

Polarizing Views: Islam, Israel and the War on Terror

Reviewed by Sadanand Dhume



The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy

John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 496 pages, \$26.00



World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism

Norman Podhoretz
Doubleday, 230 pages, \$24.95

John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt have unleashed a storm of debate with their recent book on what they call the “Israel lobby.” American neoconservative Norman Podhoretz, meanwhile, has stirred controversy over how to view Islam in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Journalist and Asia Society Fellow Sadanand Dhume looks at what arguments Asia relationship to Islam poses to both debates.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2004, while researching my book on the rise of radical Islam in Indonesia, I visited a slice of Saudi Arabia carved out of the rain forest in Borneo. The Hidayatullah network, headquartered outside Balikpapan in East Kalimantan, runs an impressive array of schools, charities and orphanages. It has also earned a reputation for fostering an austere and violence-prone reading of Islam. The network’s monthly magazine, *Suara Hidayatullah*, peddles a cocktail of paranoia, conspiracy theory and Islamist triumphalism. In its world view, Christians are constantly plotting to destroy Islam, Americans carried out the 2002 Bali bombings and the eventual triumph of jihadis from Chechnya to Kashmir to Mindanao is foreordained.

Hidayatullah was founded by a self-proclaimed follower of Kahar Muzakkar, a leader of the Darul Islam rebellion against the Indonesian

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state that claimed about 40,000 lives between 1948 and 1965. More recently, amidst violent clashes between Christians and Muslims that erupted in 1998, Hidayatullah teachers and students joined anti-Christian militias in Poso in central Sulawesi. Fighters from a particularly volatile group, Laskar Jundullah, used the sprawling forest campus outside Balikpapan as a pit stop. Another Hidayatullah school sheltered one of the Bali bombers who was on the run from the police and there were persistent allegations, routinely denied, that militants used the seclusion of the Balikpapan campus as a cover for military training.

My guide and traveling companion was Herry Nurdi, a young Javanese journalist who at the time edited *Sabili*, a magazine that matches *Suara Hidayatullah* in its glorification of violence and fondness for conspiracy. On our first evening in Balikpapan we found ourselves invited to the home of the vice-principal of the network's main *pesantren* — Indonesian for madrasa, or Islamic boarding school — where the conversation soon turned, predictably enough, to Israel. Our

mind, an austere but outgoing preacher named Abdul Latief, recalled with wonder a trip to the Jewish state occasioned by a pilgrimage to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

"In Tel Aviv they live without cables," he said. "Everything is wireless. The tomatoes are the size of fists. And the oranges! Rows and rows of oranges with machines and no people. And the Palestinians are wearing jeans to prayer. How can we defeat the Israelis like this?"

We pondered this question. After a few moments Latief struck a more hopeful note. "Though Israel is so small that if the Arabs all piss at the same time it will disappear."

It's easy to guess what John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt would make of Abdul Latief. The authors of *The Israel Lobby* would likely dismiss his colorfully expressed desire to eradicate the Jewish state as rhetorical excess. The underlying animosity they would chalk up to the usual reasons: Israel's failure to retreat to its pre-1967 borders, and its alleged brutality toward Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. And then, for the Hidayatullah view of America,

which is scarcely more charitable than its take on Israel, they would turn to the heart of their thesis: that Israel's supporters in the US cast a malign influence on its foreign policy, and that this feeds the anti-American ferment palpable from Morocco to Malaysia.

Walt and Mearsheimer, political scientists at the University of Chicago and Harvard respectively, take nearly 500 densely footnoted pages to make their case, but the essentials, laid out early on, are simple enough. First, that the US provides Israel with extraordinary aid and diplomatic support. Second, that the lobby (small "l") is the principal reason for this support. And third, that this "uncritical and unconditional" relationship is not in America's interest.

The first of these three statements is the easiest to substantiate. Through 2005 American assistance to Israel totaled \$154 billion. Each of Israel's six million citizens receives on average about \$500 a year from America. For populous Egypt, in absolute terms the second largest recipient of US aid, that figure is \$20. Thanks to its designation as a "Major Non-NATO Ally," Israel has access to a wider range of US weapons than most countries, and at lower prices. Between 1972 and 2006 the US vetoed no less than 42 UN Security Council resolutions critical of its ally.

