From Jerusalem to Baghdad? Israel and the War in Iraq

DOV WAXMAN

Baruch College

The prevailing opinion that the Bush administration took the United States to war against Iraq in March 2003 under false pretenses has led many to believe that Israel's security was the secret rationale for the war. According to this ''war for Israel'' thesis, neoconservative policy-makers in the Bush administration, the pro-Israel lobby in the United States, and Israel's government all pushed the United States to go to war with Iraq for the sake of Israel's security. This article critically assesses this controversial claim and examines Israel's role in the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. I argued that while neoconservatives were instrumental in promoting the Iraq war, Israel was not their primary concern and that although American Jewish organizations and the Israeli government did largely support the Iraq war, they did not seek it or actively lobby for it.

Although Israel has not taken part in the war in Iraq, it has been deeply associated—some would say implicated—in it. Indeed, aside from the United States and Great Britain, in the public imagination (both in Western countries and Middle Eastern ones) Israel is perhaps more tied to the Iraq war than any other country. Many people, in fact, hold Israel responsible—directly or indirectly—for the war. While the United States led the ''coalition of the willing'' into war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in March 2003, it is widely believed that Israel was in some way behind this decision to go to war. This popular and controversial belief will be critically examined in this article. How did Israel factor into the United States' prewar policy-making concerning Iraq? Did policy-makers in Washington DC and Jerusalem have a common agenda vis-à-vis Iraq? Was Israel as staunch a supporter of the war as it was often portrayed to be? This article will attempt to answer these questions in order to achieve an accurate and complete understanding of the role that Israel played in the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. By examining the views of neoconservative ideologues, American Jewish organizations, and Israel's political and security establishment toward forcible regime change in Iraq, this article will show that Israel and pro-Israel groups in the United States were not pushing for war with Iraq and that Israel's security was not the primary motivation for neoconservative advocates of the war. The regional transformation that neoconservatives hoped would be unleashed after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime was meant to serve American interests first and foremost.

A War for Israel?

As the war in Iraq drags on and the death toll there continues to mount, the accusations of blame for an increasingly unpopular war have spread and become ever more vociferous. Israel is often at the center of these accusations. The belief that Israel and its American supporters were ultimately behind the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq is now widespread among critics of the war.[1] It gained particular prominence with the publication of an article titled ''The Israel Lobby'' in the *London Review of Books* by John Mearsheimer, a professor at the University of Chicago, and Stephen Walt, then-Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006a), and the posting of their longer working paper on the Kennedy School's website (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006b). Mearsheimer and Walt criticized U.S. support for Israel and denounced the excessive influence of the ''Israel Lobby''—a diffuse network of lobbyists, journalists, think tanks, and mostly Jewish neoconservative policy-makers—on U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. Among the many explosive charges Mearsheimer and Walt (2006b:34) made against Israel and the ''Israel Lobby'' was that they played a critical role in pushing the United States into war against Iraq. ''There is little doubt,'' they wrote, ''that Israel and the Lobby were key factors in shaping the decision for war. Without the Lobby's efforts, the United States would have been far less likely to have gone to war in March 2003.''

   Mearsheimer and Walt's paper became something of a sensation, generating a great deal of media attention. Commenting on the firestorm of controversy the paper sparked, Michael Massing (2006) wrote in *The New York Review of Books*: ''Not since *Foreign Affairs* magazine published Samuel Huntington's 'The Clash of Civilizations?' in 1993 has an academic essay detonated with such force.'' Subsequently, Mearsheimer and Walt (2007) elaborated and updated their argument in a book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, which quickly became a best-seller. Yet neither their book nor their earlier article was particularly original. Arguments about the malign influence of the pro-Israel lobby over U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East were nothing new (see, e.g., Chomsky 1983; Findley 1985; Tivan 1987; Curtiss 1990). Nor was the argument that the war in Iraq was, in the words of Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:231), ''inextricably linked to concerns about Israel's security.''

   The belief that Israel's security was a primary motive for the war against Iraq originated even before the U.S.-led invasion on March 20, 2003 (Guttman 2003a). In the run-up to the Iraq war, the claim that it was a ''war for Israel'' was a staple of antiwar propaganda, frequently voiced at antiwar meetings and rallies in the United States and around the world, and echoed in the popular press (Tolan and Felch 2002; Kaplan 2003; Klein 2003). The belief that the Iraq war was a ''war for Israel'' was particularly appealing to many people who were skeptical of the Bush administration's stated main rationale for the war—disarming Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Unconvinced of the threat that the Bush administration claimed Iraq posed to American security, many of these skeptics believed that it was Israel's security that a war in Iraq was really designed to safeguard. So common was the belief that Israel's security was a primary motivation for the Bush administration's desire to wage war against Iraq that it became the conventional wisdom among many opponents of the war (Kinsley 2002; Keller 2003). Since the invasion of Iraq, the failure to find the

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[1]In a poll conducted in the United States in October 2006, 39% of respondents said that they believe that the ''work of the Israeli lobby on Congress and the Bush Administration has been a key factor for going to war in Iraq […]'' (cited in Mearsheimer and Walt 2007: 10).

WMD that the Bush administration had confidently claimed Iraq possessed has further reinforced this belief. The absence of any WMD in Iraq has fuelled popular suspicion that prewar intelligence about Iraq's WMD programs was exaggerated and distorted in order to provide a convenient pretext to invade Iraq.[2] Iraq's alleged WMD program is now widely believed to have been merely an excuse to wage a war for ulterior motives—Israel's security being a prime candidate.

