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Israel, Iran and the Bomb *The Neighborhood Bully*

by ANDREW LEVINE

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What accounts for the U.S.-Israel “special relationship”? This question is seldom addressed outside dissident circles; the foreign policy establishment simply takes it for granted, much as they used to take it for granted that the Cold War needed to be fought.

From the Israeli side, there is no mystery. The association with the United States is an economic, military and diplomatic necessity. Keeping it going is therefore Israel’s top priority; taking advantage of it whenever they can is a close second.

But what explains the U.S. role? Plainly, inertia plays an important part: the U.S.–Israeli relationship developed years ago, under different conditions than those that now obtain, and foreign policy establishments become set in their ways. The world changes, but deeply entrenched assumptions are not easily dislodged.

Legislators too can be blissfully indifferent towards shifting realities – when there is nothing in it for them in taking changed situations into account, and when they think it is risky to do so.

The fact that the issue is off the mainstream agenda also helps keep everything as is. If the issue isn’t engaged, how can views change?

But even if the main reason why things are as they are is that they were that way in the past, it is important to understand the rationale for received ways of thinking and acting.

For this, the work of foreign policy dissidents is indispensable.

Two main hypotheses stand out: that Israel is a strategic asset for the United States and, more generally, the West; and that the Israel lobby is running the show – in the United States and, in varying degrees, in key European countries, Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

Noam Chomsky is the most prominent proponent of the former view. It plainly explains a great deal, particularly in the period between the Six Day War of 1967 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when American foreign policy was geared towards “winning” the Cold War, and when the main threat to American dominance in the region came from secular nationalist movements that were, in varying degrees, dependent on Soviet protection and support.

Then Israel was useful not just for taking nationalists down a notch, but also for guaranteeing a reliable American presence in the Middle East.

That historical moment has passed. With political Islam in ascendance and with non- or extra-state actors taking on the United States and the governments of its allies in the region and beyond, it is no longer clear what Israel does to advance American interests.

Nevertheless, the consensus view in the foreign policy establishment is that Israel remains indispensable.

In recent years, John Mearscheimer and Stephen Walt have been among the most persuasive defenders of the Israel lobby hypothesis. Their 2008 book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* is noteworthy not just for the cogency of its arguments, but also because the authors are respected political scientists who breached the code of silence that had shrouded discussion of the Israel lobby’s influence. They broke a longstanding academic and journalistic taboo.

Each day’s news seems to bring fresh confirmation of the Mearscheimer-Walt position —most recently, the, probably temporary, failure last week of hastily called ministerial-level talks in Geneva that aimed to defuse tensions over the Iranian nuclear program, and the expulsion of the United States from UNESCO for failing to pay its dues. The U.S. hasn’t been paying what it owes because UNESCO accorded full membership rights to Palestine.

Congress was the villain there. According to news reports, French opposition was the main factor behind the setback at Geneva, but there is no doubt that the increasingly hysterical warnings of Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli government officials also played a role.

It is a scary thought but it is possible that there are people in the American and other delegations who actually believe what Netanyahu says. What is certain is that they are all wary of the political consequences of not bending to his will.

That fear is no doubt justified – not so much because Israel’s lobbyists really are omnipotent, but because the idea that they are has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In any case, everyone who has given the matter serious thought understands that both hypotheses are true; it is not a case of either/or. Geopolitical considerations are never insulated from domestic politics; in this instance, the two are especially closely joined.

However, because so much is at stake, it can be important to know which is, or rather which is thought to be, the more important factor. Over the years, there have been countless “natural experiments” that bear on this question – cases where U.S. national interests and support for Israel appear to be at odds. But the question remains unresolved.

One reason for this is that the relative importance of one or the other factor varies from case to case. Another is that it is often difficult, or simply impossible, to determine what the national interest is.

National interests often have very little to do with the interests of the vast majority of the people who live in the nation.

