel has moved to the right. Even so, the lobby's right-wing, hawkish leaders are far more conservative than the

Jewish populace they profess to speak for, and may have themselves induced the rightward shift among American Jews by casting events and policies in Israel through a conservative filter.

Concerning wider American society, Mearsheimer and Walt offer no systematic data exhibiting that the pro-Israel lobby frames the public discourse about Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship or stifles criticism on the topic in the media, think tanks, or academia. Such claims also conflict with scholarly literature showing the limited effect of the abovementioned venues in shaping public attitudes, the national agenda, or the direction of policy. Moreover, in the examples provided, pro-Israel lobby censure was unsuccessful in silencing critics; there is simply no causal evidence showing that pro-Israel lobby attempts at intimidation deter potential critics.

Nevertheless, a strong perception prevails that the pro-Israel lobby shapes the public discourse on Israel and on the U.S.-Israel relationship, inside and outside government. That perception is muddled, however, by the difficulty of distinguishing the activities of the lobby from those of pro-Israel supporters. Even though such an effect is difficult to substantiate or schematize, the indirect shaping of policy discourse is intuitively a more plausible vehicle of pro-Israel influence on policymaking than is direct lobby influence in Congress or the executive branch. It is reasonable to conclude that the pro-Israel promotion in the halls of government, in the media, in think tanks, in academia, and on a local level, has created a ubiquitous pro-Israel climate that not only makes it costly for individuals in government to criticize pro-Israel policies, but also constricts the range of allowable policy alternatives.

In sum, the *centrist* pro-Israel lobby is widely recognized as a powerhouse, exercising influence over Congress and the executive branch, as well as over public discourse, to move U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. However, the specific mechanisms by which pro-Israel groups gain and exert influence, and the extent to which that influence operates, are unknown in

the absence of systematic empirical evidence. Much of what Mearsheimer and Walt have to say about the pro-Israel lobby is true—but to a lesser extent than they claim, and wiped clean of the malevolence that they unjustly ascribe to their assertions.

Nevertheless, the “conventional wisdom” culled from *The Israel Lobby* and the literature surrounding it has one glaring deficit: its ubiquitous disregard for the growing non-trivial divisions in the American Jewish community that controverts Mearsheimer and Walt’s core empirical claim of the pro-Israel lobby’s unitary, pervasive and destructive influence on American society and government. As the organized Jewish community has become increasingly disunified—polarized between right-wing establishment leadership and resurgent liberal organizing, and beleaguered by rising rates of communal attrition—the portrayal of the centrist pro-Israel lobby’s monopoly over Jewish opinion becomes increasingly invalid. In turn, the portrayal of the lobby’s power as emanating from its perceived dominance becomes increasingly unfounded.

In the next chapter, I will outline the changing dynamics in the Jewish community and in wider American society that have begun to erode the ascendancy of the centrist pro-Israel lobby, and present a brief case study of J Street, a recently established pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby. J Street’s rapid rise to prominence strongly suggests that the conventional narrative on the pro-Israel lobby no longer holds, as centrist pro-Israel supremacy is gradually being supplanted by a pluralistic pro-Israel policy subsystem.

CHAPTER 2

THE OTHER PRO-ISRAEL LOBBY

Based on my assessment of the academic and popular literature that proliferated in response to *The Israel Lobby*, it appears that Mearsheimer and Walt's core claims about the pro-Israel lobby's power over American policymaking are exaggerated and biased regarding the extent of the lobby's influence, as well as imprecise regarding the manner in which that influence is exercised. Conventional wisdom, framed by the discourse on *The Israel Lobby*, holds that the pro-Israel lobby has a palpable influence in American society, steering Congress, the executive branch, as well as public discourse, in a pro-Israel direction, though this conventional wisdom offers little insight as to the scope of that power and the manner in which it is exercised. While this view seems to be a reasonable assessment of the pro-Israel lobby, not enough attention has been paid in the literature to the fact that there are considerable differences of opinion among Jews on U.S. policy toward Israel. A case in point: a new Jewish organization called J Street has emerged in opposition to the mainstream pro-Israel agenda.

In Chapter 2, I will undertake a preliminary sketch of J Street's activities and its rise to prominence, drawing on archival research and interviews with J Street staff members, in order to determine the degree to which the "other pro-Israel lobby" undermines Mearsheimer and Walt's depiction of the mainstream lobby's pervasive and pernicious influence on American life. The story of J Street's development offers further, if initial, confirmation of my assessment of Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments reached in Chapter 1: namely, that the authors vastly overstate both the pro-Israel lobby's influence on Capitol Hill and the taboo proscribing open discussion on Israel in the Jewish community. Moreover, the advent of J Street introduces new wrinkles to the authors' central thesis, bringing to light that it disregards the critical changes

occurring among American Jews and the wider American public in relation to Israel, and that it is becoming increasingly invalid as the mainstream pro-Israel lobby is now forced to operate in the context of an active and growing pro-Israel, pro-peace counter-lobby.

Self-styled the “pro-Israel, pro-peace” lobby, J Street is a center-left organization for supporters of Israel who are devoted to Israel’s security, but are willing to disagree occasionally with Israeli policies in order to advance resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁷⁰ As articulated by its founder and president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street deems the continued failure to resolve the conflict “the single greatest threat to the survival of Israel as a democracy and Jewish home.”¹⁷¹ The organization supports the creation of a viable Palestinian state as part of a negotiated two-state solution, based on pre-1967 borders and reciprocal land swaps.¹⁷² J Street is the first pro-Israel, pro-peace lobbying group, having departed from the nonprofit educational foundation model of past dovish pro-Israel groups. The organization encompasses J Street, a 501(c)(4) nonprofit corporation and lobby, JStreetPAC, a federal political action committee, and J Street Education Fund, a 501(c)(3) independent nonprofit.¹⁷³

J Street’s theory of change involves mobilizing American leadership as a key to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, as the parties have shown they cannot arrive at a resolution on their own. Its organizational goal, therefore, is to create the political space for the President to take a position of leadership to resolve the conflict. Toward that end, J Street seeks to open up the Jewish communal discourse on Israel and demonstrate to legislators that there is broad-based

¹⁷⁰ Ben-Ami, Jeremy. *A New Voice for Israel: Fighting for the Survival of the Jewish Nation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print. 106.

¹⁷¹ Broder, Jonathan. "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath." *Www.cqweekly.com*. CQ Press, 10 Aug. 2009. Web.

¹⁷² Traub, James. "The New Israel Lobby." *The New York Times Magazine* 09 Sept. 2009: n. pag. *Www.nytimes.com*. Web.

¹⁷³ "About J Street." *About J Street*. J Street, n.d. Web. <<http://jstreet.org/about/>>.

support for a two-state solution among Jews, giving them the leeway to support and advocate for a pro-peace agenda in the halls of Congress.¹⁷⁴

CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH J STREET WAS BORN

CHANGES IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

In their assessments of the extent and mechanisms of pro-Israel lobby influence on American policymaking and domestic discourse, neither Mearsheimer and Walt nor their various critics sufficiently account for the significant changes taking place in American society and among American Jews concerning relations with Israel. This omission calls into question the validity of the conventional wisdom on the pro-Israel lobby distilled from those analyses. In fact, in American public discourse, the atmosphere of censorship and intimidation pervading discussion of Israel, and the fear of retribution for coming out against pro-Israel viewpoints, have progressively diminished in recent years.¹⁷⁵ A number of important shifts underlie that change, particularly reactions to the Iraq war, the popular focus on Israel's moral blunders, the mounting aversion to Israel among American public figures, the influence of *The Israel Lobby*, the increased attention to the perniciousness of the pro-Israel lobby in policing academia, and the growing prevalence of unconventional views on the conflict in American media and film.¹⁷⁶

The Iraq war was a defining moment that transformed the tenor of debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Popular criticism of the war and attention to the damage to American credibility in the Middle East inflicted by the war caused a backlash against pro-war jingoists, including the war's pro-Israel advocates. In turn, that anger prompted a popular re-examination

¹⁷⁴ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street." Telephone Interview. 25 Jan. 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Roy, Sara. "Reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in U.S. Public Discourse: Legitimizing Dissent." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 39.2 (2010): 23-38. Print. 24.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 25-29.

of the U.S. alliance with Israel, and a newfound awareness that America's embrace of Israeli policies may perpetuate violence and political deadlock in the region. Such cynicism toward the U.S.-Israel relationship has also intensified the focus on Israel's moral lapses in American public discourse, despite the countervailing efforts of pro-Israel actors. As such, American academics, journalists, activists, and diplomats have increasingly drawn attention to the turpitude of the West Bank occupation and of Israeli human rights abuses. Their admonitions have been bolstered by concerns over troubling illiberal developments in Israel's democracy, brought to the attention of the American public by Israeli political figures like former Knesset speaker Avraham Burg.¹⁷⁷

The potency of the pro-Israel lobby in public discourse has also diminished due to the growing ambivalence toward Israel among American public figures. According to Ben-Ami, there is a growing antipathy in government to the repressive atmosphere that pro-Israel actors have produced on Capitol Hill.¹⁷⁸ Recent survey findings attest to that shift. A 2005 Pew study shows that the majority of U.S. opinion leaders saw Israel as a major cause of anti-American sentiment, and a 2009 Pew study shows that Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) members have become markedly less sympathetic to Israel than is the public at large. This study found that only 26% of CFR members sided with Israel over the Palestinians, and that 67% of CFR members thought U.S. policies inordinately favored Israel, compared to 51% and 30% of the public respectively.¹⁷⁹

In addition, Mearsheimer and Walt's publication of *The Israel Lobby* has been instrumental in creating space for criticism of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship. Ironically, the very insuperable proscription on substantive discussions of the U.S.-Israel relationship that

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 25.

¹⁷⁸ Ben-Ami, 103.

¹⁷⁹ Roy, 26.

the authors lament has been overcome in large part because of the maelstrom of controversy that their book aroused. To a lesser extent, former President Carter's book, which focused attention on the nature of the Israeli occupation, also helped to carve out space for frank dialogue on Israel in American public discourse.¹⁸⁰

Additionally, a handful of high-profile attempts by pro-Israel activists to silence critics of Israel in academia have heightened public awareness of the pro-Israel lobby's deleterious effect on intellectual freedom. In each case, academics marshaled a national campaign to defend those who came under fire, showing that they would no longer tolerate fear-induced silence. For example, pro-Israel supporters waged several battles against universities granting tenure to professors inimical to the pro-Israel agenda—including professors Joseph Massad and Nadia Abu El-Haj of Columbia University—which were successfully countered by the concerted efforts of indignant academics.¹⁸¹

Moreover, in recent years, media and film have become increasingly hospitable venues for expression of non-mainstream views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, *60 Minutes*, a leading American television newsmagazine program, aired a segment entitled "Is peace out of reach?" in January 2009, which explored the Israeli occupation and Palestinian suffering, topics assiduously avoided a few years prior. In addition, it has become increasingly common for American film festivals, including Jewish film festivals, to feature films critical of the Israeli occupation or sympathetic to Palestinian perspectives.¹⁸²

According to Sarah Roy, a researcher at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, there have been two significant shifts in public discourse on Israel as a result of the diminution of the repressive atmosphere surrounding such discussion. First, there is now a greater

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 26-27.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 28-29.

¹⁸² Ibid, 28-29.

differentiation between American and Israeli interests in evaluating U.S. foreign policy choices. Second, opposition to Israeli policies is increasingly couched in terms of those policies' incongruence with American political and cultural values.¹⁸³

JEWISH DISTANCING FROM ISRAEL

While there has been a marked shift in attitudes toward Israel in wider American society, American Jews have been undergoing an even more drastic shift in their relations with Israel. For decades, sociologists studying the American Jewish community have advanced a distancing hypothesis: the idea that attachment to Israel among American Jews, and Jewish youth in particular, is in decline. The hypothesis is best articulated by the findings of Steven Cohen and Ari Kelman in their 2007 report "Beyond Distancing: Young American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel."¹⁸⁴

Cohen and Kelman argue that, in marked contrast to prior generations, non-Orthodox younger Jews are not only less attached to Israel, but truly alienated from it, which is part of a long-term decline in American Jewish attachment to Israel driven by generational replacement.¹⁸⁵ The decline that Cohen and Kelman deduce from the American Jewish Committee's 2007 National Survey of American Jews is also demonstrated in several other recent studies of American Jewish identity (Cohen 2002, Luntz 2003, Greenberg 2004 and 2006, Ukeles et al. 2006).¹⁸⁶ The authors claim that such age-related decline is evident in all available metrics of Israel attachment. They deny that such decline is related to lifecycle effects, as the levels of attachment vary by generation rather than by particular life stage, and argue instead for

¹⁸³ Ibid, 34.

¹⁸⁴ Cohen, Steven M., and Ari Y. Kelman. *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*. Publication. New York: Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, 2007. 11.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 2.

a birth cohort effect.¹⁸⁷ In addition, they interpret gaps among cohorts to suggest that broad-based distancing has been ongoing for decades, and will continue to intensify with future generational displacement.¹⁸⁸

Cohen and Kelman ascribe this phenomenon primarily to the changed tenor of historical events through which Jews have based their identification with Israel. The oldest generation came to identify with Israel because of the Holocaust and Israel's War of Independence in 1948, and their children's generation because of the 1967 Six Day War and the ensuing period of pro-Israel mobilization. By contrast, the youngest generation of American Jews has been unable to form similar bonds with Israel, having known it only through the lens of the 1982 Lebanon War, both Intifadas, the 2006 Lebanon War, and the 2008 Gaza War—all ethically and politically knotty conflicts that have portrayed Israel in a disturbing light.¹⁸⁹

Cohen and Kelman also attribute the distancing phenomenon to the transformation of American Jewish identity from the public to the private realm. Whereas Jewish identity used to center on ethnicity and politics, the focus has shifted inward to religion, culture, and spirituality, making collective Jewish loyalties, and Zionist identification in particular, less intuitive for younger Jews.¹⁹⁰ In addition, the authors impute the attenuated attachment to Israel among Jewish young adults to the rise in intermarriage, as it fosters fluid group identity and a parallel decline in Jewish collective identity.¹⁹¹ Despite Cohen and Kelman's grim diagnosis, they argue that there remains a substantial reservoir of positive sentiment toward Israel among young Jews, citing data that 60% of Jewish young adults report some level of attachment to Israel.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 2-3.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 14, 21.

¹⁹² Ibid, 20-21.

