

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2022

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship



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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$9.50

Book Review by Peter Berkowitz

TIES THAT BIND

The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People,
by Walter Russell Mead. Alfred A. Knopf, 672 pages, \$35



THE ENDURING BOND BETWEEN THE United States and Israel stems from principles, experiences, and views about history and world affairs—some shared, some divergent—that have shaped the two nations. The widespread misunderstandings of that special relationship—and the often ill-conceived, if well-meaning, policies that the United States has adopted in pursuit of Middle East peace—frequently originate in the failure to grasp those principles, experiences, and views.

Over the last generation, the most dramatic and influential of these misunderstandings—at least in ostensibly respectable intellectual circles—was elaborated in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007) by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt of the University of Chicago and Harvard University, respectively. A *New York Times* bestseller, the book grew out of their 2006 *London Review of Books* essay.

The Israel lobby thesis came of age in the wake of America's 2003 invasion of Iraq. The

authors sought to explain why U.S. Middle Eastern policy since the 1973 Yom Kippur War supposedly often placed Israel's interests ahead of America's. The very notion of a great power acting contrary to its interests confounded Mearsheimer and Walt's "realist" school of international relations. Their academic realism holds that the logic of geopolitics defines nations' interests and dictates their conduct. In this view, domestic political affairs and the machinations and judgments of statesmen are largely irrelevant to nation-state conduct and international relations.

AND YET, MEARSHEIMER AND WALT ARGUED, U.S. diplomacy defied geopolitical imperatives by repeatedly taking the side of Israel, small and resource-poor, instead of the surrounding Arab nations, which are far more populous and, in several cases, have vast oil reserves. This irrational tilt was particularly apparent, the professors argued, in the refusal to accede to Arab demands to pressure Israel to make substantial conces-

sions to end the conflict with the Palestinians. In Mearsheimer and Walt's eyes, the George W. Bush Administration's decision to oust Saddam Hussein was only the latest, most egregious example of America's propensity to betray its own interests in the Middle East.

Mearsheimer and Walt reasoned that an extraordinary factor must be at work to account for the deviation of U.S. Middle East policy from the dictates of their international relations theory. The one they identified was the vast power of the Israel lobby, which is dominated by, but not confined to, American Jews. This thesis suffered from manifest flaws, starting with the mishandling of basic facts. Contrary to Mearsheimer and Walt, the 2003 Iraq invasion did not serve the interests of Israel, which by then was concentrating on the Iranian threat. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the fossil fuels lobbies wield considerable weight in Washington. A less tortured explanation would be that the United States has long recognized Israel as a potent, reliable friend in an unstable but strategically vital region.



IN *THE ARC OF A COVENANT: THE UNITED States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People*, Walter Russell Mead goes well beyond the basic facts to demolish the Israel lobby thesis. Even as he declines to mention Mearsheimer and Walt's book, Mead develops an elaborate argument that transcends the debunking of their theory.

A *Wall Street Journal* columnist, Bard College professor, and Hudson Institute distinguished fellow, Mead is unsurpassed among contemporary commentators on foreign affairs in his command of world history, understanding of the manifold dimensions of the American political tradition, and appreciation of the cross-cutting currents of contemporary public policy controversies in the United States. Accordingly, his refutation of the notion that our Middle East diplomacy is driven by one dominant special-interest group expands outward into a restatement of American foreign policy's origins, aims, development, sources in changing voter sentiment, and contemporary quandaries.

Prompted by the centrality to successive administrations of the quest for a peace agreement that would resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as by indignation at the Israel lobby canard, Mead undertook what he "originally thought would be the simple task

of writing a short, clarifying book about the nature and sources of American sympathy for the Zionist movement and the Jewish state." Following the argument where it led, he produced a clarifying but long book that illuminates for Americans "the real history of their relationship with the Jewish state, the cultural and political importance of the Jewish national movement known as Zionism in American life, and the relationship of our Israel policy to American strategy worldwide." In the process of enlarging and refining our understanding of the U.S.-Israel relationship's roots and character, Mead enlarges and refines our understanding of United States foreign policy's roots and character.

At the heart of Mead's ambitious book is the claim that "an array of mental habits, cultural predispositions, and unspoken assumptions" derived from both Christianity and the modern tradition of freedom have, since the founding, shaped Americans' views about the world and hence about Israel. Mead distills these beliefs into four propositions. First, political freedom and economic freedom foster happiness and prosperity in the United States and can do so around the world. Second, the spread of freedom is consistent with human nature and represents a culmination of humanity's historical development. Third,

America is an exceptional nation because Providence has given it the leading role in advancing universal principles of freedom. Fourth, America fulfills its duty by both honoring the principles of freedom at home and promoting them abroad. Contemporary attacks on these beliefs are fueled, Mead contends, by identity politics on the left and a growing aversion to global engagement on the right, developments imperiling U.S. foreign policy's coherence and vitality.

THE *ARC OF A COVENANT* COVERS A STAGGERING assortment of ideas and events. Reflections about the misunderstandings on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict set the stage for meditations about the United States' need to develop a foreign policy appropriate to an international arena in which the Chinese Communist Party seeks to bend world order toward authoritarianism. Mead then jumps to a pivotal chapter in the making of modern Zionism: Theodor Herzl's undaunted efforts in the decade before his death in 1904 to raise money and diplomatic support in Europe for creating a Jewish state.

