How the Israel Lobby Got its Start

As the annual AIPAC conference wraps up in Washington on Tuesday, historian Walter Hixson looked back on the Israel Lobby’s origins in this speech last Friday to the “Israel Lobby & American Policy Conference” at the National Press Club.

By Walter Hixson

This conference speaks truth to power. We gather here because we support truth and justice in Palestine. We also insist on a free and open discussion of the Israel lobby and its impact on American democracy and world politics.

All of you already know that the Israel lobby is extremely powerful—for the record, it constitutes easily the most powerful diaspora lobby representing the interests of a foreign nation in all of American history—but you may not know how deeply rooted it is. In fact, the extensive lobbying efforts of Zionists and their Jewish and Christian sympathizers in the United States predate the creation of Israel and flourished throughout the first generation of the Palestine conflict.

As good a date as any to fix the origins of the Israel lobby in the United States is the 1942 Biltmore Conference held in the heartland of American Zionism, New York City. Zionists quickly discovered that they could mobilize Jewish organizations as well as groups such as the American Christian Palestine Committee, to pressure Congress to back the cause. The nascent lobby efficiently lined up the two
main political parties in support of creation of a Jewish commonwealth, admission of masses of refugees, and crucial US financial assistance to accommodate them. Military assistance would come later.

A well-organized and effective Zionist lobby thus pre-dated the creation of Israel. It was poised to ensure that Israel would receive the diplomatic, political, and military support that would enable it to undertake decades of aggressive expansion in direct violation of myriad UN resolutions, principles of human rights, and international law. From the beginning the purpose of the lobby was to insulate the Zionist state from widespread criticism, to deflect and distort the truth about its aggression, so that it could reap the benefits of security and massive financial assistance from the most powerful country in the world.
Louis Lipsky, an American Zionist from Rochester, declared that propaganda and persuasion would provide “the armor that Israel cannot live without.” The key figure in the first generation of the lobby, however, was a little-known Zionist from Cleveland, Isaiah Leo Kenen. Working hand in hand with the Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, Kenen became the workhorse of the Israel lobby. His personal papers, available at the Center for Jewish History in New York yet largely neglected by scholars, reveal the early history of the lobby. Those and myriad other papers, along with State Department records and an abundant secondary literature, provide the research foundation for the book that I have done.
The Palestinians and the Arab world had no comparable lobby in the United States, which had the largest Jewish population in the world and millions of modernist and fundamentalist Protestants ready to line up behind the Jewish refugees in Palestine. Full awareness of the horrors of the Nazi genocide, combined with ignorance of the impact of Zionist aggression in Palestine, underlay US public support.

Buoyed by the growing U.S. support, Israel expanded its borders, rejected international mediation, and turned a blind eye to the plight of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. When the UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden pressured Israel to compromise, a terrorist troika that included future Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir had him gunned down in his jeep at a Jerusalem roadblock in September 1948.

The Qibya Massacre

By that time, with a presidential election looming in November, the lobby exercised a powerful influence over the Truman administration. Zionists worked through David Niles, a White House adviser on Jewish affairs, which became an essential
post in presidential administrations. Israeli patriarch Chaim Weizmann assiduously cultivated Truman with the help of the president’s former business partner, Eddie Jacobson, a Zionist from Kansas City.

Fully aware and frequently resentful of the pressure exerted on him by the Israel lobby, Truman nonetheless ultimately sided with it and against the advice of the State Department. The United States became the first nation to recognize Israel, supported a massive influx of Jewish migrants, and glossed the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles presented a greater challenge for Israel and the lobby than had Truman. The Republican administration entered office in 1953 determined to rein in Israel and forge a Middle East peace that would protect oil supplies, allow Arab moderates to fend off extremists, and support the overarching foreign policy of containment of communism. Israel appeared vulnerable when Ariel Sharon manifested a lifelong zeal for indiscriminate slaughter of vulnerable Arab people, as he orchestrated a massacre in the West Bank village of Qibya in October 1953.

Deeply alarmed by the impact the massacre might have on American public opinion, Kenen mobilized the local councils to calm the waters in the wake of the indiscriminate killing of innocent villagers in their homes. Kenen soon realized that the political power of the lobby already was so well ensconced that representatives and senators of both political parties could be counted on to line up behind Israel in a crisis. This was an important moment, as Qibya showed that Israel could massacre people and rely on the
lobby to effectively manage the political fallout.

