

The US and Israel: who controls whom?

International relations scholar and "The Israel Lobby" author joins Max Blumenthal to address the longstanding debate about whether Israel functions as a reliable proxy of US empire, or Israel's vast lobby influences the US government to adopt policies that undermine its interests. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Max

So that affects the way the lobby functions in the United States. They're not relying as much on consent or duping people through Hasbara. Liberals no longer support them. I think support for this war on Iran is below 10%, according to a new DropSite poll I saw among Democrats. So it's all—they're just operating through pure force, stealth PACs, censorship, and control over Donald Trump. And I think that makes it so much more obvious. Yet still, there's a perception that the United States is the dog and Israel is the tail.

I mean, that was an argument pushed by Walter Russell Mead against you—the conservative historian—when he said Americans just love Israel, that there's no need for a lobby because Americans simply love Israel. But now we can see they no longer do. Still, I sometimes hear this from more doctrinaire Marxists on the left—that Israel is just an extension of the American empire, little more than an unsinkable aircraft carrier for the United States, and that it's the U.S. setting the agenda. What do you say to that argument in 2026, as the U.S. wages war with Israel on Iran?

#John Mearsheimer

Well, I'd note that my good friend Norman Finkelstein did a podcast the other day that I listened to while I was cooking dinner. Norman was one of those people who thought I was wrong—or Steve and I were wrong—back in 2006 when we said that Israel was one of the main driving forces behind it.

#Max

Yeah, I've argued with him publicly about that as well.

#John Mearsheimer

Yeah, but anyway, he was saying, in effect, that we might have been wrong then. But he believes we're not wrong with regard to Iran, and that it's quite clear the lobby and Israel itself played a critically important role in getting us into the war we're now in. It's very important to emphasize, Max, that when you talk about the factors that drove the United States into the Iraq War back in 2003, or what factors drove us into this war against Iran, it's obvious there were a variety of factors that mattered. The question is, which factors mattered the most? If you go back to the Iraq War, the basic argument that Steve and I made was that if there had not been pressure from the lobby and from Israel itself—and it's very important to emphasize there was enormous pressure from Israel to attack Iran—things might have turned out differently.

And there was enormous pressure from the lobby, especially from the neoconservatives inside and outside of it. Our argument is that the war would not have happened otherwise. Right, I believe that's true. And lots of people, in effect, said that at the time. But of course, once the war went south, the lobby went to great lengths to distance itself—and to distance Israel—from the causes of the war. And here in 2026, it's going to be much more difficult to do that because, again, the lobby is out in the open. What's going on with Israel and the United States is out in the open. And it's so obvious that Israel and the lobby played a key role in pushing us into this war. And Norman Finkelstein was, in effect, saying exactly that about what's happening now.

Now, I want to directly address the question you raise, which is: how do I deal with people who say that Israel does our bidding? This is not a case of the tail wagging the dog—the dog gets the tail to do what it wants. My simple response to that is, if that were true, you wouldn't need a lobby. You wouldn't need this incredibly powerful group of individuals and organizations working overtime to influence American foreign policy. If Israel were such a strategic and moral asset, the government would just axiomatically support Israel, and you wouldn't need a lobby. The reason you need the lobby is because Israel is a strategic liability, and it is a moral liability. Therefore, the lobby has to work to get the United States to support Israel. It is the tail that wags the dog. Yeah.

#Max

Yeah. And places— I mean, address the war on Iran. I think that's the current context that really vindicates your entire thesis. Here's Lindsey Graham.

#Fox News

I go back to South Carolina, asking them to send their sons and daughters over to the Middle East.

#Max

I mean, he's been making comment after comment like that. He was practically trading places with Netanyahu, advising him.

#John Mearsheimer

I mean, it's amazing, Max. He admits that he was advising Netanyahu on how to convince President Trump to attack Iran. This is truly remarkable. And by the way, Lindsey Graham is certainly a member of the lobby, right? It's important to emphasize that. He's like Mike Huckabee—yeah, he's profoundly committed to defending Israel, and he's profoundly committed to Prime Minister Netanyahu. And he helped Prime Minister Netanyahu bamboozle President Trump into launching this remarkably foolish attack on Iran. You know, if you look at this case, what's really interesting is there's no evidence that anybody inside the administration was pushing for this war, except maybe Kushner and Witkoff—which, of course, would support our argument, right? But there's no evidence that Pence was pushing for it, or that even Rubio was pushing for it.

