

Eli Clifton & Ian Lustick: Israel's Lobby - America in the Grip of a Foreign Power

Eli Clifton is cofounder and senior advisor at the Quincy Institute, and Ian Lustick holds the Bess W. Heyman Chair in the Political Science Department of the University of Pennsylvania. Buy "Israel's Lobby": <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Israels-Lobby/Eli-Clifton/9781668210840> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined today by Eli Clifton and Ian Lustick to discuss their excellent new book, Israel's Lobby. And for those who have not bought it yet, now is a good time. And I've left a link in the description. Thank you both for coming on. This is quite an important book. Also, it can be quite relevant.

#Glenn

Well, the way I see it, the era of liberal hegemony is over, and there seems to be a growing push now in the United States to adjust to new realities by ending the forever wars. But seemingly, the Israel lobby is a key restraint, that is, or a limitation on the ability to make these changes. Indeed, the Trump administration, as we know, expressed the ambition of ending these forever wars before launching this disastrous war on Iran, and there seems to be a very wide consensus that Israel will push the U.S. towards it.

Well, we don't really need much consensus. The evidence is already there. And we see many more critical voices in terms of how Israel is influencing U.S. policies. And again, what I find fascinating about your book is you follow the money. You find out how, essentially, the U.S. ended up pursuing policies that undermine its own interests. So, yeah, I'm not sure where's a good place to start here. I'm thinking, well, you argue that Israel's lobby is like no other. Well, what makes it different, though, from other lobbies? Because the U.S. has many powerful lobbies.

#Eli Clifton

I want to let Ian answer this quickly, but I want to quickly just get in there with what you said before the question, which was about how this seems to go against what the Trump administration said they wanted to do. And something that we point out in the book, and that I think is meaningful, is that in our media discussion, in our political discourse, we tend to focus on Trump a great deal. But it is noticeable to look at the previous presidents—and I mean recent presidents—who have all stated, in various forms, that they wanted to pivot away from the Middle East, from Obama to Trump to Biden to Trump again. They've all indicated this, that they want to focus, in varying manners and forms, on managing a rising China and shifting focus to the Pacific. And all of them have said that the only way that can happen is with a pivot away from the Middle East. And every single one of them has been thwarted in that effort. I have one take on this. Sorry to step in. Sure.

#Ian Lustick

So let's look at it in a couple of ways. What's so unusual about this lobby? I think we titled the chapter "A Lobby Like No Other." Lobbies are very common, as you noted, in the United States. The whole country was based on a Constitution which imagined that every interest in the country would mobilize on behalf of its own very, very particular desires. Every faction would therefore mobilize, counterbalance the influence of the other faction opposed to it, and that would give a certain equilibrium to American politics. What stands out about the Israel lobby, what makes it so unusual, is number one, it's a foreign policy lobby, and very few foreign policy lobbies have enough—are of enough interest to Americans to matter very much in American politics.

Well, the Israel lobby is one of the only foreign policy lobbies to actually matter, and matter a very great deal. In fact, it matters more because most people don't care about foreign policy. So if a congressman or a president is pressured by the Israel lobby to do something in foreign policy that they otherwise wouldn't want to do, they do it because their constituents won't reward them for standing up to the Israel lobby. Traditionally, most constituents just don't care, but they know they're going to get punished severely by the Israel lobby if they don't toe the line, and that has been why the lobby has been so successful.

This, we know, was anticipated by President George Washington in his farewell address, when he warned that although it was fine for domestic lobbies to contend in the arena of American politics, really, partisanship should stop at the water's edge. Because if there was, quote unquote, from George Washington, a passionate attachment between one faction in America and a foreign country, that would distort all of American foreign policy because there would be no countervailing power standing against it domestically, and the politicians would cave to its influence. And he has been proven right, tragically correct, although perhaps now things are changing a bit.

#Glenn

Well, I liked—well, that was interesting as well, what Eli said earlier on that. Of course, this didn't start with Trump. Indeed, it was Obama who first announced this pivot to Asia. But again, the comments about the Middle East have preceded this as well. But I was wondering if you could take us through the evolution of Israel's lobby. It's quite surprising, given that it's a fairly small country. How did it become so powerful in the United States? Because, well, if you would look only at national interest, one could argue from 1967 it looked like a powerful bridge into the Middle East. But these days, of course, it's seen more and more as undermining U.S. interests. I was just wondering how this evolution took place.