Israel thus could continue to lash out violently across the already expanded borders, regularly carrying out assaults disproportionate to any provocation in Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. In 1957 Eisenhower did force Israel to pull back after it had invaded Egypt, but even then, Israeli aggression was rewarded with critical new navigation rights that would enable it to precipitate the pivotal June 1967 War.

**JFK and Dimona**

In the period between Suez and the 1967 war, John F. Kennedy won election backed by overwhelming Jewish political support. In 1962 JFK pronounced the existence of the “special relationship” and opened the military supply spigot by selling Israel Hawk surface to air missiles. The Israelis showed their appreciation to Kennedy by repeatedly lying to him about the nuclear research program in the desert at Dimona. They pledged not to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East when in fact they were committed to doing precisely that. Israel refused to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty. Iran, by contrast, like the overwhelming majority of nations in the world, is a signatory.

By the Kennedy years the lobby had reorganized several times and established its structural component, AIPAC, backed by influential supporters in both political parties. Kenen regularly stuffed congressional mailboxes with copies of the *Near East Report*, the well-edited and highly successful propaganda newsletter that he created. Inside the White House, the Jewish affairs adviser Myer “Mike” Feldman
undermined efforts to rein in Israel.

The lobby ensured that the State Department and the few members of Congress who asked troublesome questions—notably Senator J. William Fulbright—were kept at bay. The lobby then targeted and in 1974 helped defeat Fulbright and drive him out of the Senate. Noting that the Kennedy administration was virtually powerless against Israel and the lobby, adviser Robert Komer, himself Jewish, asked in frustration, “What kind of relationship was this?” To Komer and the State Department diplomats it was obvious that Israel and the lobby were the tail that wagged the strategic dog of American Middle East policy.

LBJ and the ’67 War

In his blurb for my book, John Mearsheimer wrote that it is “especially good at showing how a select group of pro-Israel Americans profoundly influenced President Lyndon Johnson, who was like putty in their hands.” Johnson had been pro-Israel since his youth when his Aunt Jessie infused him with the biblical lore that God had chosen the Jews to inherit the holy land. Johnson also enjoyed the company of close Jewish friends and advisers—Eppie Evron, Abe Fortas, Arthur Goldberg, Arthur and Mathilde Krim, among others. Johnson apparently did not directly green light Israel’s initiation of the June 1967 War, but neither did he flash a red signal.

As several Israeli leaders subsequently openly acknowledged, Israel in 1967 as in 1956 launched the June war as a first rather than a last resort. The Israelis as well as the CIA knew that Israel was the more powerful force, could defeat all of its Arab rivals combined, and that is precisely what
Israel did, initiating a blitzkrieg attack rather than seeking a negotiated settlement of maritime and territorial disputes.

After the war—which included the apparently deliberate attempt to sink an American spy ship, the USS Liberty, killing 34 and wounding 171 US sailors—Johnson reversed a generation of US policy upholding the 1949 borders. He acquiesced to the lobby in support of an occupation of Arab territories that extended in myriad directions far beyond the 1949 armistice lines. The lobby thus enabled Israel to exploit the sweeping military triumph by embarking on a messianic quest for the Greater Israel.

My study culminates with the pivotal decisions in 1967 initiating an illegal occupation and the emergence of a violently regressive apartheid state. Before most Americans even knew that it existed the lobby had played a pivotal role in enabling Israel to launch an aggressive war, to choose land over peace with the Palestinians and its other Arab neighbors, and to continue to thumb its nose at the UN and international law. The United States not only enabled the illegal occupation, it bolstered the IDF with advanced weaponry including tanks and F-4 Phantom jets despite Israel’s contempt for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

By 1967, Israel and the lobby had achieved a stranglehold over modern American political life. “The U.S. position is all that can be desired,” Kenen declared after the Six Day War. “The U.S. is working like never before.”