Although most sociological researchers of the American Jewish community accept the distancing hypothesis, it is not without its detractors. Brandeis University researchers Theodore Sasson, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe have led the charge against the distancing model. In their view, the narrative of American Jewish disengagement that has prevailed since the 1980's is not substantiated by survey evidence.¹⁹³ They argue that attachment to Israel among American Jews has been quite stable for the past two decades, varying within a narrow 10-15% range in no discernible direction.¹⁹⁴

Sasson, Kadushin, and Saxe indict studies that have purported to demonstrate the distancing hypothesis as flawed for using unsystematic pair studies and for extrapolating long-term trends from individual survey results, which would require the analysis of longitudinal data sets (Cohen and Eisen 2000, Cohen and Wertheimer 2006). They further claim that when longitudinal data was in fact used, it did not bear out a distancing trend (Cohen 1996, Phillips et al. 2002). Utilizing data compiled from multiple years of the AJC National Survey of American Jews, they posit that a downward trend indicative of distancing would only be manifested if the decline in levels of attachment from 2006-2008 were to continue. But that would be unlikely, they argue, since the stated decline was nothing more than a return to normal from elevated levels of attachment between 2000 and 2005, due to the Second Intifada.¹⁹⁵

The authors refute Cohen and Kelman's assertion that cohort effects underlie age-related differences in attachment, arguing instead that surveys of American Jews from the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's indicate a lifecycle effect in their parallel breakdowns in age-related gaps in attachment to Israel. They claim, by contrast, that the data suggests that American Jews become

¹⁹³ Sasson, Theodore, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe. "Trends in American Jewish Attachment to Israel: An Assessment of the "Distancing" Hypothesis." *Contemporary Jewry* 30.2-3 (2010): 297-319. 3.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 21-22.

more attached to Israel as they age.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, the authors counter the assertion that intermarriage is a primary cause of distancing among young Jewish adults, maintaining that the rise in intermarriages has not been large enough to significantly affect the overall levels of Israel attachment among younger Jews.¹⁹⁷

Despite their differences of opinion, both those who support and those who oppose the distancing hypothesis agree that the available evidence shows that younger Jews report lower levels of attachment to Israel, intermarried Jews are less attached to Israel, and the majority of Jewish Americans are attached to Israel to varying degrees.¹⁹⁸ In assessing the annual AJC data from which both research teams draw their conclusions, it appears that, rather than the longitudinal data disproving the distancing hypothesis, the distancing effect may in fact be stronger than its proponents have shown. Since the panel data involves a sample of self-identified Jews, less connected Jews would be more likely to withdraw participation over time, skewing the data to display disproportionately high levels of reported Israel attachment among American Jews.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, while many Jews would prefer that the distancing hypothesis be proven false, it is a widely-held idea among sociologists of the American Jewish community, it accords with reported distancing from Israel occurring in other Jewish diaspora communities, and it goes a long way toward explaining the dynamics reshaping the landscape of the American Jewish community.

In fact, according to Hebrew University political science professor Gabriel Sheffer, American Jewish distancing from Israel is not an isolated phenomenon, but is a single manifestation of a wider trend of diminished connection to Israel among world Jewry since the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 14-15, 17, 21.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 21.

¹⁹⁸ Miller, Ron, and Arnold Dashefsky. "Brandeis v. Cohen Et Al.: The Distancing from Israel Debate." *Contemporary Jewry* 30.2-3 (2010): 155-64. 160-161.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 158.

1973 Yom Kippur War. Sheffer attributes worldwide Jewish distancing from Israel primarily to the assimilation of Jews into their home countries.²⁰⁰ He argues that assimilation has transformed the nature of Jewish identity from one of national-religious character to one of personal connection to Judaism, echoing Cohen and Kelman's portrayal of the transformation of American Jewish identity. Again, parallel to Cohen and Kelman's discussion, Sheffer posits that the decline in Jewish collective identity has prompted the concomitant decline in the importance of maintaining Jewish families, as evidenced by the global rise of Jewish intermarriages, which itself further attenuates identification with the Jewish people and Israel.²⁰¹

Sheffer notes, too, that the reduced identification with Judaism among diaspora Jewry has precipitated a decline in the number of active Jewish communities and in the willingness of existing Jewish communities to act on Israel's behalf. In addition, he reports that traditional Zionist organizations are seen as increasingly illegitimate by diaspora Jewry for being outdated and overly Israel-centric. Moreover, diaspora Jews no longer view themselves as living in exile, nor do they deem Israel the center to the diaspora periphery. Thus, Sheffer contends that diaspora Jews have become increasingly reluctant to defer to Israeli leadership with regard to the development of Jewish culture and religious values, and that their growing inward focus has caused their reduced contact with and economic investment in Israel.²⁰² He relates that since the 1980's, there has been a downward trend in charitable donations to Israel, travel and relocation to Israel, and political support for Israel, and an upward swing in more strident criticisms of Israeli policies among diaspora Jews.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Sheffer, Gabriel. "Loyalty and Criticism in the Relations between World Jewry and Israel." *Israel Studies* 17.2 (2012): 77-85. *JSTOR*. Web. 77-78.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 79.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 80-82.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 83-84.

While the American Jewish community has arguably sustained stronger connections to Israel and higher levels of support for Israel than many other Jewish diaspora communities have, it exhibits the same sentiments and trends associated with increased assimilation and disconnection from Israel. For example, survey data has shown a 12.5% decline in American Jewish travel to Israel and a 51% decline in American Jews discussing Israel between 1983 and 2010.²⁰⁴ Moreover, the diminished legitimacy of traditional Zionist organizations, due to their outmoded and Israeli-centric platforms, contextualizes the growing disfavor of the pro-Israel establishment among American Jews.

THE ROTTEN STATE OF PRO-ISRAEL LOBBYING

Apart from American Jewish distancing from Israel, the modus operandi of the pro-Israel lobby and the organized Jewish community increasingly alienates many segments of the Jewish community and erodes communal affiliation and cohesion. According to Tom Dine, the former executive director of AIPAC and current consultant for the Israel Policy Forum, “in the way we deal with Israel, somehow we’ve forgotten about what is at the heart of being Jewish, which is constantly to question and argue until we get to the truth.” He insists that the old paradigms that pro-Israel leaders cling to are no longer valid: “There is nothing wrong with criticizing Israel out loud. Israel is not a fragile flower” any longer.²⁰⁵ In the face of disturbing long-term illiberal trends in Israeli society, pro-Israel groups police communal discourse and reprimand anyone who challenges their conception of Israel as treasuring liberal democracy and striving for peace—truly the height of hypocrisy.²⁰⁶ In addition, faced with the growing Boycott,

²⁰⁴ Ben-Ami, 112.

²⁰⁵ Fleshler, 223.

²⁰⁶ Beinart, Peter. "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment." Editorial. *The New York Review of Books* 12 May 2010: n. pag. *The New York Review of Books*. 10 June 2010. Web.

Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement domestically, pro-Israel groups have recoiled, rejecting such civil protests as “de-legitimization” and labeling protesters as anti-Israel.²⁰⁷

In theory, the leading pro-Israel groups subscribe to liberal Zionist ideals, often drawing on the axioms of human rights, equal citizenship, and territorial compromise. However, their slogans have been sapped of meaning, for by blindly supporting any and all Israeli governmental actions, pro-Israel actors have constructed an ideological defense for Israeli politicians who imperil the very liberal values that the pro-Israel community alleges to cherish. For example, Abraham Foxman, with a number of other pro-Israel leaders, has defended the virtue of former Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, who displayed an undeniable animus toward Arabs throughout his political career.²⁰⁸ Martin Indyk, former American ambassador to Israel and Director of Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institute, describes the Jewish communal “cognitive dissonance” after Israel’s geopolitical position had deteriorated to during Bush’s presidency, leaving many wondering “whether a blank check for Israel is necessarily the best way to secure the longevity of the Jewish state.”²⁰⁹

Beyond cognitive dissonance, the failure of the Jewish community to adapt to the new realities in Israel and live up to its own stated ideals have prompted communal decline. Jewish organizations are struggling more and more with dwindling numbers of donors. With the number of donors to Jewish community Federations cut in half from a few decades ago, those organizations are staying afloat only because of ever-larger gifts from the community’s wealthiest donors. Such a trend away from communal involvement is even more alarming

²⁰⁷ Ben-Ami, 59.

²⁰⁸ Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.”

²⁰⁹ Traub, “The New Israel Lobby.”

considering that baby boomers should now have the time and money to devote to engagement, indicative of the rising apathy toward organized communal life among middle-aged Jews.²¹⁰

In addition, many leaders of the center-left in the organized Jewish community, mostly Reform and Conservative clergy, are private doves but public hawks, careful not to take controversial stands and risk alienating certain members of their communities. For instance, Rabbi David Saperstein and Rabbi Eric Yoffie, leaders of the Union for Reform Judaism, have openly criticized Israeli settlement building, but rarely join with dovish groups to mobilize grassroots support against it.²¹¹ It is a grave sign of communal infirmity that leaders of the largest contingent of organized Jewry, representing more than 3 million Jews, censor themselves to their own constituencies for fear of retribution by the impassioned few. Similarly, Jewish human rights organizations do not dare broach the subject of Israel for fear of being subjected to the sort of withering attacks from pro-Israel leaders that Human Rights Watch endured for its investigation into Israel's conduct during the Gaza War.²¹²

Concerned by the distancing trend among Jewish youth, leaders of the organized Jewish community have attempted to understand the apathy of the younger generation.²¹³ As part of their effort, they commissioned Republican pollster Frank Luntz to survey Jewish college students. Luntz concluded that Jewish youth espouse liberal viewpoints on, and are indifferent toward, Israel. According to Peter Beinart, political writer and Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, communal leaders inferred from Luntz's inquiry that they have a "PR" problem with Jewish youth, refusing to look inward to determine whether they themselves are to

²¹⁰ Ben-Ami, 171.

²¹¹ Fleshler, 71-72.

²¹² Ben-Ami, 141.

²¹³ Ibid, 120-121.

blame.²¹⁴ In response, they dispatched pro-Israel counterweights to college campuses to combat BDS activists, who, from Ben-Ami's perspective, merely spout off black-and-white talking points, further alienating young Jews who yearn to explore the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²¹⁵

Beinart relates that having internalized the principles of American Jewish liberalism, young American Jews logically hold Israel to the same standard. Like Cohen and Kelman, Beinart argues that American Jewish youth have grown up perceiving Israel as a "regional hegemon and occupying power," are more aware of the degree to which Israeli actions contradict liberal values, and are less disposed to excuse Israel's actions because of its purported vulnerability. In his view, the Jewish establishment's fixation on Holocaust-centric Jewish victimhood is particularly illuminating with respect to why Jewish youth no longer relate to Zionism; such a focus rings hollow, as does the entire lingua franca of pro-Israel discourse.²¹⁶ In fact, the BDS movement has reportedly gained traction among many Jewish college students as an outgrowth of the difficulty Jewish youth face in reconciling their liberal Jewish values with the Israel they have come to know as an aggressor, occupier, and oppressor.²¹⁷

Cognitive dissonance between American Jewish liberal values and discordant Israeli actions has evidently caused American Jewish youth to disengage from Israel and from the organized Jewish community in large numbers.²¹⁸ Beinart claims that, "for several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism

²¹⁴ Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment."

²¹⁵ Ben-Ami, 122.

²¹⁶ Beinart, "The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment."

²¹⁷ Horowitz, Adam, and Philip Weiss. "American Jews Rethink Israel." *The Nation* 14 Oct. 2009: n. pag. www.thenation.com. Web.

²¹⁸ Fleshler, 81.

instead.”²¹⁹ Ben-Ami notes that younger Jews, though eschewing traditional communal involvement, are engaging with Judaism more and more outside the confines of the traditional organized community. They are forming independent prayer minyans, social justice organizations like The Progressive Jewish Alliance, educational initiatives like Limmud, and social media outlets like J-Dub.²²⁰

COMMUNAL DISCORD AND THE NASCENT PRO-ISRAEL LEFT

Ever deepening divisions in the American Jewish community over Israeli policies have poked holes in the once formidable façade of consensus, creating fertile ground for the upsurge in dovish pro-Israel organizing.²²¹ Recent survey data has shown that there is much stronger support among American Jews for assertive and even-handed American engagement to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than exists in the organized Jewish community. In 2005, for instance, 75% of Jews in an Ameinu survey supported President Bush putting pressure on both the Israelis and the Palestinians to reach a peace agreement.²²² A 2008 Gerstein Agne poll also found that 87% of American Jews supported U.S. efforts to actively facilitate the peace process, and 75% supported American engagement even if it entailed public pressure or disagreeing with Israel.²²³

In addition, Roy argues that the 2008 Gaza War was a watershed moment for American Jews (similar to the Iraq War for the American public), compelling them to press for more open dialogue on Israeli actions.²²⁴ According to Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss of *The Nation*, for the first time in years, leading American Jewish columnists, like Roger Cohen of The New York

²¹⁹ Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment.”

²²⁰ Ben-Ami, 118.

²²¹ Roy, 30-31.

²²² Fleshler, 112.

²²³ Ibid, 11.

²²⁴ Roy, 25.

Times, condemned Israel's conduct in the war.²²⁵ This momentum helped to fuel a liberal backlash within the Jewish community, which had been mounting because of anger over the rightward shift of Jewish communal leadership, the pro-Israel lobby's support for President Bush's "War on Terror" and the Iraq War, and the perceived suppression of Jewish communal debate on Israel.²²⁶

In turn, dissenting Jewish voices have begun organizing in greater numbers and finding their own space in the communal discourse like never before. Dovish groups, such as Jewish Voice for Peace, American Jews for a Just Peace, and Jews Say No, have proliferated, becoming increasingly established and attracting members on a large scale.²²⁷ In addition, an active dovish grassroots network has emerged due to the growth of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, an organization founded in 2002 to cultivate a stronger liberal Jewish grassroots presence.²²⁸

This development signals a renaissance for liberal American Jewish discourse, which had been sidelined for nearly three decades since mainstream Jewish organizations aligned their efforts with the Republican Party in the 1980's.²²⁹ In fact, dovish groups have never made any measureable impact in the pro-Israel arena; until now, they were lacking major donors and grassroots support.²³⁰ According to Fleshler, in the past, the left's lack of clarity and conceivable solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reinforced community members' natural inclination to retreat to conventional viewpoints so as to avoid potential embarrassment or censure.²³¹ As a

²²⁵ Horowitz and Weiss, "American Jews Rethink Israel."

²²⁶ Waxman, 16.

²²⁷ Roy, 31.

²²⁸ Fleshler, 52.

²²⁹ Traub, "The New Israel Lobby."

²³⁰ Fleshler, 123.