#Ian Lustick

Well, this started in the '50s with an operation by the Israeli Foreign Ministry to gain certain influence in the United States and counterbalance anti-Zionist sentiments that existed in the State Department under the Eisenhower administration. It anticipated that an ideologically committed Jewish state with revanchist, irredentist ambitions would destabilize the region and interfere with American policy, American ambitions to counter Soviet influence. So it goes back to the early '50s. But what happened was that supporters of Israel, who were also very active in support of the Zionist movement before the creation of the state, they organized themselves with Israeli help and became what we now know of as the Israel lobby, with its core as the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, though it went by a different name early on.

And they took full advantage of the point I was making earlier. Knowing that most Americans don't care, they became extremely well organized. They could go to politicians from Montana or Kansas or North Dakota and say, "Look, we want you to support what we are saying about the Middle East, even though the president may not like it. And if you do support it, we will support you. But if you don't support us, we will organize a primary against you, and it will only take a little money in your district. And nobody cares in your district or in your state about this issue. So if you defy us, you're not going to gain anything. And if you acquiesce, you're going to win. You're going to benefit." Now, that resulted—if you look at American foreign policy over the global sector, you see that there are two issues in which traditionally American foreign policy has been really weird.

Three standard deviations from the international mean. There are two issues. One of them is Israel. The other one is Cuba. The United States and Israel vote every October to continue the embargo blockade of Cuba. The rest of the world says no. What accounts for the fact that these two issues, Cuba and Israel, have American foreign policies that are so strange? What accounts for those two issues is that those are the two issues where there are foreign policy lobbies that really count domestically. And domestic politics is what counts for American presidents and for American congressmen. So it's dedication, it's money, it's alliances within the Jewish community and outside the Jewish community with Christian evangelicals, and it's the structure of American politics thoroughly exploited that explains the rise and consolidation of the power of the Israel lobby.

#Eli Clifton

Now, there's something interesting here, which is that the lobby's strength and its ability to exert influence, for certainly the first several decades of its existence, relied on foreign policy being a low-salience issue and on at least nominally pro-Israel sentiments within the electorate. So it gave it sort of a lot of leeway in terms of what it could ask for from politicians. As Ayan said, there was a notion that it was sort of cost-free if you went along with the lobby.

But around 2000, you know, with the death of the Oslo Accords, with the global— and heading into the global war on terror, you start to see a pretty steady but slow decline in pro-Israel sentiment within the electorate of the United States. Not enough to really swing elections, not enough to make it a high-enough-salience issue that it's swinging votes, but you start to see a trend emerge. And I think something pretty interesting happens, that as that momentum builds, with 2010, with the Citizens United and SpeechNow court decisions that opened the floodgates into our campaign finance system, it allowed a small group of people, plutocrats, to have a great deal of influence within our political system that they had previously been denied in some ways.

And through that mechanism, you see the lobby take on a new life at the top of the campaign finance ecosystem, driven by an increasingly small group of people with really rightward views about Israel, very much in line with the Likud governments in Israel. And in a sense, a more radical set of views being expressed both in Israel and via the lobby in the United States. That could only be possible when they're able to effectively have a stranglehold on the campaign finance of elections and of members of Congress. And again, that threat of a primary being staged against them that they might not be able to afford to counter.

#Glenn

Well, I guess another unique aspect of the Israel lobby is that, as you argue, it's not just that it's influencing U.S. policy, but American policymakers themselves, well, over and over again, subordinate U.S. interests to those of Israel. I was wondering, well, do you have any examples of this, and how has it increased? I mean, obviously you have examples, but...

#Eli Clifton

Well, I think the most recent one is a pretty good place to start, with the Iran war. When you have Marco Rubio coming out there and saying, within the first 36 hours of the war in February, that the reason that the United States chose to join Israel in this is that they concluded that the Israelis were going to start attacking Iran again, and that in doing so, the Iranians were inherently going to be attacking American targets in the region. So the United States had no choice but to go along with this. Now, what's really missing from that is any consideration that the United States might have been able to tell the Israelis, "Don't do it."

If for no other reason than our own interests here, which is that we didn't want to be dragged into this war, that this is the thing that Donald Trump said that he wanted to avoid. But instead, you have the Secretary of State out there saying pretty explicitly, the Israelis twisted our arm, and you watch the lobby light up. In the first 24 hours of that conflict, you see AIPAC and other groups enthusiastically celebrating the start of that war. So again, a war that the Secretary of State said was effectively forced upon this administration.