The crudest version of the ''war for Israel'' argument holds that the Iraq war was undertaken solely for the benefit of Israel. Essentially, President George W. Bush and the other key decision makers (the ''Principals''—Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice) were duped by a shadowy ''neo-con cabal'' to do Israel's bidding and invade Iraq. It was the so-called neo-conservatives in the administration—notably, Paul Wolfowitz (then-Deputy Secretary of Defense), Douglas Feith (then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy), Elliott Abrams (then in charge of Near East and North African Affairs on the National Security Council), I. Lewis ''Scooter'' Libby (then the vice president's chief of staff), David Wurmser (an aide to then-Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton and later Middle East adviser to Vice President Cheney), and Richard Perle (then chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board)—who were really behind the decision to go to war. These individuals—all Jewish and all strong supporters of Israel—steered the United States into invading Iraq for Israel's benefit. As the right-wing commentator Pat Buchanan (2003) wrote, ''What these neoconservatives seek is to conscript American blood to make the world safe for Israel.'' Hence, according to this view, the Iraq war had nothing to do with the interests of the United States and everything to do with the interests of Israel. It was, quite simply, nothing more than a ''war for Israel'' concocted by Israel and its American backers. This argument can be found on thousands of websites and in many articles (e.g., Christison and Christison 2002; Lobe 2002; Raimondo 2002, 2004; Green 2004), and it has been made (explicitly or implicitly) by a number of public figures, such as former Senator Ernest Hollings (Berger 2004; Hollings 2004) and Anthony Zinni, a former commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East (Nir and Eden 2004).

The biggest flaw with this argument is that it entirely omits how the war in Iraq was designed to serve American interests. It totally dismisses American fears of Iraq's possession of WMD (which, although unfounded, were nonetheless real at the time) and overlooks the benefits for the United States that a successful war against Iraq was expected to bring (to name just a few, the prevention of a possible future threat from Iraq, the downfall of an anti-American ''rogue'' regime, the consolidation of U.S. regional hegemony in the Persian Gulf, the enhancement of U.S. deterrence, the redeployment of American forces from Saudi Arabia to Iraq). Its portrayal of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, and Rice as helpless dupes is also completely at odds with the prevailing view of these individuals as strong-willed, and in some cases unyielding, personalities (a view that is supported by countless media reports, as well as ''insider accounts'' by former Bush administration officials[3]). Thus, its depiction of the Bush administration as being manipulated by neoconservatives loyal to Israel into invading Iraq solely for Israel's benefit is, at best, much too simplistic.

A more sophisticated version of the ''war for Israel'' argument claims that while American interests were certainly important to the Bush administration's

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[2]According to a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll in November 2005, 55% of Americans believe that the Bush administration ''deliberately misled the country in making its case for war with Iraq'' (Morin and Balz 2005).

[3]See, for instance, Clarke (2004); Suskind (2004); Frum (2005).

decision to invade Iraq, so too were Israeli interests. As Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:231) put it, ''the individuals and groups that pushed for war believed that it would benefit both Israel and the United States.'' It was, then, not just a ''war for Israel'' but rather a war for Israel and the United States. Nonetheless, Israel was a crucial, indeed essential, factor in the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq. ''Pressure from Israel and the Lobby was not the only factor behind the Bush Administration's decision to attack Iraq in March 2003,'' Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:230) write, ''but it was a critical element.'' Hence, they claim that ''the war was motivated at least in good part by a desire to make Israel more secure'' (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007:231). According to this view, although Israel and the American pro-Israel Lobby were not solely responsible for the Iraq war, they bear a large share of the responsibility. Without their efforts to promote the war, it would not have come about [''absent the (Israel) lobby's influence, there almost certainly would not have been a war,'' in the words of Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:17)]. Put differently, the Iraq war may not have been waged exclusively for Israel, but if it weren't for Israel and the pro-Israel Lobby it would not have been waged at all.

What substance, if any, is there to this more nuanced ''war for Israel'' argument? In order to judge its validity, it is necessary to distinguish between the role of neoconservative policy makers in the Bush administration, the role of pro-Israel and Jewish organizations in the United States, and the role of the Israeli government in the decision to invade Iraq. Much of the debate over the claim that the Iraq war was a ''war for Israel'' has centered on the influence of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration and their support for Israel. Far less attention has been given to the views within Israel and within pro-Israel and Jewish organizations in the United States with regards to the war in Iraq. The strong backing of Israel and American Jewry for the war is often simply assumed. In fact, in both cases, there was no unanimity of opinion concerning forcible regime change in Iraq. Israel and American Jewish organizations were certainly not as enthusiastic about a war in Iraq as is generally believed, and American Jews were actually less supportive of the war than were Americans in general.

The Role of the Neo-Cons

Much has been written in recent years about the influence of neoconservatives on the Bush administration's foreign policy and their role in the U.S. decision to invade Iraq (see, for instance, Mann 2004; Woodward 2005; Packer 2005). The general tendency has been to depict the neoconservatives within the Bush administration as the key shapers of the administration's Iraq policy (see, for instance, Drew 2003; Clarke 2004). From this perspective, the ''neo-cons'' basically took control of the Bush administration's foreign policy after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and then implemented the aggressive and militaristic agenda they had developed long before 9/11 in think tanks (such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Project for a New American Century, the Center for Security Policy, and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs) during their years out of power (Vest 2002). Regime change in Iraq was one of their abiding passions ever since President George H.W. Bush's ''failure'' to remove Saddam Hussein from power at the end of the first Gulf War.[4] The

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[4]The neoconservatives' support for regime change in Iraq was earlier expressed in a now famous public letter to President Clinton in January 1998 calling for the removal of Saddam from power, by force if necessary. Among the signatories of this letter were Wolfowitz, Bolton, and Abrams—all neoconservatives who later served in the Bush administration.

neoconservatives seized the opportunity provided by 9/11 to convince a gullible and ignorant President Bush that forcible regime change in Iraq was essential for victory in the president's ''war on terror.'' They also ''worked to impose their agenda against the opposition of the career civil servants, senior military officers, diplomats, and intelligence analysts who were unconvinced Saddam was a major threat'' (Hinnebusch 2006:298). Moreover, the efforts of neoconservatives within the Bush administration to push for a war against Iraq were supported by neoconservatives outside the administration (most notably, by prominent journalists like William Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and William Safire) who helped ''sell'' the war to the American public, writing numerous op-eds and giving frequent media interviews making the case for war. Thus, neoconservatives were the driving force behind the invasion of Iraq.

