

The U.S. Invasion of Iraq: Not the Fault of Israel and Its Supporters

By Stephen Zunes | January 4, 2006

As the official rationales for the U.S. invasion of Iraq—that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction” which threatened the national security of the United States and that the Iraqi government had operational ties to al-Qaida—are now widely acknowledged to have been fabricated, and the back-up rationalization—of bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq—is also losing credibility, increasing attention is being given as to why the U.S. government, with broad bipartisan support, made such a fateful decision.

There are a number of plausible explanations, ranging from control of the country’s oil resources to strategic interests to ideological motivations. One explanation which should not be taken seriously, however, is the assertion that the right-wing government of Israel and its American supporters played a major role in leading the United States to invade Iraq.

The government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and its supporters here in the United States deserve blame for many tragic policies in recent years which have led to needless human suffering, increased extremism in the Islamic world, decreased security, and rampant violations of the UN Charter, international humanitarian law, and other international legal principles. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, is *not* one of them.

Arguments Supporting Claims of a Major Israeli Role in the U.S. Invasion of Iraq

There are four major arguments made by those who allege a key role by Israel and its American supporters in leading the United States to war in Iraq:

“Despite propaganda by the Bush administration and its bipartisan supporters on Capitol Hill, Iraq was not a military threat to the United States. As a result, the invasion had to have been done to protect Israel for an Iraqi attack.”

To begin with, Iraq during the final years of Saddam Hussein’s rule was no more of a threat to Israel than it was to the United States. All Iraqi missiles capable of reaching Israel had been accounted for and destroyed by UNSCOM, the International Atomic Energy Agency had determined that Iraq no longer had a nuclear program, and virtually all the country’s chemical weapons had similarly been accounted for and destroyed. All this was presumably known to the Israelis, who actively monitored United Nations disarmament efforts in Iraq and had the best military intelligence capabilities in the region.

Though observers were less confident regarding the absence of biological weapons, the Israelis recognized that there was no realistic threat from that source either. Respected Israeli military analyst Meir Stieglitz, writing in the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*, stated categorically that “there is no such thing as a long-range Iraqi missile with an



effective biological warhead. No one has found an Iraqi biological warhead. The chances of Iraq having succeeded in developing operative warheads without tests are zero.” Similarly, it is highly doubtful that Iraq would be able to attack Israel with biological weapons by other means, either. For example, it is hard to imagine that an Iraqi aircraft carrying biological weapons, presumably some kind of subsonic drone, could somehow make the 600-mile trip to Israel without being detected and shot down. Israel—as well as Iraq’s immediate neighbors—had sophisticated anti-aircraft capability.

More fundamentally, if the United States was really concerned with Israel’s safety from Iraqi attack, why did the U.S. government provide Iraq with key elements of its WMD capability during the 1980s—including the seed stock for its anthrax and many of the components for its chemical weapons program—back when Iraq clearly *did* have the capability of striking Israel? How could the “pro-Israel lobby”—which was no more influential in 2002 than it was fifteen years earlier—have the power to push the United States to invade Iraq when Saddam was no longer a threat to Israel when the lobby was unable to stop U.S. technology transfers to Iraq when it really could have potentially harmed Israel?

“Though Iraq had no connection with al-Qaida, they were supporting other terrorist groups that were attacking Israel. A U.S. invasion was seen as a means to stopping the terrorist threat targeted at the Jewish state.”

Saddam Hussein did support the Abu Nidal group, a radical secular Palestinian movement, during the mid-1980s, though they tended to target moderate leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organizations as much as they did Israelis. Ironically, the Reagan administration dropped Iraq from its list of states sponsoring terrorism at that time in order to be

able to transfer arms and technology to Saddam Hussein’s regime that would have otherwise been illegal. Iraq was put back on the list of state sponsors of terrorism immediately following its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, despite evidence that Iraq’s support for international terrorism had actually declined. Abu Nidal himself became chronically ill not long afterward and his group had been largely moribund for more than a decade when Saddam Hussein had him killed in his Baghdad apartment in 2002.