He was too busy worrying about colonizing Latin America to get involved in a war or in the decision-making process involving Iran. So there was no pressure from below. And, in fact, General Keane warned him that there was no military option. The National Intelligence Council said, in effect, this is not going to work. So there was real resistance coming from inside the administration and no real proponents that I can see. But who were the proponents inside the United States? All you had to do was read the Wall Street Journal, which was a cheerleader for the war—Bret Stephens, who was a cheerleader for the war; Lindsey Graham, who was not only a cheerleader for the war but was working closely with Netanyahu, right? And then Netanyahu himself. This man has been deeply committed to getting us involved in a war against Iran for decades.

The evidence here is just overwhelming, right? Yeah. But you know what's going to happen, Max? What's going to happen is the war is going to go south—or the war has already gone south—and it'll steadily go further south. And what will happen is that the lobby will go to enormous lengths to say that Israel and the lobby here in the United States had nothing to do with causing this war. Right. Don't tell me that Donald Trump isn't an independent variable who can make his own decisions, because that's what happened here. Trump's responsible—not Israel, not the lobby. But of course, you and I know better. And the evidence is overwhelming in the other direction. I think their arguments this time won't convince many people.

#Max

Yeah, they'll home in on Trump's demented personality—his claims that he's, which are probably accurate, profiting from high oil prices—his corruption, personalizing the entire thing. Maybe, according to Rachel Maddow, the UAE and Saudi Arabia made him do it. I don't know. Maybe Russia made him do it. It's anything to muddy the waters, but I think at this point it's just too obvious. You even have Joe Rogan saying, "Why are we doing this?"

#John Mearsheimer

It seems like Israel dragged us into this war.

#Max

I mean, it's all—actually, going back to that drop-site poll—a vast majority of Democrats said they believe Trump is attending to Netanyahu's interests more than those of the American people, and that this is a war for Israel. Whereas most Republicans just don't believe that, because they're Trump cultists. Netanyahu made some very revealing comments as well that I think support your thesis in a way we've never seen before.

#Max

This coalition of forces allows us to do what I've yearned to do for 40 years: smite the terror regime hip and thigh. This is what I proposed, and this is what we shall do. So what I've pledged—or attempted—to do for 40 years. What is Netanyahu referring to with this 40-year plan, which Trump is enacting through what Netanyahu calls a coalition? And, you know, is he referencing something like the "Clean Break" document there?

#John Mearsheimer

Oh, yeah. I mean, there's no question that this vision Netanyahu has is completely consistent with the "Clean Break" doctrine of the mid-1990s. What's going on here, Max, in my opinion, is that Israel is, number one, interested in creating a greater Israel. Exactly where those borders are, we don't know, but it certainly includes the West Bank and Gaza. I would argue parts of southern Lebanon and parts of southern Syria as well, and maybe even parts of Jordan and the Sinai. The Israelis are interested in expanding their borders, number one. And number two, they're very interested in expelling the Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank and creating an almost purely Jewish state.

And then your third objective is to make sure that all the states in the region are either beholden to the United States. This would include countries like Jordan and Egypt, as you know well. And then the more powerful, the bigger, the more threatening states are broken up or destroyed. What the Israelis ultimately want to do in Iran is what they did in Syria—break Syria apart, wreck Syria. What they're doing in Lebanon is trying to wreck Lebanon. And I think they've sent messages to the Turks that, in the final analysis, they'd like to greatly weaken Turkey as well as weaken Iran. The idea here is that you'll then have a benign threat environment, or a benign security environment. So I often say that Israel's goal and America's goal in Iran is regime change.

And people will sometimes correct me and say that may be America's goal, but that's not really Israel's ultimate goal. Israel's ultimate goal is to wreck Iran, not simply to get regime change. And they're right, of course. I focus on regime change because we—the United States—focus on regime change, and the Israelis talk about that. But their ultimate goal is to wreck Iran, to do to Iran what was done to Syria. And I believe they'd ultimately like to do that to Turkey as well. So that's really what's going on here. That's the grand scheme. And Netanyahu has had that blueprint firmly emblazoned in his

brain, probably since his father first started educating him when he was a little boy. And there's nothing that moves him away from that blueprint.