Next, Mead turns to the history of opinions about Jews in the English-speaking world, with special focus on how the Protestants who founded America saw themselves, like the Jews of the Bible, as a chosen people bound to God by a distinctive covenant. He recounts how the collapse of the Russian, Ottoman, and Austrian empires, which controlled eastern Europe and much of central Europe and the Middle East at the end of the 19th century, precipitated two world wars. He reviews America's evolving response over the 20th century to its heightening responsibilities: preserving "the American way of life" grew to encompass preserving a world order friendly to freedom.

From this foundation, *The Arc of a Covenant* provides an eye-opening reconstruction of the domestic and geopolitical considerations that impelled President Harry S. Truman, 11 minutes after Israel declared independence on May 14, 1948, to become the first world leader to recognize the Jewish state. In addition, Mead offers a searching review of the changing configuration of anxieties and priorities that have animated Republicans and Democrats over the last 100 years. And he examines the many chapters of American efforts to promote peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, which for the United States has usually meant negotiating an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Throughout, Mead emphasizes how the push and pull of domestic politics, the exigencies of foreign affairs and national security, and the

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deepest beliefs about its highest national purposes—rather than some nefarious Israel lobby—have shaped America’s relationship with Israel.

ONE MIGHT QUARREL WITH MEAD’S decision to weave several short books—and occasionally extravagant digressions—into one sprawling tome. But one can only marvel at his ability to illuminate the many grand topics that he addresses and, after long stretches, to redirect the argument back to his central thesis: the United States and Israel are bound together by a shared Biblical heritage and a common commitment to freedom and democracy.

Although his lucid prose never falters, Mead occasionally stumbles due to a laudable determination to treat all sides of the debate justly. For example, he refers to the Arabs subject to British rule in Palestine in the 1920s as “Palestinians” and he notes their rage at how Zionism had “reshaped much of their country.” Mead is right to insist that even as Zionism-inspired immigration to the Holy Land built the infrastructure of a Jewish state, the Arabs living under the British Mandate in Palestine had legitimate claims. But a people with a distinct national identity they were not. It is fair to say that a Palestinian national identity began to emerge in reaction to the rise of Zionism in the 20th century and various proposals under the British Mandate to divide the land between Jews and Arabs. But Palestinian nationalism only crystallizes in reaction against the establishment of the state of Israel. Nor had there been a nation exercising self-rule in the land of Israel since the first century when Romans laid waste to the Second Temple.

Nevertheless, today the approximately 2.5 million Palestinians residing in Judea and Samaria, who exercise substantial autonomy, ultimately live under Israel’s control. National security considerations may dictate such control, but it conflicts ultimately with Israel’s

self-understanding as a free, democratic, and Jewish state.

Recent American foreign policy, contends Mead, has done little to improve matters. He faults both the Obama and Trump administrations, but understates the former’s shortcomings and neglects the latter’s achievements.

After all, in June 2014, a few months after Secretary of State John Kerry ended the Obama Administration’s vain five-year quest for a conflict-ending settlement, hostilities erupted: the Israel Defense Forces launched Operation Protective Edge to combat rocket and missile attacks from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. By contrast, in September 2020—eight months after he announced a peace plan that went nowhere—President Trump hosted at the White House the signing of the historic Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

DESPITE HIS ERUDITION, SYMPATHETIC understanding of the Israeli and the Palestinian case, and appreciation of the severe political constraints faced by both sides, Mead—to say nothing of the Biden Administration—misses the opportunity that the Abraham Accords present for revising the United States’ approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The problem is not the two-state solution, which Mead endorses. It is, rather, as Micah Goodman argued in his 2017 book, *Catch 67*, the belief that America’s only option is to persuade the parties to sign a comprehensive agreement that yields a just and lasting peace.

However, one needn’t give up on a two-state solution—or embrace it—to take advantage of the Abraham Accords. With the infusion of Gulf funds, the clearing of bureaucratic obstacles by Israel, even minimal cooperation from the Palestinian Authority, and, not least, concentrated American diplomacy, Abraham Accords countries could work together over

the short term to build roads and other infrastructure in the West Bank, improve schools, and expand economic opportunities.

Such measures, consistent with differing interpretations of the parties’ long-term aims, should be guided by two fundamental objectives: improving West Bank Palestinian freedom and prosperity while preserving Israeli security. Efforts along these lines would not establish an independent Palestinian state, but well-designed and prudently implemented steps of this kind would improve Palestinians’ quality of life without eroding Israel’s ability to defend itself. They would not prejudge the outcome of the conflict even as they would advance the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians to govern themselves and enhance the prospects of a future Palestinian state prepared to live in peace with Israel. They would dissatisfy both the Right and Left in Israel—the former suspecting that too much had been conceded and the latter lamenting how little had been offered. But by increasing the political separation of the two peoples, they would advance Israel’s interest in preserving a free, democratic, and Jewish state, and by bettering the Palestinians’ social and economic conditions, they would enhance the prospects for mutually advantageous cooperation.

After a long, costly record of botched attempts to *resolve* the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United States should aim to *reduce* the conflict. This approach would be entirely consistent with the enduring bond between the United States and Israel that Walter Russell Mead has illuminated. Indeed, in the complex circumstances of the contemporary Middle East, U.S. diplomacy that reduced the conflict would serve as an exemplary expression of that enduring bond.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow of the Hoover Institution. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department.

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FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

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