Iraq did support a tiny pro-Iraqi Palestinian group known as the Arab Liberation Front, which was known to pass on much of these funds to families of Palestinians who died in the struggle against Israel. These recipients included families of Palestine Authority police and families of nonviolent protesters, though some recipients were families of suicide bombers. Such Iraqi support was significantly less than the support many of these same families had received from Saudi Arabia and other U.S.-backed Arab monarchies, which—unlike Iraq—also provided *direct* funding for Hamas and other radical Palestinian Islamists. In any case, given that Israeli occupation forces routinely destroyed the homes of families of suicide bombers and the Iraqi money fell way short of making up for their losses, it was hardly an incentive for someone to commit an act of terrorism, which tends to be driven by the anger, hopelessness, and desperation from living under an oppressive military occupation, not from financial incentives.

“Individuals and organizations sympathetic to Israel strongly supported the invasion. Sizable numbers of otherwise dovish Jewish members of Congress voted in support of the war resolution, and the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), long considered one of the most powerful lobbying groups on Capitol Hill, pushed Congress to authorize an invasion on behalf of Israel.”

While AIPAC undeniably has influenced Congressional votes regarding Israeli-Palestinian concerns and related issues, they did not play a major role lobbying members of Congress to vote in favor of the resolution authorizing a U.S. invasion of Iraq, in large part because they knew there was such overwhelming bipartisan support for invading that oil-rich country they did not need to. More fundamentally, there are far more powerful interests that have a stake in what happens in the Persian Gulf region than does AIPAC, such as the oil companies, the arms industry, and other special interests whose lobbying influence and campaign contributions far surpass that of the much-vaunted “Zionist lobby” and its allied donors to Congressional races. The American Jewish community, like most Americans, is turning against the war. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, along with its chairman of the board, Robert Heller, recently sent a letter to President Bush stating that “We call not only for a clear exit strategy but also for specific goals for troop withdrawal to commence after the completion of parliamentary elections.”

It is noteworthy that in the authorization of force for the 1991 Gulf War, the majority of Jewish members of Congress voted *against* the war resolution, which is more than can be said for its non-Jewish members. In the more lopsided vote authorizing the use of force in October 2002, a majority of Jewish members of Congress did authorize the use of force, though proportionately less so than did non-Jewish members.

“Pro-Israel Jewish neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, and others were among the key architects of the policy of ‘preventative war’ and were the strongest advocates for a U.S. invasion of Iraq.”

While it is true that a disproportionate number of Jews could be found among the policy makers in Washington who pushed for a U.S. invasion of Iraq, it is also true that a disproportionate number of Jews could be found among liberal Democrats in Congress and leftist intellectuals in universities who opposed the invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, while a number of prominent neoconservative intellectuals are of Jewish background, they have tended not to be religious nor have they, despite their support for the current right-wing Israeli government, been strongly identified as Zionists.

It should also be noted that these same neoconservatives, while in the Reagan administration during the 1980s, were advocates of a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua and Cuba as well as a nuclear first strike—in a so-called “limited nuclear war”—against the Soviet Union. In short, they are hawks across the board, not just in regard to the Middle East. Support for Israel has always been seen as part of a broader strategic design to advance perceived U.S. interests in the region.

Furthermore, the most prominent backers of the U.S. invasion of Iraq—Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney—are neither Jewish nor prone to put the perceived interests of Israel ahead of that of the United States. Indeed, strong U.S. strategic interests in the Persian Gulf region, home of most of the world’s known oil reserves, have existed for many decades and even pre-date the establishment of modern Israel.

Has the U.S. Invasion of Iraq Helped Israel?

To argue that support for Israel and/or pressure by supporters of Israel was a crucial variable in prompting the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq assumes that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq has been good for Israel.

Evidence suggests strongly to the contrary, however. As cited above, in the years leading up to the March 2003 U.S. invasion, Iraq was no longer a strategic threat to Israel nor was it actively involved in anti-Israeli terrorism. In short, Israel had little to worry about Iraq during Saddam Hussein's final years in power. They do now, however.