²³¹ Ibid, 134.

result, the left's self-censorship prevented moderate pro-Israel voices from forging a common language or rhetoric to rally around.²³²

J Street's emergence was certainly the product of the major changes occurring within the American Jewish community. According to sociologists Ron Miller and Arnold Dashevsky, "it is clear that the rise of J Street represents a change in the American Jewish political landscape." J Street exemplifies the distancing hypothesis and, they assert, its success is due to the growing number of young, less connected American Jews, who are more critical of Israeli policies and have formed an incipient base of support for the fledgling organization.²³³ In Waxman's estimation, J Street is the clearest manifestation of reinvigorated liberal activism in the Jewish community. The fact that J Street has arisen and established itself in the Jewish community is itself significant, demonstrating the potency of communal discord and of the nascent pro-Israel left. Clearly, times have changed since the 1970s, when the dovish organization Breira was shunned and forced to disband because the taboo against criticizing Israel reigned supreme.²³⁴

WHY J STREET WAS FOUNDED

Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street's founder and president, has made it his life goal to rewrite the rules of pro-Israel advocacy.²³⁵ A former domestic policy advisor in the Clinton administration and the Director of Domestic Policy for Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, Ben-Ami is American-born, but has deep Israeli roots. His ancestors were some of Israel's earliest pioneers, arriving on the First Aliyah (migration) from Russia before the turn of the twentieth century.²³⁶ In his 2011 book, *A New Voice For Israel: Fighting for the Survival of the Jewish Nation*, Ben-

²³² Ibid, 188-189.

²³³ Miller and Dashevsky, 159-160.

²³⁴ Waxman, 15-17.

²³⁵ Beinart, 66.

²³⁶ Ibid, 11-13, 45, 54.

Ami lays out his rationale for founding J Street, tracing the organization's successes and struggles in establishing itself in the Jewish community and on Capitol Hill. In the next section, I will briefly outline Ben-Ami's account of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ills of pro-Israel advocacy, American Jewish values, and J Street's organizational mission.

DIRE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Ben-Ami insists that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is imperative for three main reasons. First, innovations in technology make ever more lethal weapons accessible to terrorists seeking to undermine the peace process. Larger stockpiles of longer-range rockets are simply a recipe for ever-intensifying violence and suffering. Second, the conflict is morphing from a national dispute, which could be rationally solved, into an intractable religious-ideological struggle inimical to resolution. If immediate action is not taken, that transformation will render a two-state solution an absolute impossibility. Third, the demographic trend lines are not running in Israel's favor, and are soon to produce an Arab majority in the Jewish state. With 5.7 million Jews, 5.2 million Arabs, and significantly higher Arab birthrates, Israel must act swiftly or it will soon rule over an ethnic majority denied equal rights.²³⁷

Left alone, Ben-Ami argues, the status quo will not change: Israeli coalition politics leaves its leaders beholden to extremist parties, Palestinian leaders lack the authority or legitimacy to deliver on their promises, and neither side has the political will to forge a resolution. Ben Ami asserts, however, that the status quo of continued occupation and an absence of fixed borders is untenable, sinking Israel deeper into gruesome violence, degraded democracy, and acute international isolation.²³⁸ Israel cannot remain both a Jewish and a democratic state indefinitely, he argues, without ending the occupation of the West Bank and helping to create a

²³⁷ Ibid, 87-88.

²³⁸ Ibid, xiii-xiv, 89, 178.

Palestinian state able to coexist beside Israel in peace and security.²³⁹ In addition, the prolongation of the conflict has caused Israel to defer addressing domestic ills, which have become alarmingly severe: democracy is besieged by right-wing extremist parties, religion encroaches increasingly on government, society is bifurcated by a huge disparity in wealth, and the state's democratic and Jewish values are imperiled by the uncertain status of rights for Israel's non-Jewish residents.²⁴⁰

PERVERSION OF PRO-ISRAEL ADVOCACY

Pro-Israel advocacy, intended to press the U.S. government to strengthen the U.S.-Israel relationship and pursue policies in Israel's best interests, has, in Ben-Ami's eyes, been perverted, to the grave detriment of Israel and the American Jewish community. In light of the dire circumstances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Ben-Ami is particularly distressed by the organized Jewish community's disinterest in advocating for resolution of the conflict, and its leaders' reflexive condemnation of those highlighting the urgency of resolution as anti-Semites or self-hating Jews.²⁴¹ He is troubled, as well, by the "alliance between the neo-cons, the radical right of the Christian Zionist movement and the far-right portions of the Jewish community that has really locked up what it means to be pro-Israel," at the expense of Jewish communal pluralism.²⁴²

Based on the results of a 2008 survey of American Jews that J Street commissioned, only 8% of those surveyed ranked Israel as a top concern in voting, while Israel was not the primary concern for the other 92% of Jews. The "loudest eight percent," whom Ben-Ami broadly conflates with the pro-Israel establishment leadership, dominate the public discourse on Israel

²³⁹ Ibid, 178.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 181-184.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 218-219.

²⁴² D1. J Street Exec. Dir. Jeremy Ben- Ami, Interview on the Formation of a Liberal Pro- Israel Lobby Group, 27 May 2008 (excerpts)." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38.1 (2008): 178-80. *JSTOR*. Web.

and define the public's conception of the Jewish community. Ben-Ami notes, to their credit, that the "loudest eight percent" have been hugely successful at securing bipartisan support for their particular pro-Israel vision. He claims that their views, however, are outdated and inconsistent with the American Jewish public; they are less liberal, less affiliated with the Democratic Party, more religiously observant, and opposed to deploying American leadership to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁴³ By contrast, Jews are one of the most consistently liberal demographics in the U.S.; of whom nearly 70% identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, the majority are Reform or non-practicing religiously, and most support the U.S. taking an active role in facilitating the peace process.²⁴⁴

Ben-Ami is also disturbed by the pro-Israel lobby's "Israel right-or-wrong" formulation that demands unquestioning support for Israel in the Jewish community and on Capitol Hill. In his view, such a hardline stance perpetuates the conflict by allowing Israel to evade tough questions, and has a poisonous effect on the Jewish community by stifling discussion of the ethical implications of Israel's policies, particularly those stemming from its occupation of the West Bank.²⁴⁵ Jewish communal leaders must recognize that their policies deter many Jews, especially Jewish youth, by refusing to allow for nuanced discussion of Israeli policies or to concede that Israel's actions are sometimes wrong.²⁴⁶ In his view, the organized community needs a paradigm shift away from that formulation in order for Jewish identity to be viably preserved in assimilated society, where it must coexist alongside an individual's other identities and beliefs.²⁴⁷ Moreover, Ben-Ami asserts that there is widespread consensus on resolution of the conflict on Capitol Hill: that it would be roughly based on the Clinton Parameters, that it is a

²⁴³ Ben-Ami, 69-71.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 71-72, Fleshler, 11, 61.

²⁴⁵ Ben-Ami, xii, 154.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 124.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, xiii, 165, 170.

fundamental U.S. interest, that resolution is pressing, that without intervention the status quo will continue, and that America should take an active role in conflict resolution. Yet, because of the pro-Israel lobby's demands for unquestioning support for Israel, Ben-Ami argues that politicians throw up their hands and act as if there is no solution in sight.²⁴⁸

WHAT AMERICAN JEWS STAND FOR

From Ben-Ami's perspective, the activities of the pro-Israel lobby are not only injurious to Israeli and American Jewish interests; they also run counter to Jewish values.²⁴⁹ He relates that the core of Jewish learning lies in debate and disagreement, an ideal turned on its head by lobby suppression. Ben-Ami enumerates that *tzedakah* (charity), *gemilut chasidim* (good works), *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), and *rodeph shalom* (pursuit of peace) are central pillars of Judaism, illustrating that Jews are naturally inclined to fight for justice and strive for peace.²⁵⁰ By stifling dialogue and supporting Israeli actions that contradict core Jewish values, Ben-Ami argues that "the state of the Israel conversation is putting the heart and soul of the entire Jewish community at risk."²⁵¹ He insists that the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza blockade are not only unwise politically, but morally wrong, and that the organized Jewish community does not do justice to Jewish ethical teachings by not applying those teachings to the Jewish state.²⁵²

J STREET'S MISSION AND THEORY OF CHANGE

Inspired by the missing J Street from the grid of DC letter streets, J Street was named to symbolize the absence of "passionate moderates" in the pro-Israel pantheon. J Street's overriding mission is to reach a two-state solution.²⁵³ Ben-Ami asserts that it is time to resolve the conflict once and for all, and that active and sustained American leadership is critical for any such

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 91-91.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 126, 213.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 77, 214, 221.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 125.

²⁵² Ibid, 205.

²⁵³ Ibid, 106.

resolution. In his view, only America is trustworthy enough and can apply sufficient leverage to compel Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate with one another and reach an agreement.²⁵⁴ In doing so, Ben-Ami believes the U.S. must bring together both parties and put the widely accepted framework before them, commencing negotiations where the Clinton Parameters left off before President Bush took office and abruptly terminated the peace process. The framework, Ben-Ami argues, should entail a comprehensive proposal involving full regional acceptance of Israel, akin to the Arab League's 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.²⁵⁵

Ben-Ami states that in order to achieve that ultimate goal, J Street's proximate mission is to facilitate open dialogue on Israel in the Jewish community, thereby doing away with the Israel right-or-wrong, zero-sum paradigm, in hopes of transforming the political dynamics in Congress that prevent resolution of the conflict.²⁵⁶ He argues that change in America's Israel policy must come from within the Jewish community, because it is the community's own political forces that are the primary obstacle keeping American lawmakers from taking bold steps to end the conflict.²⁵⁷

Pursuant of that goal, Ben-Ami strives to overhaul the definition of "pro-Israel," abandoning the one-dimensional, unqualified support the term now entails, and instead giving content and depth to a progressive vision of support for Israel that embodies Jewish values.²⁵⁸ J Street seeks to redefine "pro-Israel" as providing for Israel's long-term security, safeguarding Israel's Jewish and democratic character, and ensuring that Israel's conduct upholds Jewish ethical principles.²⁵⁹ Ben-Ami also insists that support for the creation of a Palestinian state

²⁵⁴ Ibid, xiii, 90.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 198-201.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, xii-xiii.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 203.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 154-155.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, xiii.

should be seen as legitimately pro-Israel, as it is the only way to preserve, on a lasting basis, Israel's democratic and Jewish character.²⁶⁰

Ben-Ami argues that the key to countering the dominance of the impassioned minority is to inspire the other 92% of Jews, particularly the "passionate moderates" with more nuanced views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to rise up and articulate a pro-Israel, pro-peace vision.²⁶¹ He asserts that the majority of Jews have been unengaged or unaffiliated with mainstream pro-Israel groups because those groups do not reflect their views.²⁶² In fact, only a quarter of American Jews are affiliated with pro-Israel groups.²⁶³ Ben-Ami underscores that polling data has shown that liberal Jews are not apathetic, but are equally attached to Israel as more conservative Jews, insisting that their views merit equal consideration in the pro-Israel arena.²⁶⁴ In his view, J Street does not have to match the power of AIPAC and other mainstream pro-Israel groups to achieve its goals, but must only provide politicians enough space to unabashedly support an active pro-peace agenda without putting their political careers in jeopardy.²⁶⁵

Ben-Ami also stresses that Jewish Americans need not play consensus politics with Israel. They are entitled to question Israeli policies, he argues, because those policies directly affect American policies in the Middle East, because Israel is the Jewish national home, and because of the deleterious effects of stifled dialogue on Israel within the American Jewish community.²⁶⁶ In that vein, J Street views it as the responsibility of the Jewish community not

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 165.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 203.

²⁶² "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street." Personal interview. 20 Jan. 2013.

²⁶³ Fleshler, 61.

²⁶⁴ Ben-Ami, 117.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 204.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 156.

only to defend Israel's security, but also to speak out when Israel's actions conflict with its liberal, democratic values or its strategic interests.²⁶⁷

Ben-Ami further asserts that criticism of Israel should be engaged in the Jewish community with sensible dialogue, not censure, demanding that defaming those who speak out cannot be an alternative to reasonable debate.²⁶⁸ He insists that the community draw a distinction between critics who seek to delegitimize Israel and those who criticize Israel, as he does, from a place of love and concern.²⁶⁹ In his view, the youth exodus from the organized Jewish community will not cease until the community welcomes debate and disagreement, allowing for the reconciliation of Jewish values with support for Israel.²⁷⁰

Facilitating open dialogue on Israel in the Jewish community is, in essence, an instrumental goal for J Street, aimed at breaking the dominance of the centrist pro-Israel lobby in Congress. In doing so, J Street hopes to have politicians hear another pro-Israel voice, so that the cues they receive will reflect the diversity of Jewish communal opinion rather than the stridently unified voice of the impassioned few.²⁷¹ In addition, J Street seeks to provide a sufficient base of political and monetary support for pro-peace politicians to freely break with the status quo and speak their minds about Israel without fearing political ruin. Given the freedom to act without fear of lobby retribution, Ben-Ami insists, politicians will act in accordance with the aforesaid consensus on the conflict and pursue policies to that end.²⁷²

In Ben-Ami's eyes, the Zionist dream is yet unfulfilled – only resolution of the conflict and establishment of finite borders will grant Israel the full legitimacy of nationhood. For him, J

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 126.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 126, 134.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 159.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 127.

²⁷¹ Ibid, 110.

²⁷² Ibid, 105.