Lobby Becomes Known

The lobby achieved its success by circumventing the foreign
policy bureaucracy and applying pressure directly on the president and the Congress through campaigns to secure financial assistance, armaments, and unstinting diplomatic support for Israel. By the 1970s the lobby and Kenen himself began to be identified and chronicled by the press. Asked in 1973 to explain the operations of the lobby, Kenen responded, “I put it very succinctly in one sentence, ‘We appeal to local leadership to write or telegraph or telephone their Congressmen and urge them to call upon the President to overrule the Department of State,’ and this has been going on, now for some 20 years.” At the time of the interview the Near East Report had achieved a circulation of nearly 30,000.

As Kenen suggested, and as my book shows, throughout the first generation of its existence, from the Truman through the Johnson years the lobby successfully fended off persistent State Department efforts to forge an “impartial” or “balanced” diplomacy between Israel and the Arabs. While Israel carried out cross-border attacks, stonewalled refugees, and rejected diplomacy, the lobby successfully undermined the advice of area experts who warned that the imbalanced, pro-Israeli policy would perpetuate instability and achieve security for no one, including Israel.

American professional diplomats, often wrongly dismissed as pro-Arab or even anti-Semitic, neither of which was true, warned about the consequences, including the rise of extremism in the Arab world. Their prophecy would come full circle in the twenty-first century.

Blaming the Victim
I turn now to a broader interpretive study I have undertaken on a history of the U.S.-Israeli special relationship. When I began intensive study of Israel-Palestine several years ago, I was susceptible to the familiar stereotypes: age-old religious conflict, ancient enmities, neither side will compromise, etc., etc. Now that I know better, I am of course charged with being one-sided, so let me say this: Palestinians and Arabs are human and have made many mistakes, to be sure. The historical record clearly shows, however, that the Palestine conflict is rooted in Zionist aggression. Accelerating settler colonization has both caused and perpetuated the conflict and moreover has foreclosed genuine opportunities for a peace settlement—in 1949, even more clearly in 1967, and in the 1990s as well.

In everyday life we learn that it is inappropriate to blame the victim. The same is true in diplomatic history; no one blames Poland for being invaded in 1939. Accordingly, the focus in what follows is where it belongs, on the aggressors and their apologists. Today Israel and its American backers have become increasingly transparent in their regressive policies, claiming Jerusalem as the “eternal capital,” savagely cutting off Gaza as well as aid to the Palestinian refugees, engaging in targeted killings and collective punishment, and now the United States has signed off on another illegitimate annexation, this of the Syrian Golan Heights. All of these actions are in direct violation of international law. We may not be able to stop these actions at this moment in time, but what we can do as scholars and activists is call to account Israel and the United States for their crimes against humanity. Specifically, we must gain a clearer understanding of Israel’s core identity, and
the ways in which the lobby acts to cover up Israel’s crimes.

Application of the framework of settler colonialism to explain Israeli history has been a step in the right direction, but what does this label really mean? Here is a brief overview: Animated by nationalist and religious discourses, settler states such as Israel, the United States, Australia and South Africa, among others, are congenitally aggressive. They strive to cleanse the land of its indigenous residents in the name of providential destiny, modernity, and racial hierarchy. Settler colonial states work relentlessly to establish facts on the ground. They embrace violent solutions including regular resort to massacre. They reject legal restraints and they abhor external authority.
The drive to lay claim to the biblical holy land meant that Israel would not agree to a negotiated settlement of the Palestine conflict. The “peace process” became a sham, providing cover for the establishment of ever more facts on the ground. Fueled by aggressive instincts and mythical destiny, Israel became a reactionary and a rogue state, building illegal settlements in contempt of the UN, and repressing Palestinians in contempt of human rights. Knowing that the lobby had its back, Israel ignored the State Department and rebuffed American presidents, thereby affirming Moshe Dayan’s famous quip, “Our American friends offer us money, arms, and advice. We take the money, we take the arms, and we decline the advice.” The Israeli patriarch Ben-Gurion liked
to say, “It is not important what the Gentiles say, what matters is what the Jews do.”

The Israeli political system has empowered a series of bigoted, bellicose leaders who showed utter contempt for Arabs and a determination violently to dispossess them. The early Zionist leaders bore the psychic scars and traumas of the bloodlands of east-central Europe from which they came. They carried the terrible burden of the Nazi genocide that took the lives of their family members and some six million Jews.

As a result, they were quick to brand Arab leaders like Nasser as the next Hitler; diplomacy became a reprise of Munich; any effort at compromise was dismissed as appeasement. This time, they vowed, the Jews would be the aggressors. The Israeli leaders thus inherited, internalized, and perpetuated an intolerant, Hobbesian worldview that was inimical to peacemaking.