#Ian Lustick

And, of course, there are many examples. We go into them in some detail in the book, from the Ford administration, from the Truman administration, from President Carter, President Obama, and, as we just mentioned, President Trump, where a president has an idea, often about how to achieve peace between Israel and the Arabs, usually through some kind of comprehensive settlement that the United States and the Soviet Union will agree on, and then the Israel lobby mobilizes powerfully, and the domestic affairs advisor for the president points out that he is very likely to lose Congress or lose his own election or reelection bid if he gives in on this issue.

And repeatedly, we document how presidents have said, "Oh, shit, I have to give—I can't do what I want," and promising the Arabs that next time, after they're reelected, they will be able to go forward with this plan. And it's happened over and over again. This is a systematic example of how American interests, as defined by what a president and his top foreign policy and national security advisors believe is in the national interest, how those policies are thwarted, are shifted, are vetoed, or are hampered by the Israel lobby. What we do in the book that goes a little bit beyond that is focus on not only how American interests abroad are compromised, but now how and why the lobby's influence is compromising American freedoms at home.

#Glenn

But how has the change in Israel, though, impacted the Israel lobby? Because, again, the Israel we saw in the '70s, the '60s, is a very different Israel than what we see today. I'm thinking more right-wing, nationalist, religious. We can put an extremist in there as well. Has this impacted the lobby in any way?

#Ian Lustick

It's tremendous. So, as Eli noted, there's been a diffuse sentiment in the United States that Israel is a good thing. It's a heroic response of Jews to the Holocaust. And there's a kind of cultural affinity between Christian America thinking of itself as a kind of chosen, exceptional people and the Jewish people and their covenantal relationship with God. There's all of these cultural, psychological elements that are soft but have had a certain influence. They thrived when Israel was a kind of social democratic, reasonable country, what in American terms could have been a kind of blue state like Connecticut or Rhode Island.

But in the '70s and '80s, it became what, in American terms, is a purple state, back and forth between right-wing and centrist left-wing governments, Labor and Likud, not knowing what to do with the territories: to trade them for peace or to annex them forcibly. But now, for the last two decades or more, it's really been a deeply red state, like Idaho in America or Oklahoma. It's become very extreme, and that has had a tremendous impact on the lobby because the lobby can no longer defend the extreme policies that the current Israeli government promotes, whether it's settlement or the support for violent settlers, or it's a war in Gaza, it's genocide, whether it's an attack on Iran, displacement of a million people in Lebanon.

The lobby doesn't even try to defend it. Yet they still demand of the American government that there be, quote unquote, no daylight between the United States and Israel. Well, having no daylight between you and a reasonable country is one thing. But having no daylight between you and a crazy country, which, using any reasonable definition, is crazy, shows how crazy Israel has become. That raises the costs and makes the lobby crazy. The lobby tries to campaign and support Israel without even mentioning Israel because they can't defend its policies.

#Eli Clifton

So this has had two major consequences for the lobby. Ian just touched on one of them, which is that they no longer try to defend Israel's policies so much. Instead, they try to shut down debate, smear people who criticize Israel. And they've actually gone beyond that now. They're trying to use the powers of the state here to silence voices who are critical, be it through withholding grant funds to universities or by deporting green card holders who are critical of Israel. But there is another thing that's happened, which is certainly more of a negative consequence for the lobby, which is that as Israel has shifted to the right, the lobby has found itself in a very uncomfortable position, and I think that sort of came to a head during Obama's second term with the Iran nuclear deal, when they found themselves having to take sides against a popular Democratic president's signature foreign policy initiative.

And ultimately, they were not able to bring Democrats along with them in doing so. And they lost, at least in the short term, with the JCPOA. Now, what that really meant for them wasn't just a very embarrassing loss, which I think was very harmful to the lobby, but it also cemented the perception that the lobby had become partisan, which is something they had really avoided since their inception. And certainly they had succeeded to a large degree in avoiding entering into partisan battles and into partisan politics up until that point. But after that, you see them entering into—they spin up a super PAC. They get involved in elections. Something fundamentally changes for AIPAC, which is the central and the biggest group within Israel's lobby, in the way that it's perceived.