Street's mission is at core 21st-century Zionism; it is the ultimate act of Zionism for American Jews to warn Israel that its present course spells doom for its Jewish and democratic character.²⁷³

Serving American interests through the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also central to J Street's mission. This is a deviation from the goals of other pro-Israel groups, who deny America's vested interest in the conflict's resolution, and for whom Israel's welfare is the singular concern.²⁷⁴ Ben-Ami concedes that the U.S. reputation is damaged in the Middle East through America's perceived facilitation of the Israeli occupation. He notes that the conflict damages U.S. interests in the region, benefitting Iran by allowing President Ahmadinejad to employ gamesmanship around the conflict to consolidate power and extend his regime's influence throughout the region, and imperiling the Persian Gulf oil supply, which could roil global markets as the OPEC embargo did in 1973. In support of this claim, Ben-Ami cites the Iraq Study Group's conclusion that the U.S. will not be able to achieve its goals in the region unless it confronts the conflict head-on.²⁷⁵

J STREET: THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

THE EMERGENCE OF J STREET

Bringing Ben-Ami's vision to fruition was no easy task. In 2006, he arranged a secret meeting with Jewish philanthropists to pitch a pro-Israel, pro-peace political organization, but his efforts were dashed when details of the meeting were leaked to the press and donors jumped ship, wary of public criticism. Ben-Ami made a second attempt, this time trying to merge existing dovish organizations, but this effort, too, resulted in failure. Finally, in April 2008, under

²⁷³ Ibid, xiii, 185-186.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, 187, 194.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 189-191.

less than ideal circumstances, J Street was born in Ben-Ami's Chevy Chase, Maryland basement with a budget of \$1.5 million and four staff members.²⁷⁶

WHAT J STREET DOES

In the Jewish community, J Street aims to broaden the range of acceptable dialogue on Israel and redefine what it means to be “pro-Israel” by gaining legitimacy as a mainstream Jewish voice, a goal it works toward through persistent communal engagement. The organization coordinates programming, outreach, and engagement to achieve those ends through the J Street Education Fund, its nonprofit arm; J Street Local; its local chapters; and J Street U, its college campus presence.²⁷⁷ According to Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice-President of Community Relations, J Street strives to engage the Jewish community wherever it can, especially in Jewish spaces, to get Jewish Americans to appreciate J Street's rationale and objectives. “The more they understand we are them, and that many of their rabbis and communal leaders are standing up for the same ideas,” Lerner elaborated, “the more J Street is accepted in the mainstream.” She notes that J Street is especially interested in strategic engagement at influential Jewish venues and with influential Jewish individuals to boost its credibility within the Jewish community. While J Street also aims to attract less engaged Jews outside of Jewish spaces, Lerner concedes the difficulty in finding and mobilizing unaffiliated Jews.²⁷⁸

J Street also operates JStreetPAC, a federal political action committee, setting it apart as the only pro-Israel lobbying group to do so. According to JStreetPAC Manager Ben Shnider, the organization runs its own PAC primarily to articulate its influence clearly to the public, as opposed to AIPAC, which derives its clout from shadowy, overblown impressions of its

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 107-108, "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

²⁷⁷ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

power.²⁷⁹ In accordance with J Street's mission, JStreetPAC's purpose is to provide sufficient political cover and monetary support for pro-peace politicians to have the political space to depart from the status quo on Israel.²⁸⁰ Candidates for JStreetPAC endorsements are carefully vetted in a three-stage process, involving a preliminary interview with the Director of Political Affairs and PAC manager, a second interview with the Finance Committee, and a final vote by the PAC board, all in order to ascertain candidates' views on Israel, as well as their electoral viability.²⁸¹

On top of its communal engagement and PAC activities, J Street devotes considerable resources to surveys in order to demonstrate to the Jewish community and Washington lawmakers that it represents the views of the moderate American Jewish majority. Since 2008, J Street has commissioned annual surveys on American Jewish opinion on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which have demonstrated consistently that American Jews overwhelmingly favor a two-state solution and an active U.S. role in resolving the conflict, even if that means publicly pressuring or disagreeing with Israel. J Street data has also shown that the majority of American Jews agree with J Street that Israeli settlement building is unacceptable, that resolving the conflict is a core American interest, and that a comprehensive peace agreement would provide Israel greater security than is provided by Israeli military superiority.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager." Personal interview. 20 Jan. 2013.

²⁸⁰ Ben-Ami, 203-204.

²⁸¹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

²⁸² Gerstein, Jim. *Making Sense of the Jewish Vote*. Analysis Memo. Washington, D.C.: Gerstein Bocian Agne Strategic Communications, 2012. *Jstreet.org*. J Street. Web.

Gerstein, Jim. *Summary Findings: National Survey of American Jews*. Survey Analysis. Washington, D.C.: Gerstein Agne Strategic Communications, 2008. *Jstreet.org*. J Street. Web.

Gerstein, Jim. *Summary Findings: National Survey of American Jews*. Survey Analysis. Washington, D.C.: Gerstein Agne Strategic Communications, 2009. *Jstreet.org*. J Street. Web.

Gerstein, Jim. *Summary Findings: National Survey of American Jews*. Survey Analysis. Washington, D.C.: Gerstein Agne Strategic Communications, 2010. *Jstreet.org*. J Street. Web.

Gerstein, Jim. *Summary Findings: National Survey of American Jews*. Survey Analysis. Washington, D.C.: Gerstein Bocian Agne Strategic Communications, 2011. *Jstreet.org*. J Street. Web.

In the following four sections, I will analyze each year of J Street's development as a pro-Israel organization separately in order to systematically assess, in sequence, the important developments in its political struggles and victories, its communal struggles and victories, and its cumulative annual impact.

J STREET: APRIL 2008-2009

Like the long list of those who had come up against the pro-Israel lobby before it, J Street was met with fierce resistance in most quarters of the Jewish community when it first emerged. Almost immediately, the organization was derided as anti-Israel by a number of Jewish communal leaders, such as Morris Amitay, former executive director of AIPAC and head of the AIPAC-affiliated Washington PAC, who labeled its endorsees "the anti-Israel Hall of Fame."²⁸³ J Street was also criticized by many in the Jewish community for merely swapping right-wing hyperbole for its left-wing counterpart, and its "pro-Israel-pro-peace" rhetoric was denounced as deceptive for preconceiving a solution to achieve peace.²⁸⁴

Initially, Jewish leaders also condemned J Street's voice as detrimental to the U.S.-Israel relationship. Abraham Foxman, the National Director of the ADL, claimed that J Street's presence was harmful in confusing lawmakers about the Jewish stance on Israel. Jewish leaders also panned J Street for acting as though it knew better than Israel how to run Israeli affairs, thus disrespecting Israel's democratic decision-making.²⁸⁵ In addition, J Street has been vociferously attacked by Jewish communal voices for having unacceptable supporters, supposedly revealing the organization's true malevolence beneath its pro-Israel guise. For example, in 2009 historian Jonathan Sarna characterized J Street "a Trojan horse for anti-Israel activists." Around the same

²⁸³ Ben-Ami, 134, Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Shows Its Strength in Numbers." *The Forward* [New York] 21 Nov. 2008: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

²⁸⁴ Chait, Jonathan. "Tough Love: So Who Are You Calling "pro-Israel"?" *The New Republic* 04 Feb. 2009: n. pag. *www.newrepublic.com*. Web.

²⁸⁵ Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath."

time, *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg seized on Stephen Walt's endorsement of J Street, condemning it as worse than an endorsement by Osama bin Laden.²⁸⁶

Although J Street was showered with acerbic criticism at its birth, it did receive a degree of early support. According to *CQ Weekly* reporter Jonathan Broder, the fact that, at its inception, J Street was already creating a modicum of space—however small—for serious debate on Israeli policies and on the U.S.-Israel relationship, was a significant accomplishment in an environment hostile to such discourse. MJ Rosenberg, director of policy analysis at the Israel Policy Forum, also celebrated that, with J Street's emergence, “finally, the debate has begun.” In addition, James Besser of *The Jewish Week* interpreted the torrent of criticism from the pro-Israel establishment against J Street as a promising sign that the organization was quickly becoming a serious pro-Israel player.²⁸⁷

In 2008, its first election cycle, JStreetPAC raised \$580,000, mostly in small online donations.²⁸⁸ It meted out those funds to 41 endorsed candidates, 32 of whom won their races. Notably, J Street convinced a number of its endorsees to break with larger mainstream pro-Israel groups and accept its endorsement instead. However, as journalist Nathan Guttman of *The Forward* observed, many of those rogue candidates had their contributions from mainstream pro-Israel PAC's threatened or revoked altogether.²⁸⁹ Nonetheless, in Broder's estimation, J Street's impressive fundraising effort did cause lawmakers to take notice of the new arrival on the pro-Israel PAC scene.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Ben-Ami, 142-144.

²⁸⁷ Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath."

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Guttman, "J Street Shows Its Strength in Numbers."

²⁹⁰ Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath."

In October 2009, J Street held its first policy conference, attracting 1500 participants, 220 of whom were students.²⁹¹ The conference laid bare the fledgling organization's struggle to tailor its message to the pro-Israel community. In order to encourage communal candor and open dialogue, J Street chose to host anti-Zionist speakers like Salam al-Marayati, founder of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, notorious for calling Israel a suspect in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. J Street had also invited poet Josh Healey onto a panel, but canceled the panel on which he was to appear when a video surfaced of Healey reciting a poem in which he compared Jews to Nazis writing numbers on the wrists of Gazan babies. The furor ignited by J Street's inclusion of such anti-Zionist voices at its conference alienated many of the organization's congressional supporters, causing a dozen lawmakers to abdicate from the conference host committee.²⁹²

Despite those abdications and the many members of Congress who refused to participate, the conference drew a sizeable American political presence. 40 members of Congress attended the conference gala, and the Obama administration sent National Security Adviser James Jones as a speaker. In his address, Jones detailed President Obama's plans for active engagement in the conflict and welcomed J Street as a partner in advancing the peace process.²⁹³ The conference also drew support from a handful of Israeli leaders. Although Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the U.S., declined J Street's invitation to speak at the conference, Israeli President Shimon Peres and Tzipi Livni, head of the Kadima opposition party, both sent J Street letters of support. Several members of the Kadima and Labor parties also attended the conference.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ "J Street Puts a Foot in the Door; American Jews and Israel." *The Economist (U.S.)* 29 Oct. 2009: n. pag. *www.economist.com*. Web.

²⁹² Carpenter, Amanda. "J Street Pro-Israel Lobby Takes on AIPAC, Alienates Backers." *The Washington Times* [Washington, D.C.] 21 Oct. 2009: n. pag. *www.washingtontimes.com*. Web.

²⁹³ "J Street Puts a Foot in the Door; American Jews and Israel."

²⁹⁴ Nathan-Kazis, Josh. "In Shift, Oren Calls J Street 'A Unique Problem'" *The Forward* [New York] 09 Dec. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

In J Street's first year, the organization faced an uphill battle in the Jewish community. In December 2008, at the outbreak of the Gaza War, J Street came out against Israel for launching its attack against Hamas targets. The organization called for a diplomatic intervention to negotiate an immediate ceasefire and equated the morality of Israel's military operation with that of Hamas terror. Only after the fact did J Street issue a statement supportive of Israel's right to defend itself. The organization was strongly criticized by mainstream pro-Israel voices for its criticism of Israel.²⁹⁵ Rabbi Eric Yoffie, then the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, produced a scathing attack of J Street's stance, deeming it "morally deficient, profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment, and also appallingly naïve." In his view, J Street misjudged the situation, misinterpreted the views of the moderate American Jewish majority, and inconceivably drew no moral distinction between Hamas' incessant targeting of Israeli civilians with rockets and shelling, and Israel's measured military response.²⁹⁶ Likewise, Chait argued that while J Street claims to represent mainstream Jews, its criticism of Israel's operation in Gaza was a fringe view, since both Israeli and American Jewish opinion supported the operation. He demanded that J Street not call itself "pro-Israel" if it would not pick sides between Hamas' terror and Israel's legitimate counterattack.²⁹⁷

J Street also struggled to curry favor with a mainstream Jewish community wary of its left-wing image. The organization sought to reduce this stigma by recruiting as its director of policy and strategy Hadar Susskind, the former vice-president and Washington DC Director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and a Jewish establishment name well known in local

²⁹⁵ Traub, "The New Israel Lobby."

²⁹⁶ Yoffie, Eric. "On Gaza, Sense and Centrism." *The Forward* [New York] 09 Jan. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

²⁹⁷ Chait, "Tough Love: So Who Are You Calling "pro-Israel"?"

Jewish Federations and Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRC).²⁹⁸ When the Goldstone Report, the product of a UN Human Rights Council fact-finding mission that accused Israel of human rights abuses during the 2008 Gaza War, was released in April 2009, it was widely condemned in the Jewish community for drawing on Hamas' uncorroborated accounts alone. J Street seized the opportunity to highlight its own mainstream credentials. Instead of issuing a press release immediately following the Report's publication, as it had following the outbreak of the Gaza War, J Street released a nuanced statement after six days of consideration, criticizing the report while urging Israel nonetheless to heed its findings. Thus, the organization averted most of the potential communal backlash.²⁹⁹

However, not every nuanced position J Street staked out in its first year was as well received. In response to Iran's belligerence in continuing its nuclear enrichment program in defiance of UN sanctions and proposed bilateral U.S. sanctions against Iran, J Street issued a statement withholding support for U.S. sanctions until diplomatic channels were exhausted, a stance for which it incurred strong criticism from Jewish leaders.³⁰⁰ J Street then made an about face, concluding that engagement had failed, and throwing its support behind the 2009 Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act promoted by a number of traditional pro-Israel groups.³⁰¹

Throughout its first year, J Street was relentlessly criticized for not being sufficiently pro-Israel. Its detractors claimed that while J Street had spiritedly opposed the actions of the Israeli government and the traditional pro-Israel lobby in reacting to the Gaza War, in placing too much weight to the Goldstone Report, in not supporting sanctions against Iran, and in making room for individuals hostile to Israel at its policy conference, the organization had not shown a

²⁹⁸ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Makes a Strategic Acquisition as Other Groups on the Left Struggle." *The Forward* [New York] 04 Sept. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

²⁹⁹ "J Street Puts a Foot in the Door; American Jews and Israel."

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ Guttman, Nathan. "From the Left: J Street Moves to the Center on Iran Sanctions." *The Forward* [New York] 16 Dec. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

commensurate passion for defending Israel's security.³⁰² J Street received a particularly devastating blow from Israeli ambassador Michael Oren, who, after declining to speak at the organization's conference, was prompted by J Street's opposition to sanctions on Iran to lambast the organization's criticism of Israeli policies as being "significantly out of the mainstream," and "inimical to Israel's fundamental interests."³⁰³

J Street also struggled to convey its mission to the Jewish community. Some in the Jewish media raised concerns that J Street's potential influence was hindered by its incongruent goals of creating political space and lobbying for the President to pursue a two-state solution on the one hand, and opening up communal discourse on Israel on the other. J Street was seen as having backed itself into a corner by summoning non-Zionists to its tent through its call for more open dialogue; turning them away would undercut the group's commitment to open discourse, while embracing them would erode its credibility as a pro-Israel organization.³⁰⁴ While J Street's mission has held from the beginning that opening up communal dialogue is a means to the end of creating political space in Congress and in the Executive, such concerns demonstrate J Street's difficulty in clearly articulating its goals to the public.

Despite the struggles that J Street faced in carving out space for itself in the organized Jewish community, the organization did score a number of significant communal victories in its first year. According to Tamar Ariel, special assistant to the President and the Chief of Staff, when J Street emerged, Jews who believed in a two-state solution but hadn't felt comfortable expressing those ideas, flocked to the organization because they had finally found an outlet for

³⁰² "J Street Puts a Foot in the Door; American Jews and Israel." Treiman, Daniel. "J Street and Main Street: The Israel Lobby We Need." *The Forward* [New York] 23 Oct. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 14 Oct. 2009. Web.

