

The Myth of Israel as 'US Aircraft Carrier' in Middle East

If Israeli apartheid were to disappear, oil and trade would still flow from the Middle East towards the West, write Jean Bricmont and Diana Johnstone.

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Why does the United States give total support to Israel?

In answer, there is a common myth shared by both champions and radical critics of the Zionist state which needs to be dispelled.

The myth is that Israel is a major U.S. strategic asset, described as a sort of unsinkable American aircraft carrier vital to Washington's interests in the Middle East.

The line of argument of those who share this myth is to show that the United States has economic and strategic interests in the oil-rich Middle East (which nobody denies) and to quote American (and, of course, Israeli) political figures who claim that Israel is the best or even the sole U.S. ally in the region.

For example U.S. President Joe Biden has gone so far as to say that if Israel didn't exist the U.S. should have invented it.

But the crucial evidence, totally missing from their analysis, is the slightest example of Israel actually serving American interests in the region.

If no examples are given, it's simply because there are none. Israel has never fired a shot on behalf of the United States or brought a drop of oil under U.S. control.

We can start with a common sense argument: If the U.S. is interested in Middle East oil, why

would it support a country that is hated (for whatever reasons) by all the populations of the oil producing countries?

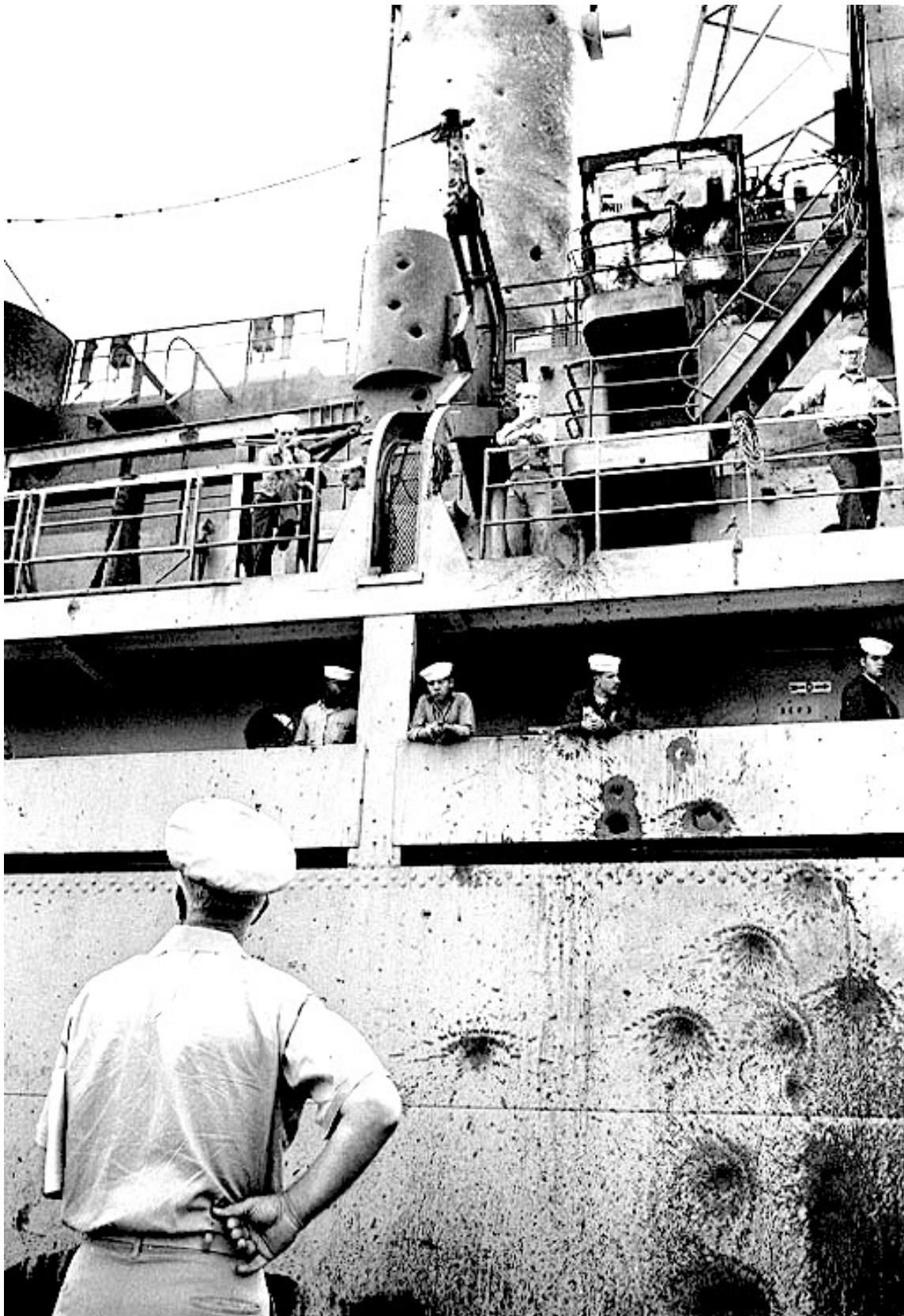
In the 1950s, such was the reasoning of most U.S. experts, who put good relations with Arab countries ahead of support to Israel. This no doubt helps explain why AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, was founded in 1963, to align U.S. policy with that of Israel.