Again, they had had this great strength with their conferences, the annual conferences where they would get Democrats and Republicans to speak. That comes to an end with COVID. And they haven't started it up again because probably they couldn't get the presence from both parties that

they had had in the past. So that really, I think, was a major reputational hit because the lobby's able to project their power, their ability to project that you can't challenge them, their ability to project that they had this broad bipartisan consensus. Again, as we discussed earlier, on some issues that historically had been pretty low-salience for voters, fell apart with the JCPOA. And they have not been able to regain that bipartisan—or bipartisan credentials that they had really enjoyed for decades before that.

#Ian Lustick

And in parallel, and actually right in line with that, the lobby has had to abandon relying on grassroots support in America for its clout and has shifted to relying on vast amounts of money donated and controlled by a very small number of extremely ideologically committed right-wing plutocrats. And that's one of the things we go into in great detail in the book, is the money trail. And it's linked to Israel becoming so extreme that the lobby can't rely on mass support, whether it's in the Jewish community and now increasingly even in the evangelical community, to support its activities. So more and more of the power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of ultra-wealthy people. And Eli can go into what has changed in America that has also given rise to that trend.

#Eli Clifton

I'm sorry, I'm going to jump in again here. The cracks in the evangelical community are very serious for the Israeli government, not just the lobby. And this is the group that was supposed to be the actual voters where this was a high-salience issue, although the polling doesn't really support that, suggesting that they were the ones who actually went to the polls first and voted down the line for candidates who were pro-Israel, who were conservative in deep red states.

And we're starting to see cracks in that as well, mostly in the aftermath of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, where, for a variety of reasons, Christian evangelicals who, again, we had been led to believe would never break with Israel, are doing so. And they're doing so because partially they're offended by the slaughter of civilians in Gaza. I think it also hit home to a lot of them, Israel's mistreatment of Christians, be they in Gaza, in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, or in Lebanon. The fact that the Israelis don't seem to make that much of a differentiation between Palestinians who are Muslim and those who are Christian. And I think that's been a wake-up call.

And again, this has set off, I think, a five-alarm fire in Israel with the Israeli government, because for the very first time we see them now spending significant sums of money from Israel, directed from Israel to people inside the United States to run publicity campaigns targeting evangelical voters. These people are filing under the Foreign Agent Registration Act, something we've very rarely seen with Israel before. This is more consistent with the way Gulf monarchies try to gain influence within the United States. So I think that there is some desperation. There's a great deal of fear, and if we believe that where the Israeli government is spending this money and having this

panicked response is reflective of a real danger, it suggests that they are losing support at a dangerous level within pro-Israel Christian evangelical communities in deep red states.

#Glenn

Just a quick follow-up question. The one was the word describing Israel as a crazy state. Indeed, that's the name of the third chapter, so I assume that was not coincidental. Why is aggressive, expansionist, or extremist—well, why use crazy as a separate category? But also, the second was just what Eli mentioned. You have all these different, I guess, mechanisms, all this money being pumped in, so they will—the American electorate will—sorry, the politicians will vote in a certain way. But how does that money mix with other mechanisms? So ideology, public opinion, or a genuine connection?

#Ian Lustick

So I'll deal with the crazy, and Eli can deal with the legal situations that help produce the money problems in the United States. Yes, the chapter about Israel is called "Israel Is a Crazy State." It uses the definition of the word crazy that was advanced in the early 1970s by Israel's leading public policy authority, a man by the name of Yehezkel Dror, who won the Israel Prize for his work in this field. He wrote a book called Crazy States, in which he said that, like Nazi Germany, all of the Arab states and the PLO should be considered either crazy or becoming crazy, not because they were irrational, but because their goals were so evil and so—or not so much evil—so grandiose, so extreme.

And the ruthlessness with which they were willing to use any means to achieve those goals meant they were crazy, and because they thought that even if the whole world thought that they were breaking moral rules, they were actually right. So there's a certain self-righteousness there. That also goes along with being crazy in this way. So it's not that you're insane or you're irrational. Certainly not that you're—according to this definition—you have to have a lot of capacity, and you have to be very rational about using that capacity. But what marks you as crazy is how extreme and how ruthless and how self-righteous you are, how impervious you are to any criticism. And all that we do in that chapter is show how Israel has come to fit the mold of what Dror said Arab states were like.