³⁰³ Nathan-Kazis, "In Shift, Oren Calls J Street 'A Unique Problem'"

³⁰⁴ Goldberg, J.J. "Rips in the Peace Camp's Big Tent." *The Forward* [New York] 06 Nov. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

Jewish political engagement that reflected their views.³⁰⁵ J Street's 2009 conference exemplified that excitement, reflecting an untapped reservoir of progressive Jewish support for a pro-peace agenda. J Street was already being embraced by some on Capitol Hill and in Israel's Knesset as an acceptable pro-Israel voice, as evidenced by the attendance of 40 lawmakers, a representative of the Obama administration, and a number of Israeli politicians.³⁰⁶

Another communal achievement for J Street was its strategic acquisition of two other dovish pro-Israel groups in the attempt to broaden its operations and audience beyond the Washington lobbying scene. In 2008, J Street acquired the Union of Progressive Zionism, a small pro-peace campus organization, in order to attract Jewish student support. Then in 2009, J Street acquired Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, a major asset providing J Street an instant grassroots network of nearly 50,000 activists.³⁰⁷ J Street's consolidation of these groups signaled its early success in remaking the Jewish communal landscape by uniting progressive voices. These acquisitions stood in stark contrast to the concurrent struggles of other dovish pro-Israel organizations, such as the Israel Policy Forum and Americans for Peace Now, which faced difficulties as a result of the financial downturn and of J Street's siphoning off progressive communal resources.³⁰⁸

As in the Jewish community, J Street confronted obstacles in the political arena during its first year. From its inception, J Street was forced to contend with its popular characterization as the "anti-AIPAC." Ben-Ami bristled at the portrayal, because it was rooted in the to the us-vs.-them framework he hoped to move beyond; because he didn't want to be compared with AIPAC; because he did not consider J Street's success contingent on equaling AIPAC; and because he

³⁰⁵ "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

³⁰⁶ "The J Street Challenge." Editorial. *The Forward* [New York] 29 Oct. 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁰⁷ Guttman, "J Street Makes a Strategic Acquisition as Other Groups on the Left Struggle."

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

claimed that J Street and AIPAC were not diametrically opposed forces.³⁰⁹ Nonetheless, J Street could not escape the comparison when, in May 2009, the organization wrote a letter countering an AIPAC letter to Congress; J Street refuted AIPAC's contention that the President should condition peace negotiations on the cessation of Palestinian violence. While J Street's 87 signatories paled in comparison to AIPAC's 329, the fact that J Street issued a counter letter at all, and that a fifth of legislators weighing in on the subject sided with J Street, demonstrated J Street's palpable influence in presenting a new and different pro-Israel voice in Congress.³¹⁰

On Capitol Hill, politicians struggled to overcome the stigma of a J Street endorsement, for which a number of lawmakers were threatened or punished by traditional pro-Israel PAC's and donors. That stigma, and the intimidation and retribution it provoked, certainly came into play for J Street's endorsees in the 2008 election cycle. The penalties for simply associating with J Street have also plagued lawmakers, such as Rep. Steven Cohen (D-Ten), whose AIPAC-affiliated funders dumped him after he recorded a video for J Street to be posted on the group's website.³¹¹

Nonetheless, J Street's first year was marked more by political triumph than by struggle. The 2008 election was certainly a positive debut for JStreetPAC, both in the amount of funds it raised and in the number of pro-peace candidates it endorsed. In addition, the credibility of J Street's endorsement was bolstered by the high-profile victories of two of its endorsees against pro-Israel establishment candidates, including Democrat Jeff Merkley, who defeated Republican incumbent Gordon Smith in the Oregon senate race, and Democrat Gary Peters, who defeated

³⁰⁹ "D1. J Street Exec. Dir. Jeremy Ben- Ami, Interview on the Formation of a Liberal Pro- Israel Lobby Group, 27 May 2008 (excerpts)."

³¹⁰ Traub, "The New Israel Lobby."

³¹¹ Ibid.

Republican incumbent Joe Knollenberg for a Michigan congressional seat.³¹² The organization also gained prominence overnight on Capitol Hill through President Obama's inclusion of J Street in a meeting with the leaders of American Jewish organizations at the start of his term in 2009.³¹³ It then seemed likely that J Street would rise to prominence on President Obama's coattails, as J Street's agenda fit squarely with the President's call for an Israeli settlement freeze in hopes of reviving peace negotiations.

J Street's most significant victory in its first year, however, was the highly publicized political cover it provided Donna Edwards. In 2009, Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD) was smeared as anti-Israel by mainstream pro-Israel actors for voting present, rather than in favor of, a resolution supporting Israel's 2008 operation in Gaza; for criticizing Israel's settlement policy during a visit to the Middle East; and for holding a town hall on Israel without including any traditional pro-Israel viewpoints.³¹⁴ When local Jewish leaders threatened to support a 2010 primary challenge against Edwards, J Street raised \$30,000 on Edwards' behalf in two days in a rare off-year fundraising campaign, conveying that right-wing message discipline would no longer rule.³¹⁵

All told, in its debut year, J Street made a considerable impact in the pro-Israel field, though it was far from winning over the Jewish community or changing the direction of pro-Israel policy in Washington. By 2009, J Street had attracted 115,000 online supporters and 7,000 donors, and had doubled its budget to \$3 million.³¹⁶ Those numbers, in addition to JStreetPAC's impressive first-cycle performance and the success of J Street's first conference in terms of

³¹² Guttman, "J Street Shows Its Strength in Numbers."

³¹³ Traub, "The New Israel Lobby."

³¹⁴ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Flexes Its Muscle and Others React As New Congresswoman Steps Into the Fray." *The Forward* [New York] 08 July 2009: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

Traub, "The New Israel Lobby."

³¹⁵ Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath."

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

communal turnout and political presence, indicated its nascent base of Jewish and political support. According to journalist Daniel Treiman of *The Forward*, by 2009, J Street was quickly becoming a force to be reckoned with in the pro-Israel arena.³¹⁷

Despite unrelenting criticism from traditional pro-Israel voices, Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss of *The Nation* observed that J Street has received more attention, grassroots enthusiasm, and positive media coverage than any mainstream pro-Israel group had ever received.³¹⁸ It had done so not only by consolidating and eclipsing the pack of dovish pro-Israel groups, but by tapping into the deeply felt discontent with mainstream pro-Israel groups for purporting to speak for the Jewish center. In Treiman's view, J Street truly had begun to transform the national discussion on Israel through highlighting the urgency of a two-state solution and the importance of furthering America's own strategic interests in its Middle East policy.³¹⁹

Moreover, J Street had shown that it could deliver considerable funding to its endorsees. In its first election cycle, JStreetPAC raised more money than any other single pro-Israel PAC, and in its 2009 fundraising drive for Donna Edwards, J Street demonstrated it could successfully provide cover for embattled legislators. "Right off the bat, we showed that we were able to compete with the best of them, on par with some of the strongest leadership PAC's on the Hill," said Shnider.³²⁰

Most saliently, J Street's mere presence on the pro-Israel lobbying scene diminished AIPAC's aura of dominance, chipping away at its monopoly over the Israel policy subsystem.³²¹

Politicians perceive the balance of power among groups by interpreting organizational

³¹⁷ Treiman, "J Street and Main Street: The Israel Lobby We Need."

³¹⁸ Horowitz and Weiss, "American Jews Rethink Israel."

³¹⁹ Treiman, "J Street and Main Street: The Israel Lobby We Need."

³²⁰ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³²¹ Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath."

communications as an index of group resources and intensity.³²² While AIPAC is accurately perceived as commanding greater resources and intensity of support, the pro-Israel arena has nonetheless been transformed by the emergence of J Street as a countervailing force.

Notwithstanding J Street's overall success, its influence in its first year was limited by its inability to effectively communicate its mission, its pro-Israel integrity, and its nuanced political positions. At first, its goal to open up the communal discourse on Israel was seen, because of J Street's own actions, as equivalent to promoting a two-state solution, not a means to an end.³²³ The fact that J Street attracted many who did not subscribe to its mission inadvertently weakened its ability to mobilize passionate moderates to articulate a pro-peace vision and, ultimately, to affect change on Capitol Hill. As seen in its policy positions on the Gaza War, the Goldstone Report, and Iran sanctions, J Street had yet to master the difficult art of expressing its nuanced views and rallying broad-based support for its positions without inciting communal outrage for its allegedly inadequate support of Israel. According to Lerner, "it is incredibly difficult to convey our nuanced positions. But the minute we try to dumb down our message, we miss the whole point of what we're trying to do. It's important that we preserve the nuance in the conversation."³²⁴

In its first year, J Street had yet to make any direct legislative impact in the Israel policy subsystem, leaving AIPAC's record of legislative victories uninterrupted.³²⁵ Though it still faced an uphill battle in Congress, J Street could nonetheless argue with credibility that supporting a pro-peace agenda would not spell financial or political ruin for legislators.³²⁶

³²² Fleshler, 53.

³²³ Goldberg, "Rips in the Peace Camp's Big Tent."

³²⁴ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

³²⁵ Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath."

³²⁶ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

J STREET: 2010

In the 2010 election cycle, JStreetPAC raised \$1.5 million, nearly triple what it had raised in 2008—outperforming all other pro-Israel PAC’s for the second cycle in a row and amounting to 30% of all pro-Israel PAC money. J Street distributed those funds to its 61 endorsed candidates, 45 of whom won their races.³²⁷ As J Street raised more money to back candidates, its number of endorsees rose. Despite this, and the fact that its endorsement was accepted by prominent Jewish legislator Sen. Russell Feingold (D-WIS), J Street still struggled to combat the stigma attached to its endorsement. It lost previous endorsee Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) and its endorsement was rebuffed by a number of other Jewish candidates after they encountered backlash from constituents.³²⁸

2010 was indeed a year marked by struggle for J Street in the Jewish community. The organization was still dogged by criticism from Jewish leaders that it was not truly “pro-Israel.” Just as it seemed that the Israeli government was warming to J Street, Danny Ayalon, Israel’s deputy foreign minister, blasted the organization for calling itself “pro-Israel.”³²⁹ In addition, Alan Dershowitz interrupted an interview of Hadar Susskind with *Haaretz* at AIPAC’s annual conference to denounce J Street for calling itself pro-Israel, for being more critical than supportive of Israel, and for allegedly having anti-Israel supporters.³³⁰

J Street also lost, or nearly lost, a number of battles in its fight for communal inclusion in 2010. When J Street launched its grassroots-organizing arm at the University of Pennsylvania Hillel, for example, mainstream pro-Israel activists vigorously campaigned to get the event

³²⁷ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

"JStreetPAC Results for 2010." *Jstreet.org*. J Street, 3 Nov. 2010. Web.

³²⁸ JTA. "J Street PAC Doles Out Money to Midterm Candidates." *The Forward* [New York] 02 July 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³²⁹ Nathan-Kazis, Josh. "Ayalon on J Street: 'They Should Not Call Themselves Pro-Israeli'" *Forward.com*. N.p., 16 Feb. 2010. Web.

³³⁰ Mozgovaya, Natasha. "Dershowitz Lays into J Street in AIPAC Conference Dust-up." *Haaretz* [Tel Aviv] 22 Mar. 2010: n. pag. *www.haaretz.com*. Web.

canceled, but were ultimately unsuccessful. Another high-profile incident occurred when Temple Beth Avodah, a Reform synagogue in Newton, Massachusetts, rescinded an invitation for Ben-Ami to speak because of the objections of a small but powerful group of congregants. J Street also encountered hostility from a number of other Jewish venues unwilling to give a voice to any viewpoint disagreeing with the mainstream pro-Israel agenda.³³¹

In that year, J Street was also rocked by two alleged cover-ups that ballooned into major media scandals. First, it came to light that J Street had kept secret that it had received a \$750,000 donation from Jewish billionaire George Soros, a controversial figure in the Jewish community because of past remarks in which he was critical of Israel. J Street's detractors seized upon this fact, claiming that the organization had put its endorsees at risk by linking them surreptitiously with Soros.³³² It then surfaced that J Street had been involved in arranging a visit to Washington DC for Judge Richard Goldstone, seen as a pariah by the Jewish community for his ostensibly prejudiced report impugning Israel for war crimes. Ben-Ami at first denied arranging the visit, but later admitted to setting up meetings for Goldstone with congressional staffers.³³³ Both incidents called into question whether J Street had the organizational readiness to make an impact in the pro-Israel field.

Despite its struggles to establish itself as "pro-Israel," to be welcomed into Jewish communal spaces, and to put out the fires ignited by the Soros and Goldstone scandals, J Street was not without communal successes in 2010. Notably, J Street won the approval of Israeli ambassador Michael Oren by seeking out engagement with the embassy.³³⁴ After months of backroom discussions explaining J Street's views and its points of agreement and contention

³³¹ Ben-Ami, 131-132.

³³² Goldberg, Jeffrey. "J Street, Down the Rabbit Hole." *The Atlantic* 30 Sept. 2010: n. pag. *Www.theatlantic.com*. Web.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ JTA. "Oren: J Street Clash Ebbing." *The Forward* [New York] 19 Feb. 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 10 Feb. 2010. Web.

with the Israeli government, Oren formally reversed his position on J Street in a meeting with Ben-Ami.³³⁵ Winning Oren's sanction was a major victory in J Street's quest to establish itself as legitimate pro-Israel actor in the eyes of the Jewish community and on Capitol Hill.

J Street also faced a number of political struggles in 2010. When Israel announced plans to build 1600 new housing units in East Jerusalem during a visit by Vice President Biden, President Obama took the move an insult to the peace process and the extant settlement freeze, and publicly opposed the plan. As in 2009, J Street issued a statement at cross-purposes with AIPAC that commended President Obama's position, while AIPAC's rival statement condemned the President's position and called for the U.S. to stop imposing unilateral demands on its ally.³³⁶ J Street's statement had a two-fold significance. First, it garnered 18,000 signatures from J Street supporters, indicating the organization's progress in marshaling progressive Jews to rally behind a pro-peace agenda. Second, the ADL's Foxman panned it as misguided and counterproductive; his reaction indicated that the Jewish community and those on Capitol Hill were indeed hearing more than just the traditional pro-Israel perspective.³³⁷

While J Street appeared to be coming to terms with its role as the "anti-AIPAC," it still struggled in 2010 with its stigma as poisonous endorsement, particularly frustrated by endorsees who disavowed the organization in response to Jewish communal backlash. For example, preceding the 2010 election, Doug Pike, a Democrat running in a congressional primary race in Philadelphia, repudiated J Street's endorsement. Though Pike claimed that he hadn't grasped the distance between J Street's views and his own when he accepted its endorsement, he intimated

³³⁵ Guttman, Nathan. "Israeli Ambassador Ends Informal Boycott of J Street." *The Forward* [New York] 15 Apr. 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³³⁶ Haaretz. "Contrasting Views: J Street and AIPAC on U.S. Stance Toward East Jerusalem Construction." *The Forward* [New York] 26 Mar. 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 17 Mar. 2010. Web.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

that he came under communal pressure to disassociate with J Street.³³⁸ Despite the inroads J Street was making in the Jewish community, it clearly remained controversial and toxic in the eyes of many.