They reflect instead the shared long-term goals of the nation’s economic elites, and the (sometimes independent) preoccupations of their foreign policy establishments. The pursuit of national interests can have consequences that benefit ordinary people but, when this happens, it is usually more by accident than by design.

However, to conduct foreign policy successfully, popular consent, or acquiescence, is indispensable. The more democratic the regime, the more this is the case.

Therefore foreign policy establishments have reason to make the national interests they pursue accord with, or rather seem to accord with, the interests of the people in the nations they represent. In this respect, ironically, democracy and transparency are sometimes at odds.

What politicians say the national interest is may therefore have little to do with what those who shape foreign policy have in mind. We should always be skeptical of what they tell us.

In the United States, they have been telling us since 9/11 that high on the list of national interests is keeping Americans safe from Islamist terrorists.

This has been their justification for going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and for sending drones and assassins to Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere. One can only wonder if their rationale is not just a pretext for keeping the Middle East and adjacent oil producing regions under American control.

It can seem that way, but the situation is more complicated. In all likelihood, politicians who bloviate endlessly about security believe what they say, whatever other objectives they may also aim to further. No doubt, they really do want to keep the “homeland” secure.

But, to the extent that they do, they go about it in an astonishingly counter-productive way.

The only sure results of the “war on terror,” as it used to be called, is that the supply of terrorists will continue to expand, and that their zealotry will intensify.

Sending soldiers into people’s homes to haul away their sons and husbands can have that effect; so can killing people’s families, friends and neighbors. Causing entire populations to live in fear of weaponized drones and murderous special operations units doesn’t help either.

There is an alternative, of course; the United States could change course. Instead of seeking to dominate the region militarily and politically, it could rely on trade to assure oil supplies for itself and its allies.

That way, the neoliberals in charge of the government would be truer to their professed free market ideology. More importantly, insofar as they care about the security of the American people, relations based on fair trade would force the United States to treat Muslim countries and peoples with respect.

This would do more to combat Islamist terrorism than all the weapons in Obama’s arsenal. Surely, this has dawned on the bright, well-educated people who spend their working hours thinking about geopolitical issues; it isn’t, as they say, rocket science.

Nevertheless, inertia reigns; changing course is out of the question. The idea may be entertained as a theoretical possibility, but for all practical purposes, it is a non-starter.

Israel is undoubtedly part of the reason why — a large part. But it is unclear how directly this bears on the apparent dispute between Chomsky, on the one hand, and Mearschimer and Walt, on the other; and not just because it is impossible to quantify, even approximately, how large a part Israel plays.

* * *

It is relevant that American support for Israel is only one among many of the reasons “why they hate us,” as George W. Bush famously put it.

It is relevant too that, notwithstanding widespread popular support for the Palestinian people throughout the Muslim world, Israel’s geopolitical role is what mainly rankles Muslim, especially Arab, political elites and also their opponents, including the ones we call “terrorists.” The Israel-Palestine question isn’t the whole problem; it is not even the major part.

Nevertheless, pulling back somewhat on the blank check the U.S. writes Israeli governments, or covering for them diplomatically a little less blatantly, would surely enhance “homeland security” considerably. It would help too if the U.S. showed more concern for Palestinian victims of the Israeli occupation.

This is not news to the American foreign policy elite or to its counterparts in other Western countries. But, again, this does not show that the Israel-lobby hypothesis outweighs the rival view.

This is because within establishment circles, supporting Israel has come to be a strategic imperative in its own right. So has the related idea that Israelis know better than anyone else what is best for their own security. If their views and common sense conflict, then common sense be damned.

Germany, for historical reasons, and lately France, have been, if anything, even more ardently committed to these positions than the United States. But the United States led the way, and its continuing indulgence and support for almost anything Israeli governments demand goes a long way towards explaining the support of the others.

The question then is not which of the main rival hypotheses is more explanatory, but rather how is it that Israel has effectively become an offshore fifty-first state?