According to the ''war for Israel'' critique, a major part of the rationale for the Iraq war was to make the Middle East safe for Israel (Lind 2003). It is claimed that the neoconservatives, who are ''devoted to Israel'' (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007: 240), promoted the Iraq war out of a concern for Israel's security as much as a concern for America's security (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007:238–240).[5] Their enthusiastic and relentless advocacy of a war against Iraq was in no small degree motivated by their conviction that removing Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq would strengthen Israel's position in the Middle East by ridding it of a powerful regional adversary. Regime change in Iraq was supposedly part of an ambitious plan to realign the balance of power in the Middle East heavily in Israel's favor. The alleged blueprint of this plan was a policy paper written by Feith, Perle, and Wurmser, among others, in 1996 for incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu titled, ''A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm'' (Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies 1996). One of the paper's recommendations was that Israel ''focus on removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq,'' which it identified as ''an important Israeli strategic objective.'' The ''war for Israel'' critique, therefore, claims that hawkish pro-Israel neoconservatives had long believed regime change in Iraq to be in Israel's interests and that they promoted a U.S.-led war against Iraq to accomplish this goal (albeit not exclusively for Israel's benefit).

Neoconservatives were undoubtedly the most persistent and vocal advocates of an American invasion of Iraq. But how much did concerns for Israel's security really have to do with this? Was Israel at the heart of the neoconservatives' support for forcible regime change in Iraq? A fundamental problem with the ''war for Israel'' critique is that it misconstrues the place of Israel in neoconservative foreign policy thinking. While neoconservatives are deeply committed to Israel's security and well-being—as are many other Americans of different political orientations (especially most American Jews)—this does not mean that the foreign policies they favor are derived from this commitment. The ''war for Israel'' critique exaggerates the importance of Israel to neoconservatives, placing Israel's security at the top of the neoconservatives' foreign policy agenda.[6] This is a serious misunderstanding of the neoconservative worldview.[7]

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[5]With regards to the neoconservatives Feith and Wurmser, Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:239–240) write that ''Feith's role in shaping the case for war should also be understood in the context of his long-standing commitment to Israel [...],'' and, ''As George Packer notes in *The Assassins' Gate*: 'For Feith and Wurmser, the security of Israel was probably the prime mover' behind their support for the war.''

[6]Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:128–132), for instance, include neoconservatives within their broad definition of the ''Israel Lobby.'' This suggests that neoconservatives are solely guided by their commitment to Israel and that they lobby the U.S. government on Israel's behalf.

[7]For a discussion of this worldview, see Dorrien (1993); Ehrman (1995); Gerson (1996); Halper and Clarke (2004); Friedman (2005); Heilbrunn (2008).

Israel is not the focus of neoconservative thought (Jewish or otherwise). How-ever much neoconservatives may care about Israel, it is American interests rather than Israeli ones that matter most to them.[8] Neoconservatism is a profoundly American political ideology (Wolfson 2004).[9] It is concerned above all with the United States, its interests, values, power, and global role. It is based upon a belief in American goodness and in America's global mission (in a moralistic sense) (Muravchik 2007). It regards the United States as the ''benevolent global hegemon'' with unrivaled power which is must wield—unilaterally and forcefully if necessary—to spread its values around the world (Krauthammer 1990; Kristol and Kagan 1996). It elevates the spread of freedom and democracy abroad as a goal of U.S. foreign policy and embraces the use of American military might to accomplish this goal. It is skeptical of international institutions and international law (Fukuyama 2006:49), weary of traditional containment and deterrence of threats, and supportive of taking preemptive military action.

It is the emphasis placed by neoconservatives on the value of democracy, and the need for the United States to defend it and promote it everywhere, that really underpins the neoconservatives' support for Israel.[10] As Irving Kristol, often described as the ''godfather'' of neoconservatism, puts it (Kristol 2003), ''Barring extraordinary events, the United States will always feel obliged to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from nondemocratic forces, external or internal. That is why it was in our national interest to come to the defense of France and Britain in World War II. That is why we feel it nec-essary to defend Israel today, when its survival is threatened. No complicated geopolitical calculations of national interest are necessary.'' Thus, since neocon-servatives look upon Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East, and one that is threatened by nondemocratic forces, they believe that the United States has an obligation to defend it. Moreover, since neoconservatives believe that Israel and the United States face a common enemy in the form of Islamist ''fas-cism'' or ''totalitarianism,'' they view Israel as a vital ally in the Middle East—the region in which American security concerns are now centered. Nevertheless, although neoconservatives have been among Israel's most stalwart and ardent supporters in the United States, they are not averse to publicly criticizing Israeli governments or recommending policies contrary to those pursued by Israel (in general, neoconservatives tend to favor the policies of Israel's center-right Likud party).[11]

Supporting Israel is, then, a foreign policy priority for neoconservatives, but not every foreign policy advocated by neoconservatives is animated by their support for Israel. Neoconservatives did not conceive of the policy of forcible regime change in Iraq and promote it so tirelessly because of their support for Israel. They did so simply because they were convinced that this would serve U.S. national interests, as they understood them. For the neoconservatives, regime change in Iraq was part of their broader plan for bringing about a sweeping transformation of Middle East politics—a regional transformation that

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[8]This is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, often identified as the most staunchly pro-Israel neoconservative policy maker in the Bush administration at the time of the Iraq war, strongly objected to Israel's arms sales to China since China's military buildup posed a threat to American security and to that of its ally, Taiwan. Feith reportedly complained to Israeli defense officials about these arms sales and even demanded the resignation of the director general of Israel's Defense Ministry (Perelman and Nir 2005).