This largesse, the authors claim, cannot be explained in either moral or strategic terms. Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank rob it of whatever moral legitimacy it garnered through Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. Indeed, on moral considerations alone America ought to pursue a more even-handed policy, or perhaps even lean toward the Palestinians. Walt and Mearsheimer contend that the strategic case (more on this later) is equally weak. Thanks to Israel's terrible reputation in the Arab and Muslim world, it ought to be self-evident that far from being a vaunted ally it is in fact an albatross, a land worth defending — out of sympathy rather than self-interest — only should its very survival be threatened. In fact, there's only one reason the US continues to back such an obviously immoral and strategically inconsequential nation: the lobby, "a loose coalition of individuals and organi-

zations that actively works to move US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction."

The *Israel* lobby, the authors stress, ought not to be confused with that familiar bogeyman, the *Jewish* lobby. Yes, many of its members are Jews and Jewish organizations. But surveys also show that more than a third of American Jews are not very, or not at all, emotionally attached to Israel. Moreover, groups such as Jewish Students for Palestinian Rights and Jewish Voice for Peace — which calls for the suspension of US military aid to Israel (about three-fourths of all aid) until it withdraws to its 1967 borders — take positions strongly critical of US policy in the region. Finally, the lobby includes many non-Jews, most prominently the so-called Christian Zionists, evangelical Christians who see the creation of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

Despite these caveats, the lobby envisioned by this book is nothing if not capacious. It includes formal lobbyists such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), membership organizations such as the Zionist Organization of America, advocacy groups like the Anti-Defamation League, think tanks such as the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and religious groups such as Christians United for Israel. It counts journalists, pundits, scholars, legislators, businessmen and government officials in its ranks.

The lobby, the authors believe, has a lock on US Middle East policy. It ensures that politicians are either too beholden to it, or too terrified, to ever oppose Israel, or rather, what the lobby sees as Israeli interests. It relentlessly influences public opinion in Israel's favor, making sure that gullible Americans remain gullible. If not for the lobby, more Americans would sympathize with the Palestinians. If not for the lobby, the level of political discourse on the Middle East would be higher. If not for the lobby, American boys and girls would not be coming home in body bags from Iraq.

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Clash of Civilizations. But it is also deeply flawed. To begin with, Walt and Mearsheimer spread their net so wide that it's difficult to hold any opinion on Israel-Palestine different from theirs and not automatically be deemed a part of the lobby. You might expect reasonable people to distinguish between, say, those who abhor the idea of a Palestinian state and those who propound one. Or between those who cheer the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and those who denounce them. Or between *The Washington Post's* hawkish Charles Krauthammer and the dovish Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*. But for Walt and Mearsheimer, it seems anyone who shows the slightest regard for Israeli security, or who fails to call for the kind of punitive measures they favor to bring Israel to heel, effectively belongs to the lobby.

Then there's the unconvincing attempt to prove the unprovable. Even if you accept that pro-Israel elements in America backed the Iraq war — despite the evidence that the Israelis themselves cited Iran as the bigger threat — it's a stretch to claim that but for the lobby there would have been no war. Would there have been a war, one wonders, if Saddam Hussein hadn't been sitting on the world's second-largest oil reserves?

Or without the exertions of Iraqi exiles such as Kanan Makiya and Ahmed Chalabi, or for that matter of Christopher Hitchens, champion of the Kurds and no particular friend of Israel?

In the end, though, *The Israel Lobby's* biggest failing lies not in what it purports to address but in what it fails to. Walt and Mearsheimer declare that their “focus will be primarily on Israeli behavior.” Fair enough, but understanding that behavior, much less attempting to explain its impact on terrorism, without even a cursory examination of Hamas, Hezbollah or Islamic Jihad is a bit like writing a treatise on pizza while studiously avoiding any mention of cheese.

The passing references that Walt and Mearsheimer make to terrorism reflect an unquestioning acceptance of a certain kind of orthodoxy. Their belief that Washington's close relationship with Jerusalem makes it harder to defeat terrorism, that Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad are largely Israel's problem rather than America's too, and that a viable state for the Palestinians will sharply diminish terrorism, all flow from a fundamental misread of the Islamist movement and the nature of its appeal. They assume that Islamist terrorism is mainly a local phenomenon rather than a global one, that its demands are primarily political rather than ideological and that appeasing it with concessions is a surer path to peace than fighting it with ideas and, when required, bullets.