In addition, the Soros scandal took a political toll on J Street, seized upon by congressional allies of the mainstream pro-Israel lobby. After her opponent demanded she return her JStreetPAC donations because of Soros' connection to J Street, J Street endorsee Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) sharply criticized the J Street for its lack of transparency, though she ultimately stood by the organization as fundamentally aligned with her views. Similarly, Pennsylvania Republican senate candidate Pat Toomey demanded that his Democratic opponent, Joe Sestak, not call himself pro-Israel unless he broke with J Street over the Soros scandal.³³⁹

In politics, as in the communal sphere, 2010 was a year marked more by struggle than by victory for J Street. Nonetheless, the organization made slow and steady progress in increasing the volume of its communications on Capitol Hill, including the letter supporting President Obama's opposition to Israel's new housing project in East Jerusalem. In May 2010, J Street sponsored another letter to the President advocating bold American leadership in pursuit of a two-state solution, highlighting J Street's core rationales for resolution of the conflict and the Israeli and American interests at stake. 61 members of Congress signed onto the letter, underscoring that J Street was progressively attracting the support of legislators and making its voice, however small, a presence on Capitol Hill.³⁴⁰

On top of its increased volume of lobbying communications, JStreetPAC's performance in the 2010 election was itself a major triumph, despite its disappointing 45:16 win-loss ratio.

³³⁸ JTA. "In Tight Race, Candidate Disavows J Street." *The Forward* [New York] 26 Mar. 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³³⁹ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Gets Taken to the Woodshed." *The Forward* [New York] 28 Sept. 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁴⁰ "D9. U.S. House, J Street-Sponsored Letter to President Barack Obama on Two-State Solution, Washington, 27 May 2010 (Excerpts)." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 39.4 (2010): 183-84. *JSTOR*. Web.

While most of its funding had come from small online donations in 2008, by 2010 J Street had attracted a strong base of Democratic Party establishment big-ticket donors, signifying its growing mainstream support in both the communal and the political arenas.³⁴¹ Moreover, the 250% increase in PAC contributions from 2008 to 2010 demonstrates J Street's remarkable organizational expansion in its first two years.³⁴²

By 2010, evidence was mounting that J Street was indeed becoming an established player in the Jewish communal and political pro-Israel arenas. According to Shai Franklin, Senior Fellow for United Nations Affairs at the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, J Street's presence had begun to restore the organized Jewish community's organic pluralism by dismantling barriers to open discourse. Because of J Street, he argued, Jewish organizations in 2010 were under less pressure to stay within the confines of allowable pro-Israel dialogue or to feign speaking for all of American Jewry.³⁴³

The nod of approval from Oren attested to the rise of J Street's standing, illustrating that, in the eyes of the Israeli ambassadorial establishment, J Street was a tolerable pro-Israel voice deserving of a modicum of recognition; this recognition held major implications for J Street's reception in the political and communal realms. J Street's newly acquired base of Democratic establishment donors and its huge increase in PAC funding unquestionably demonstrate that J Street's influence as a pro-Israel lobby was expanding. Though difficult to quantify, J Street's influence was clearly presenting an ever-stronger counter voice to the traditional pro-Israel lobby on Capitol Hill, both in terms of the number of J Street-endorsed legislators and in terms of the organization's lobbying communications. Franklin argued that, as a consequence, members of

³⁴¹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁴² Broder, "Israel: Standing Up to Goliath," "JStreetPAC Results for 2010."

³⁴³ Franklin, Shai. "J Street's Gifts To American Jewish Life." *The Forward* [New York] 22 Oct. 2010: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 13 Oct. 2010. Web.

Congress increasingly realized that they could be pro-Israel without supporting the traditional pro-Israel agenda in its entirety.³⁴⁴

Nonetheless, J Street's setbacks in its struggle for communal acceptance, as seen in its continued rejection by a number of Jewish communal venues, loomed large. Moreover, J Street was still viewed as a poisonous political endorsement in many quarters, a perception that was magnified in the wake of the Soros and Goldstone incidents. Evidently, both J Street's communal repudiation and its enduring stigma severely hindered the magnitude of its possible impact.

J STREET: 2011

In this off-election year, J Street held its second conference, attracting over 2000 participants, among them 500 students—a 33% increase in participation from its first conference in 2009. With regard to American political presence, 50 members of Congress attended the conference gala—a 25% increase from 2009.³⁴⁵ The Obama administration was represented by Middle East Special Adviser Dennis Ross, whose dispassionate speech was received coldly by conference participants.³⁴⁶ As to the Israeli political presence, Tzipi Livni again sent a letter of support, and 5 Knesset members from the Kadima and Labor parties attended. However, neither the Israeli embassy nor the Netanyahu administration participated, out of protest for J Street's support of the UN resolution condemning Israel's continued settlement activity.³⁴⁷

In its third year of existence, J Street remained controversial within the Jewish community, still on the losing end of many fights for communal inclusion. It found that it was

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Guttman, Nathan. "Rather Than Defend Obama, J Street Is Now Pushing Him." *The Forward* [New York] 11 Mar. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 2 Mar. 2011. Web.

³⁴⁶ Goldberg, J.J. "Hey J Street, Is There A Realist in the House?" *The Forward* [New York] 11 Mar. 2011: n. pag. 2 Mar. 2011. Web.

³⁴⁷ Guttman, Nathan. "At J Street Conference, Israeli Politicians Are Scarce." *The Forward* [New York] 27 Feb. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

especially unwelcome in certain Jewish pockets, such as the Jewish community of Nashville, Tennessee. In 2011, the Jewish Community Center (JCC) of Nashville rejected J Street's request to bring former Knesset member Yael Dayan to speak, and four different synagogues in the area, in addition to the JCC, refused Ben-Ami's offers to speak.³⁴⁸

J Street's efforts to reach Jewish youth went no more smoothly. J Street U's application to sponsor a Birthright delegation was rejected because of what Birthright considered J Street's explicit political agenda outside the mainstream, while Birthright had for years sanctioned AIPAC-sponsored trips, which it deemed "apolitical."³⁴⁹ J Street U's application for membership was also rejected by Berkeley's umbrella organization for Jewish student life, the first instance of a Jewish campus organization banning J Street.³⁵⁰ Both rejections dealt serious blows to the organization's efforts to ingratiate itself in the Jewish community and popularize its message among Jewish youth, one of its primary target audiences.

J Street's 2011 conference further exposed its continued inability—or reluctance—to clarify its mission, and its resultant untenable position: trying to build support as a mainstream pro-Israel voice while still holding onto its left-wing supporters. J Street's predicament came to the fore when, in his opening address, Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center, warned J Street that it risked alienating moderate Jews and delegitimizing itself politically by pandering to the far left.³⁵¹ J Street's precarious position was manifest in the conference's panel discussion on BDS, a policy which J Street opposed, but a

³⁴⁸ Zeveloff, Naomi. "J Street Accepted in Some, Not All, Cities." *The Forward* [New York] 30 Dec. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 23 Dec. 2011. Web.

³⁴⁹ Guttman, Nathan. "Three Years Old, J Street Still Struggles For Acceptance." *The Forward* [New York] 11 Feb. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 2 Feb. 2011. Web.

³⁵⁰ Zeveloff, "J Street Accepted in Some, Not All, Cities."

³⁵¹ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Opens With 2,000 Participants, Still Struggles To Define Itself." *The Forward* [New York] 27 Feb. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

great many of its conference participants supported, as evidenced by the panel's popularity.³⁵² In addition, media criticism that J Street's conference did not include mainstream pro-Israel viewpoints demonstrated the organization's continued failure to communicate to the Jewish community that broadening the communal dialogue was not its primary goal.³⁵³

In 2011, J Street once again provoked the ire of Israeli politicians for its public criticism of Israeli policies. In January, J Street came out in opposition to the U.S. veto of the UN Security Council Resolution condemning Israel's continued settlement activity, unwilling to support a resolution in line with a longstanding American policy that, in its view, properly censured Israel for its unacceptable settlement policies. In doing so, J Street reversed its gains with the Israeli establishment; Oren returned to his old refrain, denouncing J Street as not genuinely "pro-Israel."³⁵⁴ J Street's stance also provoked the Netanyahu administration's boycott of the organization's 2011 conference. The few Kadima politicians who did attend J Street's 2011 conference were blasted by members of their own party for backing a group unsupportive of Israel, reportedly goaded on by mainstream pro-Israel actors.³⁵⁵

Angry right-wing Israeli politicians even went so far as to hold a Knesset hearing to investigate J Street's activities and beliefs, purportedly due to public concern. In actuality, the hearing was a thinly veiled attempt to marginalize the organization. According to journalist Nathan Jeffay, polling of Israeli opinion argued against such public concern, as only 18% of Israelis thought American Jewish organizations should support Israeli policies unconditionally,

³⁵² Guttman, Nathan. "Rather Than Defend Obama, J Street Is Now Pushing Him." *The Forward* [New York] 11 Mar. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 2 Mar. 2011. Web.

³⁵³ Goldberg, "Hey J Street, Is There A Realist in the House?"

³⁵⁴ Guttman, "At J Street Conference, Israeli Politicians Are Scarce," Guttman, "Three Years Old, J Street Still Struggles For Acceptance."

³⁵⁵ Guttman, "At J Street Conference, Israeli Politicians Are Scarce."

and only 14% of Israelis had even heard of J Street.³⁵⁶ Theatrics aside, this episode was significant in showing that, beyond Oren's sanction of J Street in 2010, Israeli politicians perceived J Street as an organization influential enough to warrant their concern.

Despite J Street's continued struggles for communal inclusion, its difficulty in articulating its goals, and its deteriorated relations with Israeli lawmakers, 2011 was a year of sustained progress for J Street in the Jewish community. The significant increase in participation at its conference was itself a victory, indicating J Street's growing base of support among American Jews and its success at rallying moderate Jews behind its pro-peace agenda. In addition, because of its tireless efforts at communal engagement, the scales finally seemed to have tipped in J Street's favor. In 2011, Ben Ami was welcomed as a speaker at dozens of JCRC's, JCC's, and synagogues. The organization was also accepted as a member into the Boston JCRC, despite heavy lobbying against its inclusion by CAMERA, a Jewish media watchdog group. This illustrates that, while J Street remained controversial, it was increasingly winning communal fights for a seat at the table.³⁵⁷ Ben-Ami also insisted that the battles J Street did lose for communal inclusion were merely local-level skirmishes, and that the overall tide was running in favor of its greater communal acceptance and inclusion.³⁵⁸

Despite J Street's communal gains in 2011, it was a year characterized more by political setbacks than victories for the organization. Besides inciting the ire of the Israeli politicians, J Street's support of the UN resolution condemning Israel's settlement activity had grave domestic political repercussions, prompting J Street endorsee Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY) to sever ties with the organization. Losing Ackerman damaged J Street's political standing, as he had been a

³⁵⁶ Jeffay, Nathan. "Is J Street a Threat? Not to Most Israelis." *The Forward* [New York] 1 Apr. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 23 Mar. 2011. Web.

³⁵⁷ Zeveloff, "J Street Accepted in Some, Not All, Cities."

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

major asset: a prominent Jewish political figure and a leading authority on Israel as a former chair of the House subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia.³⁵⁹ Even worse, as J Street and Ackerman sparred publicly, the incident ballooned into an all-out media disaster for the organization.³⁶⁰

J Street also faced worsening relations with the Obama administration in 2011, as evidenced by the contrast between James Jones's embrace of J Street at its 2009 conference and Dennis Ross's chillier comportment at its 2011 conference.³⁶¹ The administration's souring on J Street appeared to coincide with the President's shelving resolution of the conflict and capitulating to the mainstream pro-Israel agenda after the U.S.-imposed settlement freeze passed and negotiations failed to materialize.

The stigma of J Street as a toxic endorsement also continued to imperil its congressional endorsees, as indicated by the statements of legislators at J Street's 2011 conference. For example, Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN) reflected that legislators still pay a hefty political price for endorsing J Street's pro-peace agenda. Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) added that, despite J Street's presence, Middle East policy is still largely dictated by fear of invoking the retribution of the mainstream pro-Israel lobby. However, those sentiments were no longer universally felt. Rep. Lois Capps (D-CA) argued that she had seen a "noticeable change" in greater tolerance for views outside the mainstream concerning Israel in Congress since J Street appeared on the scene.³⁶²

J Street had few political victories to speak of in 2011, partly because it was an off-election year, and partly because its lobbying communications on Capitol Hill were still in an

³⁵⁹ Guttman, Nathan. "Ackerman Breaks with J Street - A Sign of Trouble Ahead for Dovish Lobby?" *The Forward* [New York] 27 Jan. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁶⁰ Guttman, "Three Years Old, J Street Still Struggles For Acceptance."

³⁶¹ Goldberg, "Hey J Street, Is There A Realist in the House?"

³⁶² Guttman, "Rather Than Defend Obama, J Street Is Now Pushing Him."

embryonic stage. J Street did, however, come out with a nuanced position on the Palestinian bid for UN statehood recognition in September 2011. It opposed the bid, citing the need for a two-state solution, not simply two states; at the same time, it rejected the call to sever U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority as harmful to Israeli and Palestinian interests and unduly punitive to Palestinian civilians. Its careful stance placed it on the same side as mainstream pro-Israel groups, and did not provoke communal censure, demonstrating both J Street's organizational maturity in improving its messaging and the Jewish community's increasing toleration of its alternative pro-Israel stance.³⁶³

As of 2011, J Street's cumulative communal and political impact were a mixed bag, though each appeared to be in a general ascent. J Street was increasingly portrayed as a counterforce to AIPAC in media lexicon, indicative of the growing public perception of its legitimacy and power.³⁶⁴ In its struggle for communal inclusion, J Street claimed more wins than losses, but that contention is impossible to verify based on those claims alone.³⁶⁵

Despite its successes, J Street still struggled in 2011 to persuade community leaders to speak out in support of its pro-peace agenda. "I can't tell you how many rabbis, how many communal leaders, tell me they support us in a whisper," Lerner observed. "They're deeply troubled by what's happening in Israel, but they stay silent because they're scared of angering their funders and congregants."³⁶⁶ Neither had J Street managed to overcome the reticence of progressive members of the Jewish community. Ben-Ami noted in his 2011 book that at his speaking engagements, those who nod in agreement hardly ever speak up, while right-wing

³⁶³ Beckerman, Gal. "J Street Opposes Palestinian Statehood Bid." *The Forward* [New York] 7 Sept. 2011: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁶⁴ Goldberg, "Hey J Street, Is There A Realist in the House?"

³⁶⁵ Zeveloff, "J Street Accepted in Some, Not All, Cities."