[9]While deeply American, neoconservatism also has a distinctly Jewish character, influenced by Jewish historical experiences, especially the Holocaust and Jewish assimilation in America (Heilbrunn 2008; Friedman 2005).

[10]This is why non-Jewish neoconservatives are just as pro-Israel as Jewish neoconservatives.

[11]Some neoconservatives, for example, were sharply critical of Israel's conduct of its war with Hezbollah in July 2006 (Benhorin 2006; Regan 2006).

they believed would resolve all the United States' problems in the Middle East. According to this ambitious plan, regime change in Iraq would inspire democratic forces across the region, and intimidate and undermine the region's authoritarian, theocratic, and anti-American (and anti-Israeli) regimes (Lemann 2003; Packer 2003). By establishing Iraq as ''the first Arab democracy,'' in Paul Wolfowitz's words (quoted in Keller 2002), a democratic ''domino effect'' would be set in motion across the Middle East (Singer 2002). Democratization would, in turn, ameliorate the region's political, economic, and social conditions that foster Islamist radicalism, Jihadist terrorism, and anti-Israel demagoguery. The new, democratic Middle East that would eventually emerge would no longer be a source of threats to the United States, Israel, or the rest of the world.[12]

It was this optimistic outlook that was behind the expression ''the road to Jerusalem leads through Baghdad.'' What this meant was that, contrary to the common argument that a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the most urgent task for U.S. Middle East policy, the United States should actually prioritize regime change in Baghdad over efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, because the former is the necessary condition for reaching an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. According to this view, the major obstacle to such an agreement was the influence of radical groups and regimes determined to prevent peace between Israel and the Palestinians (for ideological and/or political expediency reasons). By turning the political tide against these radical forces—through regime change in Iraq—the obstacle to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement would be removed, thereby enabling Israel to finally make peace with the Palestinians and Arab world.

The neoconservatives, therefore, certainly expected Israel to benefit from the transformed Middle East that they confidently believed a war in Iraq would bring about. But this expected benefit was not their primary motivation in pushing for war. It was an additional incentive, not their major rationale for invading Iraq. The neoconservatives were guided by their conception of American interests, not Israeli interests, but they believed (as do most American policy makers) that these interests were harmonious. While they were no doubt convinced that toppling Saddam Hussein's regime would promote America's security, Israel's security, and international security more generally, it was American security and power that mattered most to them.

The Role of Pro-Israel and American Jewish Organizations

Together with neoconservative ideologues, the other groups within the United States that have been blamed for promoting the Iraq war on behalf of Israel are pro-Israel organizations (most notably, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee [AIPAC]) and major American Jewish organizations. These organizations are accused of lobbying for a war with Iraq because of their loyalty to Israel (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007:241–243). The truth is that pro-Israel and mainstream Jewish organizations in the United States did generally favor removing Saddam Hussein from power, and this was in large part because of their support for Israel (Goldberg 2002). The prevailing view was that Saddam Hussein's Iraq posed a threat to Israel. Saddam had already attacked Israel with scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War and funded Palestinian terrorist groups; it was feared that in the future he could launch missiles equipped with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons against Israel. It was hoped that Saddam's overthrow would

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[12]According to democratic peace theory, democracies are more peaceful and do not go to war with one another.

not only end this threat but also exert some pressure on Israel's other regional foes—Syria and Iran (Lichtenstein 2003).[13] But while the stance of pro-Israel and major Jewish organizations in the United States on regime change in Iraq was primarily determined by their concern for Israel, they were also convinced that, in the words of David Harris (then the deputy executive director of the American Jewish Democratic Council), ''what's good for Israel is good for America'' (quoted in Goldberg 2002). As they saw it, there was no conflict of interests, or loyalty, between supporting Israel's interests and those of the United States. Like the neoconservatives, pro-Israel and American Jewish organizations all adhere to the tenet that American and Israeli interests are completely compatible.

Although pro-Israel groups and major Jewish organizations in the United States did generally support removing Saddam Hussein from power, there was no consensus of opinion on how this should be done (Berger 2002b; Cattan 2002). That is, while there was broad agreement on the objective of toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, there was much less agreement on the strategy of how to do this. Prior to the invasion, only a few Jewish groups (the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs) publicly expressed outright support for unilateral American military action against Iraq; others (the Jewish Council for Public Affairs) called for diplomacy and only supported war with Iraq as a last resort if diplomacy failed; and still others (the American Jewish Committee and AIPAC) took no official position. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the umbrella group that represents fifty-two Jewish organizations, never endorsed unilateral regime change in Iraq. American Jewish organizations, therefore, were not united in pushing for unilateral, forcible regime change in Iraq, as they have been accused of doing.