1967 War & After

U.S. support for Israel took off after the 1967 war. Israel's success dealt a fatal blow to the Arab nationalism embodied by Egypt's Gamal Nasser, which some U.S. policy-makers falsely saw as a potential communist threat (which they saw just about everywhere).

But the war was waged by Israel for its own interests and expansion, with no benefit to the United States.

On the contrary: a remarkable official silence has been maintained over the fact that in the course of that short war, the American intelligence gathering ship USS Liberty, which was spying on the conflict, was shelled for several hours by the Israeli air force, with the obvious intention to sink it, killing 34 sailors and wounding 174.



Damage to USS Liberty, June 1967. (Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain)

Had there been no survivors, Egypt could have been accused (making it a “false flag” operation). The survivors were ordered not to speak about it, and the incident was never fully investigated, accepting the official Israeli explanation that it was a “mistake.” In any case, Israel’s behavior was [not exactly that of a precious ally](#).

When Israel attacked Lebanon in 2006, that country’s government was perfectly “pro-

Western.” What’s more, during the 1991 war against Iraq over Kuwait, the United States insisted that Israel should not participate, because such involvement would have collapsed their Arab anti-Iraq coalition. Again, it’s hard here to see Israel as an indispensable “ally.”

U.S. post-9/11 wars have targeted Israel’s enemies — Iraq, Libya, Syria — with no advantage to U.S. oil companies, on the contrary. The question arises whether the U.S. choice of enemies in the Middle East has not been determined by the interests of a foreign government, contrary to American interests in the region.

Washington & Gaza Today

Now we come to the current situation: what interest does the United States have in the slaughter being perpetrated in Gaza?

In reality, what Washington is doing is trying to maintain good relations with their Arab allies (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States) by pretending to seek a compromise while exerting no effective pressure on Israel – for instance, by cutting off funds.

And why don’t they? The answer is obvious but saying so is politically incorrect, and is rarely discussed by defenders of the myth, except to refute it. It is the action of the pro-Israeli lobby, which de facto controls Congress and without which no president can really act.

The lobby is no secret conspiracy. It is openly coordinated by AIPAC, which spreads billionaire donations throughout the U.S. political system and dictates the line to take on Israel to ensure a successful career.



Outside annual AIPAC meeting in Washington, March 2016. (Susan Melkisetian, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Control is virtually complete over the two parties represented in Congress.

It is achieved primarily through the funding of election campaigns. All those who comply can count on campaign donations, while anyone daring to defy the lobby's injunctions would quickly be challenged by a very well-funded opponent in the next primary election, thus losing support of his or her own party in the next election — as happened to Georgia representative Cynthia McKinney in 2002.