The Israel lobby is surely part of the explanation; but only a part.

Cultural affinities also play a role, as does the sense of solidarity that many Americans instinctively feel towards settler states that dislodge and then oppress native populations.

It is also noteworthy that, in the past half century, Christianity's traditional anti-Judaism has largely reversed course, turning into its opposite; and that longstanding "orientalist" attitudes towards the Middle East have enabled the vilification of Muslims and of their religion, purportedly the cause of their villainy.

Finally, we should not underestimate the effects of lingering guilt over American acquiescence in the Nazis' attempt to exterminate European Jewry during World War II. Without quite casting blame on venerated American officials like FDR, the Holocaust Industry works overtime to keep this guilt alive.

In short, the strategic asset hypothesis and the Israel lobby hypothesis are constituent parts of a complex set of causes that, taken together, account for one of the more extreme and implausible inter-governmental relationships in recent world history. Insofar as Israel is viewed as if it were part of the United States, differences between American and Israeli national interests are read out of existence.

The complexity and oddity of this situation – and also its precariousness – becomes especially apparent when viewed through the prism of American and Western attitudes towards Iran's nuclear program.

The parties are caught up in a charade from which they cannot, or rather will not, extricate themselves.

Policies are based on illusions, and sustained by powerful inertial forces. To date, no one whose defection might make a difference has shown a willingness to break free.

* * *

It is plain why Israel doesn't want Iran to have the bomb. Its reasons have nothing to do with Iran's purported eagerness to wipe Israel "off the map."

There is no cause to think that the Iranians are interested in anything like that; but even if they were, it would hardly matter because, whatever else they may be, they are not suicidal. Israel's leaders, with more than two hundred bombs of their own, know this.

Israel doesn't want Iran to get the bomb because it does not want to lose its nuclear monopoly in the region.

As much as anything else, including American support, that monopoly enables Israel to do what it could never get away with if all it had to impose its will were its massive stock of conventional weapons.

Israel's bombs – along with its inclination, demonstrated many times, to use military force — are also part of the reason why Israel has become a 51st state; and therefore why the United States, its allies in tow, is as opposed as Israel itself to the prospect of an Iranian bomb.

American leaders are understandably of the view that they cannot allow Israel to find itself in a situation where it might be tempted to use its bombs. The consequences would be devastating for the entire Middle East and, if events get out of hand, as they tend to do, for the entire world.

They therefore think that they have no choice but to make Israel's security, or rather Israeli perceptions of Israel's security, a strategic objective of their own.

In this sense, Israel's bombs are aimed figuratively at the United States and Europe as much as at Iran or at any of its other Middle Eastern neighbors.

Israel is especially interested in securing its ability to do as it pleases in Lebanon, and it is concerned about Syria too.

Keeping Lebanon disunited and weak is important to the Israeli government because Hezbollah, a major force in Lebanese politics and an ally of Iran, has more than once proved itself capable of resisting anything the Israelis throw their way.

The Syrian case is more complicated since, on the whole, Assad family rule has been good for Israel. Despite the continuing grievance of its unlawful annexation of the Golan Heights, the Syrian government has helped keep Israel's northern border quiet and secure.

Additionally, the Syrians made sure that no military force hostile to Israel was free to operate from its territory. Like the Mubarak government in Egypt, the Assad “regime,” as our media call it, has been a force for stability.

Naturally, the Israelis would have preferred a dictator in Baghdad who would be on their side in Lebanon, and who, like the Saudis, shared their views on Iran. But they could live with Bashar al-Assad, just as they had lived with his father.

From the Israeli point of view, Ba’athist rule in Syria was therefore good enough; they were not about to do anything to put it in jeopardy.

This remained their attitude when the Arab Spring came to Syria, and it continued even as the repression intensified and as major components of the popular opposition took a sectarian turn.