³⁶⁶ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

critics regularly harangue him with questions.³⁶⁷ Clearly, the norm of stifling candid discussion on Israel still ran deep in 2011, despite J Street's best efforts.

It is certain that, despite rejections and communal reticence, J Street's absolute communal engagement was rising steadily, suggesting that the organization was in fact broadening the debate on Israel. The organization's 2011 conference evidenced a strengthened J Street: an increased number of communal participants and legislators and an Israeli governmental presence, in spite of the Netanyahu administration's abstention.³⁶⁸ Nonetheless, while Ben-Ami claimed "the vacuum is being filled" by J Street's mounting communal engagement, J Street's successes had far from transformed the dynamics of American politics to allow for the embrace of a pro-peace agenda.³⁶⁹ Moreover, J Street's stigma in Congress stubbornly persisted, an outgrowth of the obstinacy of mainstream pro-Israel forces in refusing to concede dominance over the pro-Israel agenda. However, considering the larger number of legislators who attended J Street's conference, either that stigma was diminishing, or a concurrent opening of the discourse on Israel and increasing toleration of views outside the mainstream, had begun to counteract the stigma's potency.

While J Street had been successful to some extent in broadening the debate, in 2011 it had still made no impact whatsoever in advancing a two-state solution, its chief policy objective. Neither the House nor the Senate had ever passed a piece of J Street-authored legislation, the Israeli government completely disregarded J Street, and the Obama administration had only tepidly embraced the organization.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Ben-Ami, 147.

³⁶⁸ Guttman, "At J Street Conference, Israeli Politicians Are Scarce," Guttman, "Rather Than Defend Obama, J Street Is Now Pushing Him."

³⁶⁹ Ben-Ami, 109.

³⁷⁰ Broder, Jonathan. "Israel's Voice Rings on Hill as Change Roils Middle East." *CQ Weekly* 16 May 2011: 1052-054. *www.cqweekly.com*. Web.

Goldberg, "Hey J Street, Is There A Realist in the House?"

J STREET: 2012

In 2012, J Street held its third conference, attracting 2500 participants, of whom 650 were students—a 25% increase in overall participation from 2011.³⁷¹ With regard to the American political presence, 57 members of Congress committed to attend the conference, though no data is available as to the number who ultimately attended. The number of RSVPs alone, however, suggests a small increase in congressional support from 2011.³⁷² From the executive, Vice President Biden's National Security Adviser Tony Blinken and President Obama's Senior Adviser Valerie Jarrett addressed the conference.³⁷³ As to the Israeli political presence, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and deputy Israeli ambassador Baruch Binah each spoke at the conference, and President Shimon Peres sent a video message in support.³⁷⁴ Both the American and Israeli political emissaries were higher-profile figures than those from previous J Street conferences. 2012 was also the first year that the Israeli embassy agreed to participate in the conference.³⁷⁵

In the 2012 election cycle, JStreetPAC raised \$1.8 million, a 20% increase in fundraising from 2010, translating to an astounding 50% of all pro-Israel PAC contributions to Democratic candidates, and 35% of pro-Israel PAC contributions overall.³⁷⁶ For its third election cycle in a row, JStreetPAC's contributions exceeded that of all other pro-Israel PAC's.³⁷⁷ JStreetPAC disbursed its funds to 71 candidates, 70 of whom won their races. Its stigma having become less

³⁷¹ Haaretz. "J Street Kicks Off With Calls for Peace Push." *The Forward* [New York] 25 Mar. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

Silberman, Zach. "J Street's Message from the Left." *Washington Jewish Week* [Washington, D.C.] 28 Mar. 2012: n. pag. *Washingtonjewishweek.com*. Web.

³⁷² "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

³⁷³ Haaretz. "J Street Kicks Off With Calls for Peace Push."

³⁷⁴ JTA. "Olmert Will Headline J Street Conference." *The Forward* [New York] 1 Mar. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁷⁵ Haaretz. "J Street Kicks Off With Calls for Peace Push."

³⁷⁶ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁷⁷ "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

of an impediment to its endorsements, J Street attained a number of high-profile endorsements in the 2012 election cycle, including senatorial candidate Tim Kaine and Sen. Dianne Feinstein.³⁷⁸

In 2012, J Street's communal struggles revolved less around fights for communal inclusion, but hinged instead on its upfront abjuration from far-left associations, a major departure from the organization's earlier maladroit tolerance of far-left views. For example, J Street admonished one of its board members for meeting with Hamas leaders, and came out strongly against "Israel Apartheid Week" activities on college campuses. J Street was thrown for a loop when, a week before its 2012 conference, Peter Beinart, a scheduled speaker, called for a "Zionist BDS" of products from Israel's West Bank settlements. In response, J Street cautiously welcomed him to its conference, but overtly disavowed his proposal. Moreover, J Street's conference, for the first time, did not include a BDS panel, indicative of the organization's conscious choice to promote its political agenda over communal dialogue.³⁷⁹

In 2012, J Street still struggled with the Israeli government's unwillingness to accept its criticism of Israeli policies as a legitimate function of American pro-Israel lobbying. While it was certainly a sign of progress that the Israeli embassy sent its second-in-command to address the J Street conference, Binah rebuked the organization for its criticism of Israeli policies in his speech, casting such criticism as destructive foreign pressure on Israel's democracy.³⁸⁰ Regardless, Israel's unwillingness to embrace J Street's non-consensus agenda is of little real consequence to the organization, which focuses its appeal on the American, not the Israeli, government.

³⁷⁸ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁷⁹ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Hopes to Return Focus to Peace at Annual Conference." *The Forward* [New York] 25 Mar. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁸⁰ JTA. "Diplomat Raps J Street for Pressuring Israel." *The Forward* [New York] 27 Mar. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

In 2012, J Street finally began to see the fruits of its communal labors much more clearly. Despite the outrage that J Street had elicited from Israel in 2011 over its support of the UN resolution censuring Israeli settlement activity, the Knesset investigation into its activities, and Binah's reproachful speech at J Street's conference, Binah's mere appearance—along with Olmert's sympathetic speech, Peres' supportive video statement, and the attendance of a number of Israeli politicians at J Street's conference—nonetheless illustrate the Israeli government's recognition of J Street as an established pro-Israel voice.³⁸¹

Additionally, Hillel, the largest Jewish campus organization nationwide, accepted J Street U as a partner organization in 2012, a momentous victory for J Street, allowing it to spread its pro-peace message to Jewish youth on a large scale.³⁸² This development was significant in demonstrating that Hillel, a leading communal institution, considered J Street's views within the pro-Israel mainstream, thereby further establishing J Street as a mainstream communal player. Moreover, according to Lerner, Hillel's "Ask Big Questions" 2012 campus initiative signaled the community-wide shift toward being, or at least toward appearing to be, more accommodating to alternative views. Lerner directly credited this shift to J Street's pressure to revamp communal discourse.³⁸³

By far, J Street's largest communal triumph in 2012 was the consolidation of its base, achieved through its forthright articulation of its core values. The effect of its consolidated base was evident both in the conspicuous absence of far-left activists from its third conference, and in its newfound success in forging a working relationship with the Israeli embassy.³⁸⁴ Indeed, this milestone in J Street's organizational development—ironing out its ideology and streamlining its

³⁸¹ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Swims Upstream in Election Year." *The Forward* [New York] 6 Apr. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. 28 Mar. 2012. Web.

³⁸² "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

³⁸³ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

³⁸⁴ Guttman, Nathan. "J Street Features Beinart, Rejects His Boycott Call." *The Forward* [New York] 26 Mar. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

base of support—allowed J Street to be more persuasive and targeted in its pro-Israel, pro-peace advocacy.

Notwithstanding the magnitude of its communal successes in 2012, J Street still faced significant challenges in the political arena. The organization came under enormous pressure in the 2012 election to prove the benign influence of its endorsement. Following the 2010 election, certain Jewish critics claimed that its endorsement was poisonous because of its middling 45:16 win-loss ratio in the 2010 election, disregarding the fact that it occurred in the context of a sweeping anti-Democratic election.³⁸⁵ Shnider said that, in order to combat such speculation, J Street became particularly concerned in 2012 with bolstering its win-loss ratio and endorsing only viable candidates, not simply those who agree with its pro-peace platform. Shnider also noted that J Street's focus on strategic endorsements in competitive races, especially those in large Jewish population centers, had proven that J Street's endorsement carries a positive, not a pernicious, impact.³⁸⁶

During 2012, J Street also continued to grapple with the White House's frigidity to its pro-peace message. Disappointingly for J Street, President Obama focused his reelection appeal on hawkish Jews, the days of his drive to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but a distant memory. For example, at the J Street conference, Blinken recited the same talking points that President Obama had focused on at AIPAC's annual policy conference three weeks earlier, underscoring the president's consistent pandering to AIPAC-aligned pro-Israel interests. In reaction, J Street assumed a confrontational approach, publicly expressing dissatisfaction with the Obama administration for letting the peace process languish.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁵ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Guttman, "J Street Swims Upstream in Election Year."

J Street also faced a challenge from mainstream pro-Israel detractors, who repudiated its interpretation of the 2012 election as a victory for the organization. These detractors contended that because nearly all of J Street's endorsees were also funded by AIPAC-affiliated PAC's or donors, and that such funding surpassed J Street's in most cases, the organization's endorsement would have a negligible impact on policymaking.³⁸⁸ Snider stridently contested that claim, arguing that, since J Street carefully vets candidates and scrutinizes their Israel-position papers before they are endorsed, which is not necessarily the case for AIPAC-affiliated PAC's, such accusations do not hold water.³⁸⁹ J Street's detractors also maintained that the organization deliberately endorsed shoo-in candidates and then took credit for their wins.³⁹⁰ Shnider denied this allegation as well, noting that 21 of J Street's races were genuinely competitive, and that J Street's contributions made a significant impact in those competitive races. For example, in each of J Street's four competitive senate races, it contributed over \$100,000 to those endorsees; case in point, Tim Kaine's Virginia Senate race, in which J Street's \$160,000 contribution made the organization one of the candidate's leading PAC donors.³⁹¹

These political struggles notwithstanding, 2012 was a year of significant political achievement for J Street, signifying its enhanced legitimacy and clout on Capitol Hill. First and foremost, the 2012 election was a major victory for J Street, unquestionably demonstrating that J Street had changed the political narrative. That 70 legislative candidates were elected while publicly supporting a dovish pro-Israel agenda indicates support for that agenda among a considerable number of legislators and donors, and among the electorate.³⁹² Thus, political space

³⁸⁸ Rosen, Steven J. "Is J Street Winning?" *Foreign Policy* 9 Nov. 2012: n. pag. *Www.foreignpolicy.com*. Web.

³⁸⁹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁹⁰ "J Street's Victory Lap." *Commentary* 3 Dec. 2012: n. pag. *Www.commentarymagazine.com*. Web.

³⁹¹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁹² "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

had been proven to exist for politicians to take pro-peace stances, as had its corollary, that the traditional pro-Israel voice no longer operates unopposed on Capitol Hill.

During the 2012 election cycle, J Street attained a number of high profile, strategic candidate endorsements, imbuing the organization with newfound gravitas. Notably, longtime senator Dianne Feinstein accepted J Street's endorsement. Having Feinstein on J Street's team, in light of her credentials as a prominent Jewish legislator and as chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and her reputation for having President Obama's ear on Iran, gave a significant boost to J Street's communal and political standing, and provided the organization with an avenue through which to lobby a pro-peace agenda to the President.³⁹³ J Street's endorsement of senate candidate Tim Kaine was equally momentous. His competitive and carefully scrutinized race, his Democratic establishment credentials as the former chair of the Democratic National Convention, and his close relationship to the President all provided J Street with positive visibility, enhanced political credibility, and another route to influencing the President's assessment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.³⁹⁴

As in its 2011 statement opposing the Palestinian bid for UN statehood recognition, J Street in 2012 again demonstrated its dexterity in conveying its nuanced pro-peace message. In November 2012, when Israel launched an aerial campaign against Hamas targets in Gaza in response to the escalation of Hamas rocket fire into southern Israel, J Street immediately expressed support for Israel's right to defend itself, only later highlighting Palestinian suffering and calling for a U.S.-brokered ceasefire.³⁹⁵ This measured response stood in marked contrast to J Street's tone-deaf reaction to Israel's 2008 Gaza operation, and did not invite any of the vitriol

³⁹³ JTA. "Feinstein Wins J Street Reelection Nod." *The Forward* [New York] 31 May 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

³⁹⁴ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

³⁹⁵ "Reaction to Escalation of Violence in Israel and Gaza: J Street." *Reaction to Escalation of Violence in Israel and Gaza: J Street*. J Street, 15 Nov. 2012. Web. <<http://jstreet.org/blog/post/reaction-to-escalation-of-violence-in-israel-and-gaza>>.

its 2008 statement had, a sign that J Street's messaging had become more attuned to the concerns of the Jewish community while preserving its pro-peace nuance.³⁹⁶

Then, in December 2012, it appeared that J Street may have made its first legislative impact, which, if true, was a milestone in its organizational development. An amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act to punish the Palestinians for seeking UN non-member state status, which would have reduced their monetary aid and shut down the Palestinian Liberation Organization's Washington office until the Palestinians agreed to resume peace negotiations with Israel, was scrapped from the bill. Though it remains uncertain why the amendment was ultimately omitted, it was likely due to J Street's strong lobbying against it; J Street activists sent out 15,000 letters and made over 1,000 calls to senators urging them to oppose the amendment. The organization was the lone pro-Israel voice advocating against the amendment. Intriguingly, in the same bill, an AIPAC-sponsored amendment for increased funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system also passed, a rare instance in which J Street and AIPAC's pro-Israel visions were momentarily complementary.³⁹⁷

Though it remains to be seen whether the 70 legislators endorsed by J Street will promote its pro-peace agenda, there are early positive signs, suggesting that J Street is inching closer to obtaining genuine influence over legislation on the Middle East. In December 2012, President Obama's nomination of former Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel to Secretary of Defense outraged many in the pro-Israel community because of previous statements he had made critical of the pro-Israel lobby and against sanctions on Iran. Both the Republican Jewish Coalition and the National Jewish Democratic Council released bulleted lists cataloging his offenses to the pro-Israel cause, while leaders of traditional pro-Israel organizations vociferously denounced his

³⁹⁶ "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

³⁹⁷ JTA. "J Street Wins as Senate Omits Statehood Slap." *The Forward* [New York] 5 Dec. 2012: n. pag. *Forward.com*. Web.

nomination. J Street, however, defended Hagel, citing his bravery in taking a stand against the Iraq War and seeing his independent-mindedness as an asset in moving forward with the peace process.³⁹⁸ J Street endorsee Sen. Tim Kaine, a prominent Democrat and member of the Senate Arms Services Committee who was under heavy pressure to condemn Hagel, released a statement in anticipation of Hagel's confirmation hearing that was measured and free of the vitriol of many of his fellow lawmakers, a preliminary sign of the different tone in Congress among J Street endorsees.³⁹⁹

All told, J Street has made huge strides as a pro-Israel, pro-peace lobby in its first four years. The organization has grown at breakneck speed; by the end of 2012, J Street had a \$7 million operating budget, a staff of 50, 180,000 registered supporters, 20,000 donors, 46 J Street Local chapters, 45 J Street U chapters with 5000 student members, and a Rabbinic Cabinet of 700.⁴⁰⁰

J Street has progressively adapted its nuanced message, as it has grown in its understanding of how that message is received.⁴⁰¹ As many in the Jewish community dwelled exclusively on its goal of opening up communal dialogue, J Street publicly stressed that the two-state solution was its primary objective. Tamar Ariel reiterated that message: "J Street seeks to broaden the tent and have all Jews be able to speak freely about Israel, but for the ultimate goal of creating political space for presidential leadership to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Broadening the tent is not a goal in and of itself."⁴⁰² In conveying that message clearly, J Street

³⁹⁸ JTA. "Prospect of Hagel Nominations Sets Off Alarm Bells for Some." *Haaretz* [Tel Aviv] 19 Dec. 2012: n. pag. *Www.haaretz.com*. Web.