The lobby also animates smear campaigns against any critic of Israel, as seen recently in the [attacks on university presidents](#) (Harvard, MIT, Pennsylvania) for not having sufficiently cracked down on alleged student “anti-Semitism” on their campuses.

There are several books that explain in detail how the lobby works:

- *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby* (1985) by Paul Findley, a Republican congressman from Illinois, who details how the lobby politically “liquidated” all those who wanted a different policy in the Middle East, precisely because they wanted to defend the interests of the United States.
- *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2007) a comprehensive and well sourced book on the functioning and the effects of the lobby.
- *Against Our Better Judgment : The hidden history of how the U.S. was used to create Israël*, by Alison Weir, 2014, which goes back to the Balfour declaration.

One can also watch hidden-camera reports by *Al Jazeera* [on the lobby's work](#) in the U.S. and Britain.

The way the Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was “eliminated” politically rests entirely on the lobby's action and campaigns against his (imaginary) anti-Semitism. The same process is currently underway in France with Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his *France Insoumise* party.

American presidents as different as Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter have complained that their actions were hampered by the lobby. In fact, every American president has wanted to get rid of the “Palestinian problem” (through the two-state solution) but has been impeded by Congress.

As for Congress itself, let us quote very explicit insider testimony, that of James Abourezk, who was first a congressman and then a senator from South Dakota in the 1970s and [who sent this letter](#) in 2006 to Jeff Blankfort, an anti-Zionist activist:

“I can tell you from personal experience that, at least in the Congress, the support Israel has in that body is based completely on political fear — fear of defeat by anyone who does not do what Israel wants done. I can also tell you that very few members of Congress — at least when I served there — have any affection for Israel or for its Lobby. What they have is contempt, but it is silenced by fear of being found out exactly how they feel.

I've heard too many cloakroom conversations in which members of the Senate will

voice their bitter feelings about how they're pushed around by the Lobby to think otherwise. In private one hears the dislike of Israel and the tactics of the Lobby, but not one of them is willing to risk the Lobby's animosity by making their feelings public.

Thus, I see no desire on the part of Members of Congress to further any U.S. imperial dreams by using Israel as their pit bull. The only exceptions to that rule are the feelings of Jewish members, who, I believe, are sincere in their efforts to keep U.S. money flowing to Israel."

AIPAC Suppression

Abourezk added that the Lobby made every effort to suppress even a single voice of congressional dissent – as his own – that might question annual appropriations to Israel, so that

"if Congress is completely silent on the issue, the press will have no one to quote, which effectively silences the press as well. Any journalists or editors who step out of line are quickly brought under control by well organized economic pressure against the newspaper caught sinning."

Abourezk once traveled through the Middle East with a reporter who wrote honestly about what he saw. As a result, newspaper executives received threats from several of their large advertisers that their advertising would be terminated if they continued publishing the journalist's articles.

"I do not recall a single instance where any administration saw the need for Israel's military power to advance U.S. Imperial interests. In fact, as we saw in the Gulf War, Israel's involvement was detrimental to what Bush, Sr. wanted to accomplish in that war. They had, as you might remember, to suppress any Israeli assistance so that the coalition would not be destroyed by their involvement.

So far as the argument that we need to use Israel as a base for U.S. operations, I'm not aware of any U.S. bases there of any kind. The U.S. has enough military bases, and fleets, in the area to be able to handle any kind of military needs without using Israel. In fact I can't think of an instance where the U.S. would want to involve Israel militarily for fear of upsetting the current allies the U.S. has, i.e., Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. The public in those countries would not allow the monarchies to continue their alliance with the U.S. should Israel become involved."

Abourezk said that U.S. encouragement in its invasions of Lebanon "was merely an extension of the U.S. policy of helping Israel because of the Lobby's continual pressure. ... Lebanon always has been a 'throw away' country so far as the Congress is concerned, that is, what happens there has no effect on U.S. interests. There is no Lebanon Lobby."