Key leaders of Iraq's current government and likely future government are part of fundamentalist Shiite political movements heavily influenced by Iran. These movements are strongly anti-Zionist in orientation and some have maintained close ties to other radical Arab Shiite groups, such as the Lebanese Hizbullah, whose militia has battled Israel for more than twenty years. One of the dominant parties of the U.S.-backed governing coalition has been the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, whose 15,000-strong paramilitary unit, known as the Badr Brigade, was trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who also helped train the Hizbullah.

Meanwhile, the anti-government and anti-U.S. insurgents in Iraq are dominated by Sunni Salafists and radical nationalists, both of whom tend to be anti-Israel extremists. Thanks to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, these insurgents are becoming stronger and increasingly sophisticated fighters gaining valuable new experiences in urban guerrilla warfare as well as terrorist tactics. These Iraqi insurgents have developed close ties with radical Jordanian and Palestinian groups with the means and motivation to harm Israeli civilians and Israel will undoubtedly feel their impact.

University of Michigan historian Juan Cole, a leading authority on internal Iraqi politics, has noted that while such radical currents were kept under control by Saddam Hussein, "An Iraq in which armed fundamentalist and nationalist militias proliferate is inevitably a security worry for Israel."

General Shlomo Brom, former chief of the Israeli army's strategic planning division, has stated that "The U.S. presence there actually causes harm to some of our interests."

To help the United States deal with the deteriorating situation in Iraq, Israel has helped train U.S. Special Forces in aggressive counter-insurgency operations, sending urban warfare specialists to Fort Bragg to, among other things, train assassination squads against suspected Iraqi guerrilla leaders. American officers have also traveled to Israel and Israeli officers have traveled to Iraq for additional consulting. In addition, Israelis have helped arm and train pro-American Kurdish militias and have assisted U.S. officials in interrogation centers for suspected insurgents under detention near Baghdad. Israeli advisers have provided advice on erecting and manning roadblocks and checkpoints, mine-clearing and wall-breaching methods, as well as techniques for tracking suspected insurgents using drone aircraft. Israel has also provided aerial surveillance equipment, decoy drones, and armored construction equipment.

It has long been assumed that working so closely with Israel would harm U.S. interests in the Middle East, given the longstanding anti-Israeli sentiment in the region. However, as a result of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the bloody counter-insurgency war which has followed, popular resentment in the Middle East against the United States today is arguably even greater than popular resentment against Israel. Indeed, the death, destruction, and dislocation resulting from U.S. policies in Iraq eclipse that from Israeli policies in the West Bank. Israel's war crimes against civilians living in Jenin in 2002 were horrendous, but pale in comparison with U.S. war crimes committed in Fallujah in 2004. Israel's mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners is also a serious matter, but does not come close in scale to America's torture

and abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Israel has openly violated the United Nations Charter and other critical standards of international law, but the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its aftermath is of even greater negative consequence to the international legal order.

As with other powers that have tried to control the Middle East, American efforts to impose its hegemony has spawned its own resistance. With the United States itself on the other side of the globe, Israel may become an easier target by those resisting this hegemonic American effort in the heart of the Middle East by going after its closest regional ally. While in the past, U.S. support for Israel has led to increased anti-Americanism in the Arab-Islamic world, today it appears that Israeli support for the American invasion and occupation of Iraq is exacerbating anti-Israeli sentiments. By further solidifying its strategic relationship with the United States through support of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, Israel is finding itself further isolated, less likely to be able to normalize relations with Arab states, more likely to be subjected to terrorist attacks by extremists, and more vulnerable to the whims of U.S. foreign policy.

As a result, rather than goading the United States into taking military action against Syria, the Israeli government has been cautioning the United States to back off from its pressure against the Assad regime, fearing that if the Baathist leader was overthrown, more radical elements could come to power or that the country could be thrown into a destabilizing civil war. Similarly, public opinion polls show that a sizable majority of Israelis oppose pre-emptive military action against Iran for fear that an attack on that large Islamic country could have serious negative consequences to Israeli security interests.