Now, Dror wrote that book in order to tell the West and Israelis that any means could be used to thwart or destroy a state that is crazy. He was trying to justify preventive wars, subversion, all kinds of other delegitimization of all the states who were Israel's enemies. What's ironic and kind of amazing is that, decades later—and Dror is still alive, by the way—decades later, his definition works more on Israel than for almost any other country in the world. So that's what is meant by a crazy state, and that chapter documents the change from what Israel was in the past to what it has become, unfortunately. Now, one other thing we can talk about is how American policy helped turbocharge that change in Israel, that without the unconditional support that American presidents,

for the reasons we've talked about, have given Israeli policy, we would not see—we would likely not see—quite the crazy Israel that we see today.

#Eli Clifton

The interesting role of money in this that you raised—and to start off, it's very difficult to answer, well, what do politicians actually believe? What does any individual actually believe? But the tension that I think is really worth calling attention to is between public opinion, certainly within the Democratic Party and increasingly so in the Republican Party, and policy. And I think the money explains that to a significant degree. What I'm pointing to is, for instance, looking at the last election, the largest reason given by voters who had voted for Joe Biden in 2020 and had not voted for Kamala Harris in the 2024 election.

The largest reason they gave for why they had changed, to some degree, the way that they voted was because of Gaza and the administration's handling of that war. And now you see something like two-thirds of Democratic voters saying that they want to see a complete drawdown of U.S. aid to Israel. But we are not yet seeing a meaningful change in policy. We did have a majority of House Democrats voting for cutting aid, but they did so knowing that they were not going to win that vote. And I think that it is really interesting to look for where that breaking point might be, where politicians realize that the pressures that they are feeling from their constituents actually are going to have to lead to meaningful policy change.

We are not there yet. Now, that has created this massive, massive gap between public opinion and policy. And as we try to show in the book, probably the best explanation for why we have that large gap is the money that the lobby is able to shovel into elections. And the numbers are pretty staggering. I mean, nine plutocrats since 2012 have put over \$1.7 billion—those are just individuals—into our election system. And these individuals, all of them speak about Israel as being the primary reason for their political engagement and for their giving to politicians.

Just this cycle, we saw something like \$30 million from the United Democracy Project, AIPAC Super PAC, trying to influence the outcome of just one Democratic primary election for the Senate in Michigan, trying to get Haley Stevens to be elected instead of Abdul El-Sayed. They failed in that endeavor. But the amount of money that we're watching just in this cycle—I have this tracker that I post at israelslobby.com. I was just looking at it. It updated over the weekend. It now says that pro-Israel super PACs in this cycle alone have raised \$168 million. They've spent \$153 million. And we're not even done with the primaries yet, meaning that by the time we have the elections in November, it's entirely possible that they will raise and spend a quarter of a billion dollars.

This is a midterm election. What that means for the next presidential election, we can only speculate at. But the point is that they are bringing unprecedented amounts of money. They are increasing the amount of money they are spending in every single political cycle since Citizens United. And I think the only explanation for this is that they are filling that gap once again between opinion and policy.

And I think we are probably reaching a breaking point at some point in the very near future where we're going to start seeing that translate into policy. But to be very clear, that has not happened yet. I just think it's probably going to be happening in the next two to four years.

#Glenn

Well, it does look like within the United States, people are becoming, well, as the economic differences continue to grow, there's more concern about, well, essentially being ruled by the wealthy—that is, that the rich will dominate. But within this framework, you do see people, therefore, looking at where does the money come from? Who's corrupting the politicians? Why don't they actually, well, listen to the people? And it looks like, from this perspective, it's probably one of the reasons why more people are looking towards Israel as one of the variables corrupting the US. But at the same time, I guess my concern would be, once one starts to look for, you know, where wealth corrupts politics, that suddenly one would switch from, yeah, the Israelis are corrupting US policy, to the Jews are running America. I mean, that becomes a bit more dangerous. So how do you see this difference? Because often one gets the impression that the Israeli lobby itself likes to conflate Israel with Jews.