In this somewhat patronizing view, Arabs and Muslims are never responsible for their own actions. So *The Israel Lobby* credits the creation of the Shia terrorist group Hezbollah to Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 rather than to the success, three year's earlier, of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution in Iran. It attributes Hamas's election victory in the West Bank and Gaza in 2006 to former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's intransigence rather than to the appeal of Hamas's ideas and the efforts of its cadres. When Arab leaders talk of driving the Jews into the sea, we're supposed to shrug it off as “largely rhetoric designed to appease their publics.” Why this talk would appease the Arab public is not questioned.

The crux of the problem with Podhoretz’s prescription is his conflation of liberty with elections. There’s no question that on balance Arab and Muslim countries have found it harder than most to embrace democracy, but their lack of liberty runs a lot deeper than the mere absence of credible opposition parties and respect for the ballot box.

For a dramatically different approach you might turn to Norman Podhoretz’s *World War IV*. Podhoretz, dubbed the godfather of neoconservatism by *The Times* (London), is the former editor of the influential magazine *Commentary* (which is now edited by his son John), and an advisor to Republican presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani. If *The Israel Lobby* is all about the trees, delving obsessively into the minutiae of AIPAC conferences and the religious leanings of important government officials, then *World War IV* focuses firmly on the forest. Podhoretz sets out to answer several “big questions” arising from 9-11. Why was America attacked? By whom and to what end? Could it have been prevented? Was the American response the right one?

As the title of the book suggests, Podhoretz rejects the appellations “global war on terror” and “long war” in favor of the somewhat apocalyptic *World War IV*. (World War III, in case you missed it, was the Cold War.) Similarly, rather than refer to radical Islam, militant Islam, or simply Islamism, Podhoretz prefers the term Islamofascism, which he defines as a “truly malignant totalitarian enemy” and as a “monster with two heads, one religious, the other secular.” The Taliban are the most prominent example of the religious head, Saddam Hussein of the secular. To underline his point, Podhoretz quotes a speech by George W. Bush shortly after 9-11, in which the president referred to the perpetrators as “heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the twentieth century,” who follow in the path of “fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism.”

Much of *World War IV* is an impassioned de-

fense of the Bush Doctrine that emerged in the aftermath of 9-11. Podhoretz lists its core principles: militarily, the right to pre-emptive war, politically, a belief in democratization. Bush, in this telling, occupies a place in history akin to Harry Truman’s at the dawn of the Cold War or, if you prefer, World War III. Like the struggle against the Soviets, this war will be long, fought on several fronts and ideological in nature. It will require the sustained mobilization of skill, expertise and resources, and a mix of violent and non-violent methods. Now as then, the capacity for victory and the will to achieve it will depend in large part on the war of ideas in America. In Podhoretz’s view the battle lines have already been drawn between those like him, who see Islamofascism as “the latest mutation of the totalitarian threat to our civilization,” and those “who think that the threat has been wildly exaggerated and does not in any case require a military response.”

Like most neocons, Podhoretz first broke ranks with the left during the Vietnam War, repelled by its “negative faith in America the ugly,” a phrase borrowed from the left-wing sociologist Todd Gitlin. The Berlin Wall may have collapsed nearly two decades ago but the ideological fault lines in American society, Podhoretz argues, remain largely intact. He finds anti-Americanism rampant in the arts, in universities, in major news media (Fox News excepted) and publishing houses. Those who oppose his prescription — “to make the Middle East safe for America by making it safe for democracy” — are legion: left wing and right wing isolationists, liberal interna-

tionalists with their squeamishness about military action and faith in the UN, realists with their love of stability and obsession with maintaining the regional balance of power.

Even to a sympathetic reader, *World War IV* is less than convincing. To begin with, though “war on terror” may be inaccurate — terrorism is a tactic and not an enemy — by now it is also established usage. The attempt to introduce a new term creates needless confusion. Newt Gingrich, for instance, calls the same campaign World War III. Likewise, the term Islamofascism is needlessly florid and on the whole generates more heat than light. The attempt to drag Saddam Hussein under its rubric doesn’t bear scrutiny. There’s no question that Hussein was a brutal dictator who tortured his opponents and subsidized terrorists. But though in his later years he turned to Islamic imagery to shore up his appeal, he was never an Islamist, someone committed to ruling the state and society by the seventh century Arab laws enshrined in sharia.