But when Obama backed himself into a corner with his “red line,” they cast prudence aside. Sensing an opportunity to go from good enough to better still, Netanyahu *et. al.* took a maximalist line, wholeheartedly advocating American intervention into the Syrian civil war.

Who knows what effect their warmongering had? The one sure thing is that they didn’t get their way. It is also plain that Obama didn’t want to go to war there and then; he had plenty of reasons, and nothing Netanyahu said could change that.

Among those reasons was a growing awareness that many Syrians wanted Assad to stay on, and that the opposition is not only splintered, but is also becoming increasingly Islamist.

If he then put two and two together, he must have realized that deposing Assad and shifting the balance of forces on the ground in the opposition’s favor might not be such a great idea; that an American intervention would risk turning Syria into a failed state, a Middle Eastern Somalia.

This would have grave repercussions throughout the region – far worse than those brought on by America’s – ostensibly NATO’s — 2011 war in Libya.

Perhaps this is one of several factors that explain Russia’s position; they don’t want the fragile order that now reigns in Chechnya and other Muslim areas of their country upset.

One would think that the Israeli government would have similar concerns. A failed state on their northern border, chock full of weapons and Al Qaida affiliated fighters would hardly be a welcome development.

But Israel is ruled by the moral equivalent of the Tea Party, and the Lord is their shepherd. When they get a notion, nothing dissuades them; good reasons, least of all.

The Tea Party doesn’t govern here; not yet; since 2009, the Lesser Evil party has been responsible for war and peace in the other fifty states. Therefore outright, self-destructive folly doesn’t carry quite the weight in Washington that it does in Tel Aviv.

But there was that pesky red line Obama thoughtlessly laid down. That was the problem; it put him in a bind. Netanyahu's ravings were a sideshow.

Fortunately, Soviet diplomacy provided Obama with a way out. We therefore dodged that bullet – along with Russia and, whether they knew it or not, Israel too. The icing on the cake was that the Israelis and their lobby were left out in the cold.

Poor Netanyahu! Not only was the unexpected prospect of “regime change” in Syria unexpectedly snatched away from him but, worse still, American “credibility” took a hit.

For Israel, that really is unfortunate. Israel depends on America being able to call the shots, and when its credibility is damaged, its ability to bend other players to its will is diminished. This is bad news indeed.

Will Israel do anything about it? Probably not; it is too important, for them, to stay on Obama's good side. But they could; they could even attack Iran on their own, and maybe draw America in after all. Thanks to their nuclear monopoly, they can cause a lot of trouble.

This, again, is why they don't want Iran to get the bomb.

All the prattle about an “existential threat” is therefore just a ruse; in all likelihood, even Netanyahu doesn't believe it.

But it serves a purpose in Israeli domestic politics, and it makes for good propaganda abroad. It has a special appeal for American and other “diaspora” Jews who will do anything for Israel except live there. But the fact remains: Netanyahu and the others are only blowing air.

Surely, this is understood in Western capitals including Washington, where the power of the increasingly geriatric, increasingly out-of-touch Israel lobby remains unabated – because no one in national politics is ready yet to cry out, like the child in the Hans Christian Andersen story, that the emperor has no clothes.

Could that be the only reason why they go along with the charade? Perhaps not; but it is the main reason. The only other contender is fear of nuclear proliferation.

American Presidents have always opposed adding new countries to the nuclear club – except, of course, in Israel's case.

Some of them, Ronald Reagan most notably, actually endorsed the idea of a nuclear free world. However, by the time he got around actually to proposing this, at the Reykjavik summit with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1986, he may already have been *non compos mentis*. In any case, thereafter he never did anything about it – except, of course, to add to America's nuclear arsenal.

Neither has Barack Obama, who has also voiced similar sentiments.

Perhaps the U.S. and other Western powers fear that if Iran gets the bomb, Saudi Arabia will want one too. That would indeed be a problem, and not just for the usual anti-proliferation reasons.