War Crimes

For most of its existence Israel has been led by men who should be held accountable for war crimes. I do not make such an accusation lightly; abundant evidence exists under international law to make the case against, at a minimum, Ben-Gurion, Dayan, Begin, Sharon, Shamir, and Netanyahu. They must be held to account in the dock of history if nowhere else.

Millions of decent, caring people live in Israel. Some of them bear a heavy burden of regret and frustration over their country’s actions, as do many of us with respect to
American policies both at home and abroad. The crucial point, however, is that neither peace-minded Israeli citizens nor liberal American Jews have thus far been unable to break through the iron wall of Israel’s militant chauvinism or to unhinge the right-wing vice grip on political power. The conclusion seems inescapable: the militant and messianic settler state selects like-minded leaders.

It is essential to come to grips with the militancy at the core of Israel’s identity in order to understand the role of the Israel lobby. The lobby provides cover for Israel’s congenital aggression, its pursuit of land over peace, its flaunting of international law. While Israel carries out violent and criminal acts, the lobby functions to insulate it from criticism, to distort history and reality, in sum to provide what Lipsky described, the armor that Israel cannot live without.

Such is the hubris of imperial settler states like Israel and the United States that even as they engage in violent repression, they simultaneously insist on being loved, honored, and accredited as model democracies. Historical denial and policing of dissent are thus among the primary characteristics of the militant settler state. Efforts to unpack Israeli or for that matter American mythology and to expose the aggression that inheres within, are invariably attacked as subversive.

For Israel, like the Soviet Union of old, glasnost could become a deadly virus. For these reasons Israel and the lobby smear and condemn their critics unmercifully. Which brings us to the recent remarkable, deeply disturbing, and

Rep. Omar may have been guilty of hitting the send button on some loosely worded tweets—clearly as rare and heinous a crime as there is in America today. Israel’s apologists attacked Rep. Omar for linking “Benjamins” with the Israel lobby; that is for having the temerity to suggest that a political lobby in a capitalist society might raise and use money in an effort to shape public opinion and the resultant national security policy. This, of course, is precisely what the Israel lobby does.

Nonetheless, Rep. Omar apologized for the tweet, showing a degree of states-woman-ship that you may never see nor hear from the Israel lobby. Think about all of the people that CAMERA and other Zionist attack groups have smeared over the years? Have you ever known them to apologize?

Israel’s vocal partisans in Congress, backed by the lobby, stepped up the Orwellian assault on Rep. Omar when she stated another rather obvious truth, namely that the lobby demands political allegiance to the state of Israel. So, we have a situation in which a lobby was created for the express purpose of promoting uncritical bipartisan support for Israel, yet when a member of Congress dares to point this out, she is viciously attacked and inundated with death threats.

Derrida and Foucault would no doubt be gratified that the Israel lobby has mastered the concept of tropes, as well as the ability to use them to manipulate an all too easily confused, Internet-addled mass society. Tropes, as the French theorists taught us, are deployed for the purpose of
exercising power. While Rep. Omar herself never used the term “dual loyalty,” her critics unleashed this particular trope as if she had. She was then promptly saddled with the scarlet letter of anti-Semitism.

Unreflective journalists including the so-called liberal news media jumped on the bandwagon, affirming and spreading the word to the point that a canard effectively became the “truth,” namely that Omar had trafficked in anti-Semitic discourse. What she had done in actuality was attempt to criticize Israel and illuminate the role of the lobby. These are the reasons that she had to be smeared and silenced.

Smears and distortion undermine free speech and dissent in a supposedly democratic society, but even worse in this case they cheapen and detract from the chilling reality of actual anti-Semitism, the hate-filled stereotypes and violent attacks such as Charlottesville and especially the massacre at the Pittsburgh synagogue in October of last year.

