

PREMIUM CONTENT

login | logout »
subscribe

my account | email | search | sitemap



Monday,
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TODAY CLASSIFIEDS SERVICES

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Take me to...
GO

THE IRISH TIMES BREAKING NEWS NEWS IN FOCUS | SPORT BUSINESS | WEATHER | TECHNOLOGY

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Mon, Apr 10, 06

In the Newspaper

Daily

- Front Page
- Ireland
- World**
- Finance
- Features
- Sport
- Opinion
- Letters
- Crossword
- Sudoku
- Article Index

Daily PDFs

- Front Page
- TV Listings

Weekly Index

- TUESDAY
 - Health
 - Education Today
- WEDNESDAY
 - Motors
 - An Teanga Bheo
 - Commercial Property
- THURSDAY
 - Science Today
 - Property
- FRIDAY
 - The Ticket
- SATURDAY
 - Weekend
 - News Features
 - Obituaries
 - Magazine

Weekly Article Index

MON | TUE | WED
THU | FRI | SAT

Archive Search

World

Unsettling signs for Israel over alliance with US

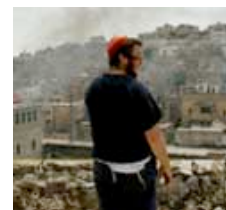
Middle East: The role of America's pro-Israel lobby in the decision to go to war in Iraq has been raised by respected academics, writes **Ed Moloney** in New York.

Israel's newly elected acting prime minister, Ehud Olmert, will face a formidable array of problems if or when his Kadima party puts together a stable coalition government that is committed to dismantling West Bank settlements and settling the issue of Israel's borders with its Arab neighbours.

Not only can he expect resistance from fundamentalist Jewish settlers but also from Hamas, now in charge of the Palestinian Authority.

Like every Israeli prime minister since the 1967 war, Olmert can count on the strong support of the White House in Washington. Only days ago President Bush suggested that Israeli security was a major reason for blocking Iran's bid to acquire nuclear weapons.

"I'll make it clear again [to Iran]," he said following a speech defending his Iraq policy, "that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel."



A Jewish settler on the roof of an occupied building in the West Bank city of Hebron yesterday. The Kadima party is committed to dismantling West Bank settlements and settling the issue of Israel's borders. Photograph: Ronen Zvulun/Reuters

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Comforting though the alliance with the US is, there are unsettling signs for Israel that America's occupation of Iraq is beginning to raise previously unthinkable questions about the country's nearly 40-year liaison with Israel.

The recent publication of an 83-page searing critique of the US-Israel relationship contains few revelations about the way the two countries have worked together, but what has alarmed Israel's friends in the US are the timing

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Special Reports

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and source of the article.

First published two weeks ago in the *London Review of Books* and since then on Harvard University's internet website, *The Israel Lobby* is the work of two of America's most distinguished international relations academics, Prof Stephen Walt, dean at the John F Kennedy school of government at Harvard and Prof John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago.

Criticism of America's ties to Israel is common at the margins of US politics but hostile analyses from the academic

establishment are unheard of.

As New York Jewish daily *The Forward* put it: "What is new and startling is the document's provenance. Its authors are not fringe gadflies but two of America's most respected foreign-affairs theorists . . . Though it's tempting, they can't be dismissed as cranks outside the mainstream. They are the mainstream."

America's relationship with Israel, Walt and Mearsheimer argue, is characterised by a US willingness "to set aside its own security and that of its allies in order to advance the interests of another state"; the alliance, they say, "has no equal in American political history" .

US support for Israel has been unwavering and generous. Israel is, they say, the largest single recipient of US foreign aid - \$140 billion (€116 billion) since 1973 - and it has been given huge amounts of military aid and intelligence assistance by the Pentagon and CIA.

The US has also expended significant diplomatic credit supporting Israel at the United Nations, vetoing 32 critical Security Council resolutions, more than all the vetoes cast by other members, and protecting Israel's nuclear capability from the scrutiny of the IAEA.

Invariably, as illustrated by the Bush White House, American presidents end up supporting Israel's stand against the Palestinians.

In return America's side of the balance sheet is deeply in the red. The relationship has "helped inflame the Arab and Islamic world" and is partly responsible for the growing terrorist and nuclear threat in the region, Walt and Mearsheimer argue.

The argument that US and Israel are close because they share terrorist foes is false: "The US has a terrorism problem in good part," they write, "because it is so closely allied with Israel not the other way round," while "Israel's nuclear arsenal is one reason some of its neighbours want nuclear weapons".

Israel repays America by being a disloyal and unreliable ally, the authors contend. It ignores US requests or has reneged on promises such as to stop building settlements in Gaza and on the West Bank, or to refrain from assassinating Palestinian leaders.

Meanwhile, it has engaged in the unauthorised transfer of sensitive US military technology to rivals such as China while conducting, according to one

Washington agency, "the most aggressive espionage operations against the US of any ally".

(Next month two officials from the pro-Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac), will go on trial charged with passing secret Pentagon documents on Iran to an Israeli diplomat.)

The explanation for America's "extraordinary generosity" towards Israel is not that Israel is a vital strategic asset or that there is a compelling moral case for giving it support, but because of "the unmatched power of the Israel Lobby" in influencing the White House, Congress and the political establishment, Walt and Mearsheimer argue.

"The Israel Lobby" is a loose coalition of individuals and organisations whose role is to steer US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. It ranges from Aipac, a hugely wealthy lobby group in Washington which "has a stranglehold on Congress", through to think tanks, print media such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and Christian evangelists who believe the creation of Israel is the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy.

The "lobby" rewards Israel's friends, punishes its enemies and attempts to control or stifle debate on the Middle East.

The most controversial and significant part of the critique deals with the role Israel had in encouraging the US to wage war with Iraq and the part played by neoconservatives, many of them Jewish, in preparing the ground.

Neocons with ties to the right-wing Israeli party Likud like Eliot Abrams, Douglas Feith, John Bolton, William Kristol, Donal Rumsfeld, Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz were active in Clinton's time, arguing for the overthrow of Saddam, but really came into their own in the Bush White House where they occupied key positions in the Pentagon and in the office of the vice-president, Dick Cheney.

According to the authors, after the September 11th attacks, the neocons won Cheney over to war against Iraq and Cheney persuaded Bush. They write: "Given the neoconservatives' devotion to Israel, their obsession with Iraq and their influence in the Bush administration, it isn't surprising that many Americans suspected that the war was designed to further Israel's interests. There is little doubt that Israel and 'the Lobby' were key factors in the decision to go to war."

American Jews has been unsure how to respond. At one end of the spectrum, silence is regarded as the best way to smother the story. "It's much better to let others respond," said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice-chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations.

At the other end are people like Prof Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School, who has attacked the authors, calling them "liars" and "bigots" and claiming they have taken material from anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi websites.

"There isn't an original word, or thought or idea in any of this. It reads like a combination of [white supremacist] David Duke and [left-wing writer] Alex Cockburn."

Dershowitz's charges are angrily denied by the authors. "We did our own research," says Prof Mearsheimer. "The claim that we relied on neo-Nazi websites is utter nonsense and as for David Duke, we have no control over who reads our work but I can say that both of us abhor and condemn what

Duke stands for."

Prof Norman Finkelstein of De Paul University, a Jewish critic of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, said the paper had appeared in the context of a major strategic defeat for the US in Iraq. "There is credible evidence for the claim that the Iraq war was a Jewish war. I happen to believe that the evidence is superficial but, nonetheless, there is evidence for it," he said.

"So if, as the situation gets worse in Iraq, if Jews are scapegoated, it is in part a disaster of their own making."

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