Neither does everyone who believes the Iraq war has been a disaster either long for America’s humiliation or underestimate the Islamist threat. Had the war been executed flawlessly, it is indeed possible that a modern, democratic, pro-American Iraq would have helped the broader struggle against Islamism by force of example, by reducing American dependence on Saudi Arabia and by serving notice to the ruling mullahs in Tehran. Instead it has rallied fence-sitters to the Islamist cause, strengthened the Iranians and raised the specter of an American defeat that will reverberate across the Muslim world.

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the Middle East requires its preconditions — the rule of law, individual rights, private property, independent courts and the separation of church and state. It’s a crucial insight, brought home vividly by reports of beard-trimming barbers dodging threats from Hamas in Gaza and university students fearful of stepping outdoors without the burqa in Basra.

To his credit, unlike Walt and Mearsheimer, Podhoretz seems to instinctively understand the nature of Islamism — that it is both global and ideological, and highly resistant to change. He also sees the futility of seeking to appease Islamists through concessions, which are invariably seen not as part of the give and take of politics but as mere stepping stones on the path to God’s law. But in the end Podhoretz displays only a limited grasp of Islamism’s adaptability and tenacity, or of its power as an idea, captured in the Muslim Brotherhood slogan that reverberates from Egypt to Indonesia: “Islam is the solution.” This is odd considering that over the years *Commentary* has published some of the most incisive thinkers on this subject, among them Bernard Lewis, Daniel Pipes, Martin Kramer and David Pryce-Jones.

For a cautionary tale Podhoretz need not have looked farther than Pakistan. At independence in 1947 it housed 137 madrassas. That number has since swelled to 13,000, between 10 and 15 percent of which are linked to sectarian militancy (Sunni v. Shia) or international terrorism. Since the 1970s both civilian and military rulers have tried to co-opt or appease the Islamists through concessions. In the 1970s Zulfikar Ali Bhutto banned alcohol and gambling and shuttered night clubs. He replaced the traditional Sunday holiday with Friday and declared the tiny Ahmadiyya sect to be non-Muslim.

Bhutto’s successor, the pious, unctuous and ultimately treacherous Gen. Zia ul-Haq continued the process. He established sharia courts, instituted government collection of *zakat* (an alms tax), stripped libraries of books deemed un-Islamic and mandated compulsory prayer for civil servants and marks in their confidential reports for piety. None of these concessions

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made Pakistan’s Islamists any more reasonable. Rather, they allowed them to expand their influence to the point that they are now strong enough to challenge even the army.

For Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, and to a lesser degree for those with large, and in places restive, Muslim minorities such as India, Thailand, and the Philippines, Pakistan presents several lessons. First, Islamists must be opposed — appeasement only emboldens them. Second, Islamists do not need to hold formal power — as in Iran or Saudi Arabia — to alter the nature of both society and the state. And finally, for the rest of the world to have any success in rolling back the Islamist tide it will have to pay less attention to promises made during White House visits, and more to the nitty-gritty of school curricula, public broadcasting and penal codes. High school text books and FM radio are at least as important as combat aircraft and tanks.

In the end, the Muslim world will climb out of its present morass not by blaming Israel or America for all its ills, but by learning from East Asia’s most successful post-war economies — Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, all of which look

to the future rather than dwelling on the past, and display a remarkable degree of openness, both cultural and economic, to the rest of the world. For non-Muslims this means recognizing that ultimately this is a civil war within Islam between a highly motivated Islamist minority and an ambivalent, passive or frightened majority. Winning will require backing genuine moderates who exhibit a long-term commitment to democracy, accept non-Islamic sources of law, profess respect for women’s and minority rights and actively oppose terrorism and other forms of illegitimate violence. In some places — Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey and perhaps Pakistan — the building blocks for democracy are already in place, though the strength of Islamist parties raises questions about their long term viability. In others — most of the Arab world — the preconditions cited by Zakaria must first be created.

The end of the Cold War was symbolized by the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The changes that mark a similar success against Islamism will likely be both subtler and more widely dispersed: ethnic Malays in Malaysians able to convert out of Islam, Pakistanis free to examine the historicity of their faith without fear of retribution, Saudi Arabian women allowed to decide for themselves how much of their bodies they choose to reveal. Until such time that these changes occur, the world is far better off with an Israel that stands firm than with one that caves in to bullying and trades its security for empty promises. America will win the war on terror by standing by its allies, not by abandoning them.

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