The lack of consensus within the world of American Jewish organizations over how to remove Saddam Hussein from power is one reason why the claim that they pushed for war against Iraq is inaccurate. Another reason is that these organizations were highly circumspect about promoting their views on a war with Iraq. As the debate raged within the United States over whether to go to war with Iraq in the months prior to the invasion, major American Jewish organizations were for the most part hesitant and cautious in publicizing their views on this controversial issue. There were a number of reasons for this caution.

First, there was a concern that if American Jewish groups vocally supported war with Iraq, they could be blamed for instigating the war,[14] and there could even be an anti-Semitic backlash if the war turned out badly (Cooperman 2003). Pat Buchanan's infamous reference to the Israeli defense ministry's ''amen corner'' in the United States during the Gulf crisis prior to the outbreak of the 1991 Gulf War had not been forgotten by American Jewish organizations, always deeply sensitive to accusations of ''dual loyalty.'' Worried about provoking such accusations, major American Jewish organizations were very careful about what they said on the issue of war with Iraq (Berger 2002a). With few exceptions, they preferred to keep quiet rather than broadcast their support for regime change in Iraq (Milbank 2002). Even the normally vocal AIPAC avoided taking a public position on the war. While the pro-war sentiments of its members were evident

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[13]The perception of Saddam Hussein as a brutal dictator who had committed massive human rights abuses was another, albeit secondary, reason that American Jewish organizations favored regime change in Iraq.

[14]This concern was certainly not unfounded, as demonstrated by Congressman James Moran's comment to a group of antiwar protesters at a local church that ''If it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this'' (quoted in Firestone 2003).

during its annual conference in April 2003, held shortly after the beginning of the war, AIPAC officials tried to downplay the subject of the war at the conference (Milbank 2003).

Second, although the official leadership of American Jewry tended to support the United States taking military action against Iraq, American Jewry as a whole was more divided on the issue of war with Iraq. Although surveys showed that a majority of American Jews supported U.S. military action to oust Saddam during the run-up to the war in late 2002 and early 2003 (59% of American Jews supported this according to a poll conducted by the American Jewish Committee [2002]), there was still strong opposition from many left-wing American Jews. American Jews were certainly no more supportive of an invasion of Iraq than were other Americans (Cooperman 2003).[15] In fact, surveys done by the Pew Research Center in the months before the invasion showed that American Jews were less supportive of the United States taking military action against Iraq than were whites of other faiths (Cooperman 2003; Freedman 2003). Since American Jewish public opinion was divided on the war, American Jewish organizations—as official representatives of the American Jewish community—were careful not to alienate and offend a sizable segment of their constituency (antiwar Jews) by enthusiastically publicly supporting American military action against Iraq (Goodstein 2003; Lichtenstein 2003).

Finally, major American Jewish organizations and the pro-Israel Lobby were keen to ensure that their public positions were compatible with that of the Israeli government at the time. Whatever the views within Ariel Sharon's government on the Bush administration's plan for regime change in Iraq, Israel did not want to give the impression that it was pushing for war. Hence, American Jewish organizations and the pro-Israel Lobby tried to coordinate their positions with Sharon's government and thus did not want to appear to be more supportive of military action than the Israeli government was.

American Jewish organizations and the pro-Israel Lobby did not, therefore, play the role of advocates for an invasion of Iraq as claimed by proponents of the ''war for Israel'' thesis. While there was certainly support for a war with Iraq, this support was not as extensive, as strong, or as vocal as the ''war for Israel'' thesis suggests. The power of the pro-Israel Lobby—however one measures or judges it—was not mobilized in support of war with Iraq. There was no effort made to rally the legions of pro-Israel activists and no concerted media campaign to drum up support for the war. Instead, there were a few public statements in favor of war made by prominent individuals in the American Jewish community[16] and allegedly some quiet behind-the-scenes lobbying of members of Congress to vote in favor of the resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq in October 2002 (this has been denied by AIPAC officials; Frankel 2006). This hardly amounts to a major attempt to push for war. At most, American Jewish organizations and the pro-Israel Lobby gave their backing to the Bush administration's Iraq policy in the run-up to the war; they were not responsible for this policy, nor did they convince Congress, let alone the American public, to support it.[17]

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[15]Most polls before the war showed American public support for the invasion ranging from 55% to 65% (depending upon the exact question asked).

[16]Such as Mortimer B. Zuckerman, then Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Rabbi David Saperstein, the Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

[17]Even if AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups did privately lobby members of Congress in support of the war resolution, its passage in Congress owes more to Republican loyalty to the Bush administration and Democratic fear of appearing weak on national security issues in the run-up to the November 2002 congressional elections, as well as the prevailing sense of insecurity in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Role of Israel

Israel's alleged desire for a U.S.-led war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq underpins the ''war for Israel'' critique. Why else would its lobbyists and supporters in the United States promote a war with Iraq if Israel was not solidly behind this effort? Indeed, the ''war for Israel'' critique accuses Ariel Sharon's government of ''warmongering,'' encouraging—even pushing—the Bush administration to invade Iraq. Israel, according to this view, was eager for war since it wanted to remove a longstanding enemy and threat to its security.[18] Israel's attitude toward the Iraq war, however, was actually more ambivalent than the ''war for Israel'' critique suggests. Instead of being a ''cheerleader'' for a war with Iraq, Israel was a halfhearted supporter. To be sure, some Israeli leaders publicly advocated the need for regime change and a pre-emptive military attack against Iraq; yet, privately, Israeli officials counseled caution to their American counterparts and tried to shift their attention to the threat of Iran. Unlike the Bush administration, the Sharon government was not fixated on Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Iran, not Iraq, was of much greater concern for Israel. Nevertheless, perceiving the Bush administration's determination to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, Sharon's government supported the war out of a combination of loyalty and hope. All the while, Israel harbored serious doubts and misgivings about the U.S. plan for regime change in Iraq. It went along with the war, but it certainly did not actively seek it.