Let’s consider another trope: “Islamic terrorism.” In the United States, in Israel, and other countries you are free to use this trope at will. It is perfectly acceptable to link the world’s second largest religious tradition, with millions of adherents in scores of countries all over the globe, with terrorism. If you say “Islamic terrorism,” there will be no lobby, no trope police to step in with smears and vilification. You are thus free to inspire people to take action, like the mass murders last week in the New Zealand mosque. If you apply “Axis of evil” or “evil-doers” to Islamic countries, that is well and good. However, if you are a non-white, Islamic-congresswoman who wears a headscarf, and you condemn as “evil” Israeli war crimes
killing innocent civilians in the Gaza strip, you are branded an anti-Semite.

Watch Hixson’s full speech:

The smearing of Omar calls to mind the remark Netanyahu once made, unaware that he was being recorded, about how easy it was to manipulate discourse and to move public opinion in the United States. It also lays bare the cynical tactics of the Israel lobby. From Qibya to the killing fields of Gaza, Israel and the lobby have discovered that a tenacious and relentless propaganda campaign can cover up almost any crime, justify almost any calumny, overcome almost any political challenge. Israel and the lobby have learned to mobilize fast, to attack without restraint, to eliminate perceived threats, and ultimately to turn them to their own advantage. Israeli propaganda thus mirrors Israeli military power: both deploy campaigns of shock and awe, allowing the bodies fall where they may, ever willing to make truth the first casualty.

Then Nothing is Wrong

As I bring this talk to a close, bear with me while I engage in a final bit of historical reflection. We live in dangerous times. The distortions and deep divisions within this country sometimes remind me of the antebellum years of American history. Ominously, it was a time when the political system collapsed.

In the year 1858, the nation confronted irreconcilable national divisions as a result of its long embrace of crimes against humanity. At that moment a little known former one-
A one-term congressman from the Midwest seized the national spotlight by declaring, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” A nation, he declaimed, could “not endure, permanently, half slave and half free.”

It was true of the United States in 1858 and it is true of Israel/Palestine today. Something, somewhere, somehow, sometime is going to have to give. In 1861 Abraham Lincoln went on to become president. He famously wore a top hot, which reposes in the Smithsonian just a few blocks from where I stand today. Encircling Lincoln’s top hat is a black silk mourning band through which he honored the memory of his son Willie, who died prematurely at age 11.

I think back to Lincoln and his top hat and then to the president we have today, a flag-hugging, certifiable narcissist demagogue who sports a red MAGA ball cap. The juxtaposition of Lincoln and Trump reminds me of the famous quotation from *The Education of Henry Adams*. The acerbic historian and scion of the vintage American political family wrote, “The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin.”

I hate to think what Henry Adams might say today.

Amid the horrific civil war over which he agonized on a daily basis, Lincoln repeatedly demonstrated his astonishing ability to say so much in so few words, including the breathtaking poignancy of his remarks at Gettysburg in November 1863. Months later in April 1864, Lincoln again revealed the epic purity of his prose in a letter to a Kentucky newspaper editor, when he declared, “If slavery is
not wrong, nothing is wrong.”

Let me conclude in the same spirit. Let us declare here today that if demanding the right to exist while denying it to your neighbor is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

If driving people from their land and demolishing their homes is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

If asserting absolute authority over a historic city, rightful home to people of all faiths, is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

If slaughtering children for throwing stones at their oppressors is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

If the terror and deprivation that are inflicted every day upon the imprisoned people of Gaza is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

If supplying more than $125 billion to finance a regime that commits such crimes against humanity is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

If converting the Congress of the United States into a lapdog for Israeli policies is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

Let us also emphasize once again that if anti-Semitism is not wrong, nothing is wrong.

Cynical deployment of baseless charges of anti-Semitism, however, in order to legislate against free speech; stifle criticism of a foreign nation; or insist on the right to boycott an apartheid state—if these things are not wrong, nothing is wrong.
As we continue to struggle, no matter what the odds and the monies arrayed against us, let us derive inspiration from another antebellum American freedom fighter. “I am earnest,” William Lloyd Garrison declared in 1831 as he launched publication of the first issue of his anti-slavery newspaper The Liberator. “I will not equivocate . . . I will not retreat a single inch . . . AND I WILL BE HEARD.”

Thank you.

Speech on March 22, 2019, at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C.

Walter Hixson is distinguished professor of history at the University of Akron. He is author of the just-released Israel’s Armor: The Israel Lobby and the First Generation of the Palestine Conflict (Cambridge University Press). He gave this talk at the “Israel Lobby & American Policy Conference” on March 22, 2019.