#Eli Clifton

Well, that's something we really try to emphasize in the book repeatedly. And I think even in the introduction, we touch on it, which is that, to be very clear, it is an anti-Semitic trope to suggest that Jews all vote prioritizing Israel, a foreign country. It is an anti-Semitic trope to suggest that Jews inherently have dual loyalties. And while it is true there are anti-Semites who take this argument, as you just pointed out, and then apply it to all Jews, I think certainly in our mainstream political discourse, the biggest propagators of that trope is the Israel lobby. Because this is probably one of the last arguments they can try to make, which is just to lean in on an anti-Semitic argument and say that any criticism of them is a criticism of all Jewish Americans. Now, it's objectively and demonstrably false.

When you look at how Jews vote, Jewish Americans, it's a low-salience issue, Israel, for Jewish American voters. Also, Jewish American voters have not shifted to the right. They have not started to vote Republican. The Jewish swing vote is fictional. It does not exist. It is one of the most consistently Democratic voting blocs within our country. So they have not moved, even as most people would say the Republican Party has become the more pro-Israel of the two political parties. So it's simply false. But you watch AIPAC, you watch the ADL, you watch these groups. Even Donald Trump echoes some of these canards with frequency, because this is the last-ditch justification that the lobby can come up with about why they should not be criticized, why they should not have to defend themselves, and why it is somehow okay that they are trying to influence our politics as a special interest within our democracy.

#Ian Lustick

I'll add that, look, Eli and I are Jewish, and that itself is not that important, except that it's representative of what we now see in polls as most Jews who are not only critical of the current government of Israel, Netanyahu, but who do not identify with the country strongly, who reject Zionism in the forms that it has taken. So it is a canard to talk about a Jewish lobby, even though an overwhelming majority of these large, large donors that we're talking about are Jewish. Now, that is not a good look for Jews. I agree. It resonates with all kinds of wrong, crazy conspiracy theories that are not true.

But that good look—that bad look, excuse me—of a small number of extremely wealthy Jews manipulating things from behind the scenes is a function, as we've said, of the change in American electoral laws, but the change in Israel, whose policies are so far to the right that it cannot get support from the masses of Jews, only from a small group of extremely right-wing plutocrats and some of their other supporters. Now, another way that we go into this in the book is to talk about the engineering of accusations of anti-Semitism that the lobby has endorsed in order to avoid having to talk about or defend Israeli policies.

And the key element in this campaign that the lobby has been using for decades, supported by the Israeli government, is to define anti-Semitism so broadly to include just about any criticism of Israel that they'll be able to treat Israel as what they call the collective Jew. So then any criticism of Israel as the collective Jew is an attack on all Jews. And that's one reason why all these statistics that are bruited about, about our so-called tsunami of anti-Semitism, are really inflated, because what they do is they take criticism of Israel or demonstrations against Israeli policies in Gaza and count all of those episodes, all of those incidents, all of those slogans, which are perfectly legitimate political debate, as anti-Semitism.

And we, on the other hand, believe that it's our analysis that clearly separates between real anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel that can help thwart, can help block, can help recognize the actual threat of rising anti-Semitism, a threat that doesn't come about because of October 7th, because of the attack of Hamas on Israelis. It comes about as a result of October 8th, about the enormous, blasphemous overreaction of the Israeli military on civilization itself in the Gaza Strip. And that's what has produced this upsurge of anti-Semitism because Israel claims it's acting in the name of the Jewish people, and that helps fuel a latent anti-Semitism to come into the open as attacks on Jews who have nothing to do with Israeli policy.

#Eli Clifton

I think something that is really important here is that, you know, the question you asked, obviously, is, you know, about—there are political and cultural sensitivities here. And people are often afraid to talk about these issues out of fear, not that they will say something or actually be anti-Semitic, but that they will be accused of being anti-Semitic. And one of the arguments we've tried to make is that that silencing is intentional. And refusing to have this conversation does an enormous disservice and

actually cedes much of this ground to a combination of anti-Semites and Israel's lobby that wants to propagate both anti-Semitic tropes, as well as the notion that any criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. And we reject that. We think it's actually important. We need to have this conversation. More people need to be out there challenging these notions. And to not do so, once again, is to really give a dangerous amount of ground both to anti-Semites as well as those who want to conflate Israel with all Jews.

#Glenn

I saw Marco Rubio recently. He made that leap because he was giving a speech arguing that it's important for the United States to protect its Jewish community. And I was thinking, yeah, well, if that makes sense. And then suddenly, thus, we're not going to grant any more entry visas to people who criticize Israel. So I thought it was interesting how one was directly tied up to the other. But I'm also thinking it must create some tensions within U.S. society because as Israel turns more towards this right-wing radicalism, you see that overall the Jewish voters in America tend to vote more liberal, I think, than others. So it is an interesting tension all there in terms of alienating the people Israel pretends or argues that it actually represents.