³⁹⁹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

"Press Release of Senator Kaine: Kaine Statement on Hagel Nomination to Secretary of Defense." *Www.kaine.senate.gov*. N.p., 7 Jan. 2013. Web.

⁴⁰⁰ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street," "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

⁴⁰¹ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

⁴⁰² "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

ultimately pushed away its supporters on the far-left. Lerner, however, considered that crystallizing moment a positive development: “we are a principled organization, and we need to engage people around those principles.”⁴⁰³

In refining its message, J Street’s also shifted its tactics to emphasize its pro-Israel credentials, so as to expand its Jewish communal appeal. Ariel related, for example, that although J Street opposed the BDS movement from the outset, the organization initially tried to create space to discuss it for the sake of broadening the discourse. Yet, when J Street recognized that discussion as strategic liability, it moved publicly to highlight its opposition to BDS.⁴⁰⁴ Similarly, J Street’s tactical evolution was evident in its decision to emphasize its support for Israel’s security interests above its criticism of Israel’s aerial bombardment of Gaza in 2012—the reverse of the reaction to the 2008 Gaza War that had provoked such communal outcry.⁴⁰⁵

J Street thus presents a mottled portrait of communal embrace and rejection, of increasing acceptance and enduring stigma. The organization has indeed made progress in its four years in broadening the discourse on Israel and establishing itself as an increasingly important pro-Israel voice. In Lerner’s eyes, “we are now overwhelmingly accepted in the Jewish community. It is a different community than when we started, with much more open dialogue on Israel.”⁴⁰⁶ J Street has also become a new point of entry for Jewish youth into the pro-Israel community, as seen in the burgeoning number of J Street U chapters and chapter members, and in the rising participation of students at J Street conferences.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰³ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

⁴⁰⁴ Guttman, "J Street Features Beinart, Rejects His Boycott Call," "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

⁴⁰⁵ "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street," "Reaction to Escalation of Violence in Israel and Gaza: J Street."

⁴⁰⁶ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

⁴⁰⁷ Franklin, "J Street’s Gifts to American Jewish Life."

On Capitol Hill, too, J Street's presence has been steadily rising, not only in the number and quality of its endorsed legislators, but also in the organization's louder lobbying efforts. According to Shnider, "little by little, politicians have begun to realize that J Street is not a poisonous endorsement, and that there's a lot to gain by joining us."⁴⁰⁸ At J Street's inception, Shnider recalled, the organization had to seek out all of its endorsees; now, candidates increasingly pursue its endorsement. In fact, in the 2012 election cycle, about half of the candidates that the organization considered had reached out to J Street.⁴⁰⁹ In addition, J Street's lobbying efforts have become more coordinated, frequent, and endorsed by increasing numbers of legislators and communal supporters, illustrating the organization's growing visibility and support in Washington.

Moreover, in all communal and political metrics—including J Street's registered supporters, the participants at J Street conferences, the universities where J Street has a presence, the rabbis in J Street's Rabbinic Cabinet, the Jewish Federations and JCRC's that J Street partners with, the synagogues and other Jewish spaces that welcome J Street speakers, the local leaders who publicly endorse J Street, the candidates who approach J Street, the candidates J Street endorses, the lawmakers whom J Street meets with, J Street's donors and donations, and JStreetPAC's performance—J Street has seen steady growth.⁴¹⁰ Not only the numbers, but the quality and prominence of people and places engaged with J Street has improved, providing solid evidence of the organization's mounting success in becoming an influential pro-Israel voice. Furthermore, Shnider asserts that J Street's influence is still on the rise, as neither in operational

⁴⁰⁸ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street," "Interview with Tamar Ariel, Special Assistant to the President and Chief of Staff of J Street."

capacity nor political fundraising has its growth plateaued, which suggests more room for organizational expansion.⁴¹¹

Nonetheless, J Street has a long way to go in becoming an established pro-Israel player. In Lerner's estimation, the organization is still controversial and stigmatized, and has not yet managed to revamp the communal conception of what it means to be pro-Israel or to erase the fear of speaking out about Israeli policies. "We don't just want to be accepted," she said. "We want to be credible as a mainstream voice, and eventually lead the conversation."⁴¹²

While J Street's impact on policymaking has thus far been negligible, save its probable influence in getting an amendment deleted from the National Defense Authorization Act in December 2012, it has become remarkably established in four years' time, and is on its way to becoming a force to be reckoned with in Middle East policy. Especially considering the class of 70 J Street-endorsed lawmakers who recently descended on Capitol Hill, there's no telling how much influence the organization's pro-peace agenda may exert in the 113th Congress, and beyond. Its increased influence seems particularly likely in light of the fact that J Street's goal is not to dominate congressional policymaking, as AIPAC does, but rather to create a congressional atmosphere conducive to allowing the President to take bold action to guide the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to its conclusion. Though the creation of such space is difficult to observe, as J Street continues to make inroads with affiliated and non-affiliated Jews, and continues to partner with more and more lawmakers with pro-Israel, pro-peace, views, the dominance of the traditional pro-Israel lobby will slowly erode, and J Street will become increasingly established as the "other pro-Israel lobby."

⁴¹¹ "Interview with Ben Shnider, JStreetPAC Manager."

⁴¹² "Interview with Rachel Lerner, Senior Vice President of Community Relations of J Street."

Indeed, the “other pro-Israel lobby,” that Mearsheimer, Walt, and their lot of critics disregard in their analyses of the influence of the mainstream pro-Israel lobby on American domestic discourse and foreign policy, further discredits their conclusions as to the scope and mechanisms of its power. Mearsheimer and Walt are not to blame for this omission, as J Street did not come into existence until a year after the publication of *The Israel Lobby*. Nonetheless, they failed to take note of the liberal resurgence happening among American Jews, soon to abrogate many of their arguments.

It can no longer be alleged that the centrist pro-Israel lobby has a pervasive and pernicious influence on American life. Not only has the liberal resurgence in the Jewish community been slowly chipping away at the centrist pro-Israel lobby dominance, but J Street’s arrival on the scene and swift establishment as a pro-Israel voice argue strongly against the centrist lobby’s stranglehold over Jews and lawmakers alike. While J Street’s story speaks less to the character of the centrist lobby, it does embody the “other pro-Israel lobby,” for whom open dialogue, ethical principles, preservation of Israel’s Jewish and democratic character, and America’s strategic interests are key concerns. These characteristics of the “other pro-Israel lobby” fly in the face of the alleged insidious objectives of pro-Israel actors.

Further, Mearsheimer and Walt’s exaggerated depictions of the taboo proscribing discussion on Israel in the Jewish community and of the centrist pro-Israel lobby influence on Capitol Hill are hardly relevant any longer, now that J Street has begun to transform the Jewish communal dialogue on Israel and is becoming an increasingly significant pro-Israel player in competition with the centrist lobby on Capitol Hill. While a spectrum of views on Israel has always existed to some extent in the Jewish community, J Street’s emergence and growth has invalidated the narrative of centrist pro-Israel dominance like nothing that has come before it,

further enfeebling Mearsheimer and Walt's already tenuous allegations of pro-Israel lobby dominion over domestic discourse and policymaking on Israel.

Going forward, future investigation into the influence of pro-Israel actors on domestic discourse and foreign policy should focus on the emerging balance of power among competing pro-Israel visions.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I critically examined the literature and the evidence on the pro-Israel lobby, an interest group of particular interest to me. The obvious place to start was with the foremost scholarly treatise on the pro-Israel lobby, Mearsheimer and Walt's *The Israel Lobby*. As I detailed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Mearsheimer and Walt portray the lobby's influence on domestic discourse and U.S. policy toward Israel as vast and virtually unfettered. In addition, they depict the means and methods by which the lobby exercises its ostensibly overpowering influence as mostly punitive and repressive. Mearsheimer and Walt's publication evoked a firestorm of mostly hostile academic and journalistic responses.

My task, at least initially, was to conduct an intensive review of *The Israel Lobby* and its critics in order to assess the accuracy of its co-authors' claims regarding the extent of the lobby's influence and the ways in which the lobby exercises that influence. After carefully examining *The Israel Lobby*, as well as the multitude of academic and journalistic responses that were published in reaction to it, I found the authors' empirical claims of pro-Israel influence to be exaggerated (and riddled with anti-Semitic connotations, whether intended or not). In addition, I found that the book's account of how the lobby wielded power was generally imprecise and ignored certain hard-to-miss contrary evidence.

Beyond reviewing and assessing the existing literature on the Mearsheimer and Walt controversy, I also set out to examine the present-day character and contours of the pro-Israel lobby for myself. Right from the outset of my research, I noticed and became fascinated by the appearance and swift expansion of J Street, a new, dovish, yet unambiguously pro-Israel lobbying group. As I reported in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I conducted a preliminary but thorough

case study of the organization, how it came to be, and how it has already made its mark on the American Jewish community, the established pro-Israel lobbying groups, and U.S. policy toward Israel. I traced the successes and struggles experienced by J Street, its leaders, and its supporters during the group's first four years of existence. It became ever more apparent to me, as I conducted interviews, did archival research, examined public opinion data, and reviewed recent and relevant policy developments and electoral returns, that the very existence of J Street is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with Mearsheimer and Walt's account of the centrist pro-Israel lobby's towering influence and their assertions about how that influence is exercised.

Like many other analysts, including even those who take a far more sanguine view of AIPAC and other mainstream pro-Israel lobbying groups, Mearsheimer and Walt vastly underestimated the longstanding differences of opinion among Jews on U.S. policy toward Israel. Moreover, their analysis missed critical changes that were already taking place in the Jewish community, and significant cleavages that were already apparent in American Jewish opinion at the time they did their research. Among American Jews and the wider American public, official Israeli policies have come to be viewed with increasing ambivalence. That development, together with the growing alienation of many American Jews from the *modus vivendi* of the pro-Israel lobby, created fertile ground for the "other pro-Israel lobby" to emerge and flourish, exemplified by J Street and its rapid rise to prominence. Though still a fledgling organization, J Street has begun to transform the pro-Israel landscape by broadening the tent of acceptable pro-Israel discourse within the Jewish community, and by becoming an increasingly well-heard, if not always heeded, lobbying presence in its own right on Capitol Hill.

This thesis also contributes to the larger literature on interest-group politics by demonstrating that the "pro-Israel lobby" is neither monolithic nor invincible. The pro-Israel lobby led for

decades by AIPAC and other leading centrist groups did not win every legislative battle, and has had to accept many major compromises in order to maintain such significant influence as it has enjoyed. No more than the NRA, the AARP, or the U.S. Chamber of Commerce--in their respective spheres of policy influence--is the pro-Israel lobby a lobby that can't be beat, or an influence network that prospers without effecting compromises and bargains.

My main point is that AIPAC and the rest of the centrist pro-Israel lobby are *not* the whole story. The influence of the pro-Israel lobby cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the increasingly weighty role and countervailing political influence of the *other* pro-Israel lobby in the policy subsystem that crafts U.S. policy toward Israel. This thesis is hardly a definitive exposition of pro-Israel lobby influence on American life. Nonetheless, I argue that the analyses, arguments, and findings presented in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis present a compelling counterpoint to *The Israel Lobby*. That treatise is not entirely without merit on certain historical and empirical points, but it exaggerates the extent of the pro-Israel lobby's influence; mischaracterizes how that lobby exercises such influence as it has; and ignores or underplays facts and developments that, even before the controversy over the book erupted, were well on the way to giving rise to what I have dubbed the "other pro-Israel lobby."

Still, there is much more work to be done in assessing interest group influence on U.S. policy toward Israel, especially in view of the changing dynamics within the pro-Israel lobbying field. Future research on the pro-Israel lobby's influence should incorporate quantitative data analyses in order to supplement historical accounts and case studies and advance us beyond the realm of conjecture and perception to that of demonstrated fact. For example, if data were available on the degree to which lobby revenge campaigns damage candidates electorally; on the success rate of pro-Israel lobbying in getting legislation altered, passed, or foiled; on the degree to which

legislators' voting behavior reflects their pro-Israel funding; on whether presidential policies vary by the amount of pro-Israel campaign funding; or on the number of pro-Israel individuals in presidential administrations, to name but a few possible examples; then more empirically concrete conclusions could be drawn in relation to the lobby's actual power.

Another avenue to assess the dynamics of interest-group influence on U.S. policy toward Israel could be to look beyond pro-Israel forces to other lobbies within the Middle East policy subsystem, such as the oil lobby, arms and technology interests, and organizations representing Arab states, in order to determine what role they may play in counteracting the influence of pro-Israel actors. Additionally, a comparison of the power of pro-Israel lobbying groups to that of other ethnic lobbies could be instructive. While the clout of the pro-Israel lobby is often highlighted in the media, other ethnic lobbies, such as the Greek lobby, which operate largely outside the public eye, are thought by some to wield tremendous influence in their respective policy areas.

Finally, I recommend that researchers investigate future American policies concerning Syria's bloody civil war and Iran's continued belligerency in pursuing nuclear development, both of which phenomena are of salience to pro-Israel groups in posing existential threats to Israel's security. A rigorous analysis in each case—of the congressional and administration actors involved, of the agendas and lobbying activities of different pro-Israel groups and of other special-interest groups, and of the degree to which policy outcomes reflect pro-Israel appeals—would be constructive in delineating the influence of the pro-Israel lobby on particular U.S. policies and helpful in illuminating any shifts in the balance of power among competing pro-Israel groups and their respective policy preferences and visions.

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