Unlike many governments and populations around the world that opposed the war, the Israeli government and the Israeli public are generally believed to have been keen supporters of the Iraq war. Media reports before the invasion of Iraq often cited Israeli officials warning of the danger Iraq posed and proclaiming the benefits to the region of his downfall (Lynfield 2002; Bennet 2003). The bellicose public statements in support of a war against Saddam Hussein's regime from former Israeli prime ministers Ehud Barak (2002), Benjamin Netanyahu (2002), and Shimon Peres (Guttman 2002) all contributed to the impression that Israel was strongly in favor of war with Iraq.

This impression, however, was not entirely accurate. In reality, Israeli sentiment on a war with Iraq was more mixed, with the general public broadly supportive and elite opinion (including within Israel's political and security establishment) more skeptical. Certainly, there was little, if any, pro-Iraqi sentiment in Israel (except, perhaps, among Israel's minority Palestinian population). Saddam Hussein was generally reviled in Israel, known for his anti-Israel demagoguery, financial assistance to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, and, not least, the scud missile attacks he ordered against Israel in the 1991 Gulf War. Israelis would certainly welcome his demise and that of his brutal regime. But there were also fears that a U.S. war with Iraq would destabilize the Middle East (Kalderon 2003), further inflame anti-Israel sentiments in the region (Oz 2003), and possibly provoke Iraq to attack Israel. The last concern was particularly acute for Israelis given their memories of anxious nights spent in bomb shelters with gas masks on as they awaited incoming scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War. The possibility that Iraq could again attack Israel, only this time with chemical or biological weapons, was one that Israelis had to take into account,[19] despite the assurances they received from Israel's political and

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[18]Mearsheimer and Walt (2007:237–238), for instance, refer to the ''Israeli government's war fervor'' and ''Israel's enthusiasm for war.''

[19]According to a public opinion survey in February 2003 (Yaar and Hermann 2003), 40% of Israeli Jews believed that the chances that Iraq will attack Israel in the event of a war were high, whereas 52% believed the chances of an Iraqi attack against Israel were low or very low.

security leadership that this scenario was highly unlikely and one that Israel was well-prepared for.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the general public in Israel supported a U.S.-led war against Iraq. According to a public opinion poll in February 2003, over three-quarters (77.5%) of Israeli Jews favored a U.S. military campaign against Iraq (Yaar and Hermann 2003). In contrast to many other countries, there were no loud protests or mass demonstrations in Israel against a war in Iraq. But while many Israelis welcomed a U.S. invasion of Iraq, there was no consensus of opinion in Israel. There was, in fact, a debate over the war, albeit a quieter and less intense debate than that conducted before the invasion of Iraq in the United States and elsewhere (Demick 2002).

The central question in this debate was whether such a war would benefit or harm Israel. Supporters of the war argued that it would bring Israel a number of strategic benefits (Kam 2003:13). First would be the elimination of Iraq's non-conventional weapons capability and the potential threat this posed to Israel. Second, regime change in Iraq would remove an enemy regime and hopefully replace it with a ''moderate'' pro-Western and pro-American regime that would not oppose Israel (or would, at least, be less anti-Israeli than the former Baathist regime). Third, the war could send a strong message to Israel's other enemies—Iran, Syria, and Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority—intimidating them to moderate their policies and behavior vis-à-vis Israel. As Efraim Halevy, Sharon's national security adviser obliquely put it, ''The shock waves emerging from post-Saddam Baghdad could have wide-ranging effects in Tehran, Damascus, and in Ramallah'' (quoted in Bennet 2003). This could pressure Syria to stop supporting Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist organizations like Islamic Jihad, lead Iran to abandon its own nuclear weapons program, bring about the downfall of Arafat (Gilad 2002; Lynfield 2002), and force the Palestinian Authority to comply with Israel's wishes (Benn 2002). Finally, some Israelis (most notably, Netanyahu and Natan Sharansky) shared the neoconservative hope that regime change in Iraq could result in a positive transformation of the political landscape of the Middle East, democratizing the entire region and, ultimately, enabling Israel to live in peace with its neighbors.

The neoconservatives' goal of democratizing the Middle East, however, was not widely supported in Israel. Few Israelis embraced the neoconservatives' vision of a democratic Middle East emerging from the aftermath of regime change in Iraq. There was a great deal of skepticism about the likelihood of rapid political progress toward democracy in the region, with or without regime change in Iraq. The prevailing Israeli view was that the political culture and traditions of the region, especially in the Arab states, were not hospitable to democracy.[20] Strong-man rule and dynastic autocracies were the norm in the Arab world, and would probably remain so.

Not only were Israelis skeptical about the prospects for Middle East democratization, but also they generally viewed democratization—even if it were possible—as representing more of a threat, than an opportunity, for Israel. After all, Israel was more hated on the ''Arab street'' than it was in the corridors of power in Arab capitals. Politically empowering the masses would overturn the status quo in the region, and the outcome could be far worse for Israel if democratic elections brought virulently anti-Israel Islamist parties to power such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (which opposed the peace agreement with Israel and wanted to scrap it). In short, a democratic Middle East could be more hostile to

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[20]According to Danny Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to the United States at the time of the invasion of Iraq, Prime Minister Sharon told President Bush in one of their meetings prior to the war (which Ayalon attended) that ''In terms of culture and tradition, the Arab world is not built for democratization'' (quoted in Alpher 2007).