#Eli Clifton

I think it's alienated a larger group than even just that. And I think certainly the wake of the Gaza war has laid that bare. And particularly, again, the targeting of people for speech crimes, for criticizing a foreign country on an American university campus and criticizing U.S. foreign policy, is leading to such dramatic backlash. It's something that I've watched play out on both the right and the left as really offending people's sensibilities at really a baseline level around the First Amendment. And again, you can tie this back to the plutocrats who are in many ways in control of this administration and more broadly of our political system.

I mean, the president of Maccabee Task Force, which is one of the key organizations that's pushed for both the crackdowns on universities through the withholding of federal funds, as well as the deportation of green card holders, is also the president's biggest donor, Miriam Adelson. So you don't have to look very far to see that there's a small group of people here who are willing to use, again, not just their money for lobbying or to influence elections, but to try to weaponize the state in the service of cracking down and stifling criticism of Israel.

#Ian Lustick

So what is actually going on now is an attack not just on the arguments that people make, as if they are anti-Semitic, and not just on the people who are making the arguments. But what we see with the Trump administration, in league with the lobby, is an attack on the institutions that produce

those people: the elite institutions, academic institutions, the media, the entertainment industry, are all subject to attack and to punishment, prosecution, deportations, questioning whether they should be able to keep their licenses, and so on, all in order to suppress discussion about Israel.

Now, we also see that these pressures on American society are felt inside the Jewish community. The Jewish community itself—just look at almost any synagogue that's not Orthodox—and you will see a tremendous split between those who are still trying to go along with the Israel lobby's line that Israel is our answer to the Holocaust, and more and more of the Jews in those congregations who can't stomach what they're seeing on television. So the result is that in congregation after congregation, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist rabbis can't even talk about Israel because it divides the congregation so deeply.

#Glenn

Well, you argue, though, in terms of how it's possible to move forward with the crisis in the Middle East, especially the Palestinian issue. And, well, after decades of these settlements and territorial expansion, you argue that the two-state framework is, well, increasingly unfeasible. Now, if this two-state solution doesn't work anymore, I was wondering, what are the alternatives for the US in terms of its independent policy, irrespective of what Israel pushes? Because the way I see it, if you only have one state and approximately half of Greater Israel are Jewish, the only way you can have an ethno-state would be Israel either to have apartheid—that is, one set of rules for another—or ethnic cleansing, to just push them out to Egypt, or kill them, like genocide. But beyond apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, what are the options now, given that the solution is undermined?

#Ian Lustick

Well, you frame the problem very well. There is no such thing as a two-state solution anymore. Israel is not going to withdraw from any territories that would make a possible Palestinian state. But that doesn't mean that there can't be a better future than there is today. But you are starting out with an Israeli version of apartheid. The difference is, it's silent. The South Africans were proud to say, yes, we discriminate systematically. We don't allow all these people to vote. Israel just says, we're waiting for the two-state solution or something else. So in the meantime, these people are not allowed to vote. But it's actually silent apartheid.

The question, therefore, becomes: how do you change a regime that is partly democratic but excludes half the population from democracy? How does that change? And historically, we have a lot of examples of that. Women, half the population, were excluded from politics, from democratic politics in Western European countries and the United States for 100 years. Blacks, Irish Catholics, Jews—exclusion of large groups is something that often occurs. And what happens is, over decades and even longer, processes in democracies reach out and include those excluded groups because the splits within the majority group force one side of the majority group to reach out to enfranchise blacks or women or Irish Catholics.

And that kind of unguided long-term change is what can produce a future of democracy and equality, but it's not a solution because we can't say exactly how to do it from now. What we have to do is look at ending the occupation through speaking truth about what's going on, acting on our values, and having the occupation end through everyone under one government with equal rights, rather than a territorial withdrawal that is simply not going to occur. And cloaking it as if it might occur has to be recognized as simply a technique to preserve apartheid in a silent form.