Saudi Arabia has long been the world's main spawning ground for Islamist terrorists; fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were Saudis citizens. And, even as it has become America's close ally in the Middle East – and therefore, implicitly, Israel's ally too — not even George Bush, the Saudi royal family's friend for life, would be foolish enough to entrust those feudal, theocratic overlords with the power to unleash nuclear devastation.

Keeping Saudi Arabia nuclear free is a worthy objective, but surely the U.S. has better ways to assure that than by allowing Israel to draw America into a war with Iran over a bomb that doesn't now exist and that probably never will.

Indeed, if there are any sensible people at Foggy Bottom or in the White House, the thought must have occurred that it might actually be a good thing were Iran to have the bomb. If nothing else, it would deter Israel from engaging in mischief that the world would be better off without, and that the U.S. would just as soon avoid.

* * *

The irony is that while Israel doesn't want Iran to have a bomb, it doesn't want them to stop trying either – because the fear of existential threats is essential to the health of the nation, and there are no better candidates in the offing.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a godsend for the Israeli government and for Israel's supporters around the world. He made it easy for them to depict Iranians as a nation of Holocaust deniers or worse, Islamic zealots hell bent on killing Jews.

On the other hand, Hassan Rouhani, Iran's current President, is the Israelis' worst nightmare – a reasonable, affable cleric intent on setting things right with the United States.

Even to his countless American admirers, Netanyahu only looks pitiful when he complains that Rouhani cannot be trusted. The man stands revealed as a frustrated whiner who lashes out impotently when he can't get his way.

Count on the Israel lobby, though, to try to make Netanyahu's case. They won't succeed, though there are plenty of people around still whom they can fool all of the time.

But the days when Congress and the White House live in fear of crossing them are numbered; much like Israel's strategic usefulness, their power is fast becoming superseded by events.

Surely, it is already dawning on at least a few politicians who are accustomed to doing its bidding that the Israel lobby is a paper tiger; that its stranglehold over Washington and other Western capitals is based on little more than smoke and mirrors.

In Congress they must certainly be aware that most Americans – even most American Jews, especially ones not yet eligible for Social Security – just don't care that much about Israel. In the final analysis, this stubborn fact is bound to count for more than the deep pockets of vile, reactionary plutocrats like Sheldon Adelson or the baseless paranoia of less prosperous geriatric ethnocrats.

Netanyahu seems to know this; perhaps it partly accounts for his hysterical outbursts over Obama's reluctance to go to war in Syria or to saber rattle over Iran and its possible future bomb.

The foreign policy establishment and Congress will be the last to know. It is telling that they didn't even realize that the Cold War was over until the Soviet Union itself imploded, and even then it took them a while to figure it out. They are no quicker now.

Inertia is powerful. But reality ultimately intrudes on ways of thinking and acting that events have superseded.

Unexpected developments this past summer and fall seem to be hastening this eventuality. From the moment No-Drama-Obama went ballistic over Edward Snowden, he and Netanyahu have stumbled pathetically, while the Russians – and the Chinese and, in their own way, the Iranians too – have shined.

The coming weeks and months promise more of this, putting in jeopardy some of the assumptions and beliefs that make the U.S.-Israel special relationship possible.

The specter of an Iranian bomb, a bomb that will probably never be, will not by itself do that relationship in.

But so long as a war that no one, not even Netanyahu, really wants can be avoided, either diplomacy will triumph and there will be no Iranian bomb, or it will fail in a way that causes the Iranians to go ahead. If that happens, it will become evident even to the likes of John McCain and Lindsey Graham that an Iranian bomb is no worse than any other.

Either way, the issue will be settled, and Israel will lose its existential threat. In the fullness of time, a recalibration of the unholy alliance between the United States and Israel will surely follow.

Then Israel will no longer be able to continue bullying its patron and its neighbors, and all countries will be better off – even those that fear, or say they fear, an Iranian bomb the most.