Israel than the existing regional order, however problematic it was. Thus, Israelis (including those within the country's political and security establishment) did not welcome the Bush administration's democracy agenda (Alpher 2007). They viewed its goal of bringing democracy to the Middle East as unrealistic and reckless.

Many Israeli officials, security analysts, and regional experts tended to regard the American plan for regime change in Iraq as ill-conceived and dangerously naïve (Alpher 2004). They knew from first-hand experience how difficult and frequently counterproductive outside interventions in the internal affairs of Arab societies could be. They were especially alert to the dangers of occupation as a result of Israel's long occupation of the Palestinian territories. As Yossi Alpher (2004) writes, ''Many Israeli strategic thinkers on the left and the right knew from bitter experience prior to the war in Iraq that foreign occupation of an Arab country is counterproductive to the occupier's interests.'' The risk that the United States would get ''bogged down'' in an occupation of Iraq was one that concerned Israelis. According to Danny Ayalon, Israel's ambassador to the United States at the time of the invasion of Iraq, Prime Minister Sharon privately advised President Bush before the war against occupying Iraq (Alpher 2007). Israel's concern in this regard was that if the American occupation of Iraq turned out to be long, costly, and bloody, this would negatively affect Israel because its strongest and closest ally would be weakened. It would also increase anti-Americanism, and by extension anti-Israeli sentiment, and fuel Islamist extremism in the Middle East and beyond (Alpher 2007).

Perhaps the biggest concern for Israel was how a U.S.-led war and occupation of Iraq might affect its neighbor, Iran. Indeed, Iran, not Iraq, was foremost in the minds of Israeli officials as they contemplated the possible consequences of a U.S. war with Iraq. Iraq had served as a regional counterweight to Iranian power, and Israeli officials were worried that the weakening of Iraq or its collapse as a result of the war would strengthen Iran. The Israelis also feared that a U.S.-led war with Iraq would divert attention and resources from the Middle East's real danger—Iran. These Israeli concerns were frequently expressed in private to Bush Administration officials. As Douglas Feith, one of the neoconservative architects of the Iraq war, recalled in an interview: ''What you heard from Israeli officials in private discussions was that they were not really focused on Iraq. They were much more focused on Iran.'' Feith also noted that Israeli officials were worried that ''if the U.S. got into a military conflict in Iraq and it didn't go well, it could make our diplomacy with Iran less credible'' (quoted in Benhorin 2008). Similarly, Lawrence Wilkerson, Colin Powell's chief of staff at the State Department at the time of the Iraq war (and a sharp critic of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration), later stated in an interview that ''The Israelis tried their best to persuade us that we were focused on the wrong enemy, and that they were very leery of destroying the balance of power in the Middle East'' (quoted in Goldberg 2007).

Israel considered Iran a greater threat than Iraq. As Israel's Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer stated in an interview with the *Washington Post* in February 2002, ''Today, everybody is busy with Iraq. Iraq is a problem [...]. But you should understand, if you ask me, today Iran is more dangerous than Iraq'' (quoted in Sipress 2002). In fact, Israel's security establishment did not see Iraq as much of a danger at all. Although the Israeli intelligence community agreed with their counterparts in the United States that Iraq was in possession of chemical and biological weapons and was still seeking nuclear weapons (Israeli Intelligence on Iraq 2003), they disagreed in their assessment of this threat (Brom 2003). From Israel's perspective, Iraq was not a primary threat since it was contained and had become militarily much weaker since the 1991 Gulf War. After more than a decade of U.N. sanctions, Iraq's once-formidable army no

longer posed a serious threat to Israel (Gold 2004), and nor did its limited missile capability (Bennet 2002; Gold 2004). As for Iraq's alleged nuclear program, although Israel believed it still maintained one, it did not consider this to be an imminent threat. While Bush administration officials emphasized the urgency of dealing with the threat of Iraq's nuclear weapons program and repeatedly suggested that Iraq could be only months away from acquiring a nuclear weapon, Israeli security officials thought that Iraq was still years away from attaining a nuclear capability (Bennet 2002). Summing up the Israeli attitude toward Iraq, Moshe Yaalon, then I.D.F. chief of staff, was quoted in an Israeli newspaper in October 2002 saying, ''I'm not losing any sleep over the Iraqi threat'' (cited in Bennet 2002).

Thus, while the Bush administration prioritized the Iraqi threat, the Sharon government prioritized the Iranian threat (Sipress 2002). This difference in Israeli and American threat perceptions arose in meetings between the two governments as far back as 2001. In October 2001, for instance, a high-level Israeli government delegation went to Washington to present the Bush administration with new evidence of Iran's rapidly progressing nuclear weapons program and to stress the need to do something about it, but the Bush administration was more focused on the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Hersh 2001). Israeli officials argued that Iran's nuclear program was more advanced than Iraq's and that if it was completed, it could alter the entire balance of power in the Middle East. American officials disputed Israel's assessment of how close Iran was to acquiring nuclear weapons and argued that in any case Iran was less likely to use nonconventional weapons than Iraq, since Saddam Hussein had already demonstrated a willingness to use non-conventional weapons and surface-to-surface missiles against neighboring countries and against Israel (Guttman 2003b).

Although the Sharon government was far more concerned about the threat from Iran than from Iraq, once it became clear that the Bush administration was intent on implementing its plan for forcible regime change in Iraq, Israel went along with it. As the Bush administration made its case for war with Iraq, the Sharon government voiced no criticism and was, for the most part, careful not to publicly challenge the Bush administration's emphasis on the Iraqi threat (Bennet 2002). In fact, Israeli officials themselves started to emphasize this threat and publicly endorsed American and British assessments of Iraq's WMD capabilities (Israeli Intelligence on Iraq 2003). Despite the misgivings within Israel's political and security establishment about the wisdom of invading and occupying Iraq, the Sharon government supported the Bush administration's plans. It did so quietly, however, both in deference to the Bush administration's wish to avoid alienating potential Arab allies (Alpher 2007) and because it did not want Israel to be blamed for encouraging the war if it turned out badly (Benn 2002).