#Eli Clifton

There is a bit of a trick here, and I don't think you were engaging with it, Glenn, but I know that certainly critics of ours would have frequently used this, which is to say that unless you can put forward a clear pathway forward to an alternative to the two-state solution, then the obvious direction U.S. policy should go is continuing to sustain the same status quo policies of supporting Israel through whatever process it's going through. Now, I think that that in and of itself is a clever trap, because it is to say that unless we can provide the alternative—again, we are a country 6,000 miles away—then we need to continue to sustain Israel's military and provide them not just the military aid, but the diplomatic cover that we provide, where they do not experience consequences in the international forum for their actions. And that is one that I really reject.

Because it is not necessarily our job to lay out the specific solution to Israel's decision to occupy the West Bank, to reoccupy Gaza, to fight wars with its neighbors. This is something that only can be really answered by the Israelis and the Palestinians and others in the region. And we need to ask: Does our support, does U.S. aid, does the diplomatic cover that we provide make it more likely that there will be some sort of a solution found by the people who are the most affected by it inside the region, who are Israelis, Palestinians, and others? And I would argue that this solutionism, as it were, does not actually further the likelihood of that occurring. It actually stifles solutions that may come along sooner rather than later, were the United States to step back a little bit from being supposedly the source from which these solutions will come.

#Ian Lustick

So they're absolutely right. This notion that solutionism is the problem is not well understood. In politics, actually, you almost never get a solution—that is, everyone now lives happily ever after. What you get, hopefully, are better problems tomorrow than you have today. And so, when we look at the problems that trying to bring democracy and equality to the two huge populations that live between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, that's a much better problem to have than how to enforce an extraordinarily oppressive, murderous regime that is now saying this is the status quo better than all others. No, I say the problems associated with that—the Iran war, the Lebanon war, the Gaza war, all of these are examples, the Hamas attack as well—those are worse problems than the problem of confronting how you build an equal democracy for everyone who lives between the river and the sea. That's a much better problem.

#Glenn

I'd like to reframe that. To be honest, I hadn't thought about that. That makes a lot of sense. I just have a last question, though, which is: you emphasize this growing gap, though, between the American public and Washington's ongoing support for Israel. But at the same time, we also see now that the conditions might be in place for its decline. I was wondering if you can flesh out your thinking. Why—well, why has this gap persisted, and why might the decline come now?

#Eli Clifton

Well, I mean, I think we're in some sort of an end stage. But, of course, timing these things is a fool's errand, just like trying to time the stock market. And this end stage is very, very, very dangerous because, as we've been discussing over the course of this hour, the lobby has lost much of the public support that it has enjoyed. And moreover, again, because we keep emphasizing it was a low-salience issue, probably it's become much worse, not because it's lost that support so much as that people—it's actually become high-salience in a negative sense—that people increasingly feel like the U.S.-Israel relationship is toxic, needs to be changed in some pretty dramatic ways.

Most specifically, the most common polling question that gets asked of voters is, "Do you support a cutoff of U.S. aid and assistance to Israel?" And again, a majority within the Democratic Party feel that way, and a growing number within the Republican Party as well. So they've lost that battle. And that leaves the lobby with these coercive, really dangerous tools at their disposal, which they have shown a real willingness to use, again, using state power to try to stifle criticism, to try to deport people who run afoul of them.

And in that, we see this intersection of plutocracy and state power and a foreign power, in this sense, all being used to the detriment of American voters, being used to challenge popular sentiments within this country. And obviously, I think history shows us that usually that's a losing proposition. But in losing, one can do an enormous amount of damage. And I wouldn't want to guess about where this will end, when it will end, when we will see that real break in the dam where you see policy changing in a meaningful sense. But what I will say is, I think the lobby and the people who are funding it and the people who lead it, they themselves consider this to be an existential battle for themselves because they have put everything into this.

#Glenn

Excellent. Well, I want to thank you both for taking the time, but also I would like for the viewers to check out the book in the description. Definitely, this couldn't be more of a relevant time, as we now see—at least in my lifetime, I've never seen this kind of criticism of the relationship between Israel and the United States before. And at least it's good to see some reflection over this. I remember when John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt wrote a book 20 years ago on a similar topic. It had a lot of backlash and it was smeared when it should have been discussed. But I think now is obviously an

even better time to discuss this problematic relationship. So thank you both. Unless you have any final thoughts?

#Ian Lustick

Thank you, Glenn. That was very enjoyable, and I hope your viewers come away from it with as much curiosity as satisfaction.

#Eli Clifton

Thank you, Glenn.