Alleged Strategic Value

The alleged strategic value of Israel is just one among many examples of claiming that some imperial/colonial project is necessary for the global capitalist system.

The Vietnam war was justified in part by the domino theory: all of South-East Asia would become communist if Vietnam "fell." The only domino that fell was Cambodia, as a result of U.S. bombing, after victorious Vietnam intervened to overthrow a genocidal regime there.

South African apartheid was supported by the West, in part out of fear of communism, but the end of apartheid had no dramatic effect on capitalist imperialism in Africa.

If Israeli apartheid were to disappear in Palestine, oil and trade would still flow from the Middle East towards the West, and there would be no attempts by Houthis to block shipments in the Red Sea.

A realistic analysis shows that Israel's treatment of Palestinians and aggressive policies toward its neighbors are entirely detrimental to American interests in the Middle East, which the current crisis only serves to highlight even more.

The trouble with the "Israel as U.S. aircraft carrier" thesis is that while it's very comfortable for its defenders, it is also very damaging for the Palestinian cause.

It's comfortable because it doesn't risk incurring accusations of anti-Semitism, as it shifts responsibility for Israeli atrocities to American imperialism and its multinational corporations.

On the other hand, if you emphasize the Lobby's leading role in U.S. Middle East policy, you will be accused of echoing fantasies and "conspiracy theories" about "Jewish power" dating from times when there was no Israel and thus no Israel Lobby.

Rejection of discredited stereotypes is no reason to ignore the facts of the unprecedented relationship that has developed between the United States and Israel.

Harm to Palestinian Cause

The "Israel as U.S. aircraft carrier" is precisely an Israeli argument designed to win over total U.S. political, financial and military support.

Thus it is no wonder that echoing that argument is extremely harmful to the Palestinian cause. If it were true, how could we hope to end this American support to Israel?

Persuade the American population to revolt against something said to be highly beneficial to U.S. interests? Or wait for American imperialism to collapse? That's not likely to happen any time soon.

But if the power of the lobby is the key to U.S. support, then the strategy to be followed is much simpler and has a much greater chance of success: we need simply to dare speak out and tell the truth.

The public must realize that far from being an asset, Israel is a chronic liability that squanders billions of American dollars, drags the United States into wars and whose genocidal treatment of the Palestinians is radically destroying America's moral pretensions in most of the world.

Once this is understood, support for Israel will collapse, and voters may put enough pressure on the national elite, the administration and even the intimidated Congress to reorient U.S. policy in line with genuine national interests.

There are signs that part of the economic ruling class is moving this way: Elon Musk's defense of free speech on social networks is a step in the right direction (to the rage of

Israel's supporters).

Although Donald Trump, as president, did all he could for Israel, his popular slogan "America First" means something quite different, as understood by anti-interventionists on the right such as Tucker Carlson.

Unfortunately, many on the left cling to an ostensibly "Marxist" view that U.S. support for Israel must be motivated by economic interests, by capitalist profits, by control of the flow of Middle Eastern oil. This belief is not only unsupported factually, it amounts to an invitation to U.S. rulers to keep it up.

With worldwide indignation rising against the genocidal assault on Gaza, how is it possible for any American to claim that Israel is "acting in American interests?" Israel is responsible for its crimes, and it is both true and in the U.S. national interest to recognize that far from being a strategic asset, Israel is America's No. 1 liability.

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Diana Johnstone was press secretary of the Green Group in the European Parliament from 1989 to 1996. In her latest book, Circle in the Darkness: Memoirs of a World Watcher (Clarity Press, 2020), she recounts key episodes in the transformation of the German Green Party from a peace to a war party. Her other books include Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions (Pluto/Monthly Review) and in co-authorship with her father, Paul H. Johnstone, From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning (Clarity Press). She can be reached at diana.johnstone@wanadoo.fr

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