Why, then, did the Sharon government ultimately support the war with Iraq? Partly, it was simply out of loyalty to the United States and to the Bush administration in particular. The United States was Israel's most important ally and benefactor, and hence it would have been incredibly foolish for the Sharon government to jeopardize this critical relationship by opposing U.S. plans for Iraq. Israel had little to gain and much to lose by doing so. Furthermore, the Sharon government enjoyed ''a special closeness,'' in Sharon's words, with the Bush administration (quoted in Kaiser 2003). President Bush was widely considered to be one of, if not the most pro-Israel American presidents, and he had consistently backed the Sharon government in its dealings with the Palestinians. Sharon was, therefore, probably motivated by some personal loyalty to President Bush, as well as Israel's sense of obligation to its American patron.

But there was more than just loyalty motivating the Sharon government's covert support for the Iraq war. The Sharon government was also motivated by

its hope that a successful war in Iraq would lead to greater American pressure on the regimes in Iran and Syria. Indeed, according to an April 2003 report in *Ha'aretz* (Benziman 2003), ''A few months before the penultimate hour in Iraq [i.e., the invasion of Iraq], high-level Israeli emissaries held talks with senior officials in the American administration, in which they tried to divine U.S. intentions for the post-Saddam era. The guests got the impression that Washington's ambitions meshed nicely with Israel's interest—that the U.S. meant to take the regime in Syria to task for the various ways in which it supports terrorism [...].'' This did not necessarily mean that Syria was the next target of attack for the Bush administration (as many speculated); rather the Bush administration hoped that regime change in Iraq would have a ''demonstration effect'' that would give the United States a greater ability to pressure Syria to end its support for terrorism. The same was true with regards to Iran. By forcefully demonstrating the price of pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, the Bush administration hoped that Iran would take notice and become more amenable to U.S. pressure to abandon its nuclear program. The Sharon government shared these hopes. It expected the Bush administration, after Iraq, to turn its attention to Syria and Iran, states that were of much greater concern to Israel than Iraq. From the Sharon government's perspective, therefore, the war with Iraq was a stepping-stone to a U.S. showdown with Syria and Iran and a means of ratcheting up the pressure on both states.

Thus, although Israel clearly did not ''push'' the United States into war with Iraq, it certainly did not try to stop it or warn against it. On the contrary, Israel was happy to support the American endeavor in Iraq, from which it hoped to benefit. Sharon's government set aside the fears and doubts within Israel's political and security establishment concerning this endeavor and placed its hopes on American success in Iraq. It surely could not have imagined what was to come.

Conclusion: A Bad War for Israel

The evidence and arguments presented in this article refute the claim that the Iraq war was a ''war for Israel.'' The Iraq war was not the result of the influence of Israel and the U.S.-based pro-Israel Lobby. Nor was concern for Israel's security the motivating factor for neoconservative advocates of the war inside and outside the Bush administration. Although neoconservatives, the pro-Israel lobby, and Israel's government all supported, to varying degrees, a war with Iraq, they did so for a variety of reasons, not all of which they agreed upon. These groups did not have a common outlook on the war with Iraq, and their motivations and concerns differed. While Israel's interests were by no means irrelevant to neoconservatives, they were not as important to them as American interests. Neoconservatives were primarily concerned with American interests and goals, and they believed that regime change in Iraq would usher in the democratization of the Middle East. The Sharon government in Israel did not share this belief and did not seek a democratic Middle East. It was more concerned with Iran than Iraq, and it hoped that a war against Iraq would help in addressing the threat of Iran. The pro-Israel lobby had no single view on a war with Iraq. Some organizations within it were keen supporters of the war; others were lukewarm. While all these organizations sought to represent what they believed to be Israel's interests, these organizations were also representing the views and interests of American Jews, a large number of whom were opposed to a war with Iraq and did not want to be closely associated with it.

Those who believed that a U.S.-led war with Iraq would benefit Israel have been proven badly wrong. The Iraq war has turned out to be deeply damaging to Israel's interests. Although then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has

claimed that ''Iraq without Saddam Hussein is so much better for the security and safety of the State of Israel'' (quoted in ''Olmert 2006: Israel Safer Post-Saddam and After Lebanon War''), few share this upbeat assessment. Many within Israel's political and security establishment, as well as ordinary Israelis, now believe that, far from making Israel safer, the Iraq war has increased the threats the country faces (Keinon 2006; Halpern 2007). Although Saddam's regime is gone, it has been replaced by a democratically elected Iraqi government dominated by fundamentalist Shiite political groups that are vehemently anti-Zionist and heavily influenced by Iran. There is now great concern in Israel about the emergence of a ''Shiite crescent''—an arc of Shiite enemies of Israel, composed of Iran, a Shiite-led Iraq, Alawite-led Syria, and a Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon (Levey 2007). Israel is especially worried by Iran's rising power, which the Iraq war has increased. Instead of being intimidated by the Iraq war, Iran is more emboldened than ever and is defiantly continuing its nuclear program despite international sanctions and American threats. Ironically, therefore, the war in Iraq that so many people mistakenly believe was fought for Israel's security has already undermined this security and may end up enabling Iran to acquire a nuclear capability which would constitute the greatest threat to Israeli security since the state's establishment.

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