The U.S.-Israeli Alliance

Using Israel to advance perceived American interests in the Middle East and beyond is nothing new. In previous decades, Israel helped prevent victories by radical nationalist movements in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as in Palestine. They have kept Syria, with its radical nationalist regime and its role as a one-time ally of the Soviet Union, in check. Their air force is predominant throughout the region. Israel's frequent wars have provided battlefield testing for American arms. Israel has missiles with ranges of thousands of miles and has cooperated with the U.S. military-industrial complex in research and development for new jet fighters, anti-missile defense systems, and other sophisticated weapons systems. Israel also served as a conduit for U.S. arms to regimes and movements too unpopular in the United States for openly granting direct military assistance, such as apartheid South Africa, Iran's Islamic republic, Guatemala under its rightist juntas, and the Nicaraguan Contras. Israeli military advisers have assisted the Contras, the Salvadoran junta, and other movements and governments backed by the United States. The Mossad has cooperated with the CIA and other U.S. intelligence services in intelligence gathering and covert operations.

As one Israeli analyst described it during the Iran-Contra scandal, "It's like Israel has become just another federal agency, one that's convenient to use when you want something done quietly."

Rather than being a liability, the 1991 Gulf War proved Israel once again to be a strategic asset for the United States: Israeli developments in air-to-ground warfare were integrated into allied bombing against Iraqi missile sites and other targets; Israeli-designed conformal fuel tanks for F-15 fighter-bombers greatly enhanced their range; the Israeli-provided mine plows were utilized during the final

assaults on Iraqi positions; Israeli mobile bridges were used by U.S. Marines; Israeli targeting systems and low-altitude warning devices were utilized by American helicopters; and, Israel developed key components for the widely-used Tomahawk missiles.

One of the more unsettling aspects of this kind of strategic cooperation is how closely it corresponds with historic anti-Semitism:

Throughout Europe in past centuries, the ruling class of a given country would, in return for granting limited religious and cultural autonomy, set up certain individuals in the Jewish community to become the visible agents of the oppressive social order, such as tax collectors and money lenders. When the population would threaten to rise up against the ruling class, the rulers could then blame the Jews, sending the wrath of an exploited people against convenient scapegoats, resulting in the pogroms and other notorious waves of repression which have taken place throughout the Jewish Diaspora over the centuries.

The idea behind Zionism was to break this cycle through the creation of a Jewish nation-state, where Jews would no longer be dependent on the ruling class of a given country. The tragic irony is that this cycle has been perpetuated through Israel being used by Western powers to maintain their interests in the Middle East. Great Britain and France, in their unsuccessful military campaign to bring “regime change” to Egypt in 1956, enlisted Israel in their fight. Subsequent to 1967, in ways described above, the United States has used Israel to advance its strategic interests in the region and beyond.

Therefore, one finds autocratic Arab governments, Islamic extremists, and others blaming Israel, Zionism, or the Jews for their problems rather than the United States or the broader exploitative global

economic system and their own elites who benefit from and help perpetuate such a system.

The late respected Israeli intellectual Ishawa Leibowitz once observed, “The existence of the Jewish people of 60 to 80 generations ... was a heroic situation. We never got from the goyish world a cent. We supported ourselves. We maintained our own institutions. Now we have taken three million Jews, gathered them here and turned them over to be parasites of America. And in some sense we are even the mercenaries of America to fight the wars of what the ruling persons in America consider to be American interests.”

In the Israeli press, one can find comments like those in *Yediot Ahronot* which describes their country as “the Godfather’s messenger,” since Israel undertakes the “dirty work” of the Godfather, who “always tries to appear to be the owner of some large respectable business.” Israeli satirist B. Michael describes U.S. aid to Israel as a situation where “My master gives me food to eat and I bite those whom he tells me to bite. It’s called strategic cooperation.”

This explains why the United States has moved increasingly toward Sharon’s position of refusing to engage in serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians and continuing to occupy and colonize large sectors of the West Bank while rejecting Israeli moderates who are willing to accept Palestinian offers of enforceable security guarantees in exchange for a withdrawal from the occupied territories: an Israel in a continuing state of violence and insecurity is far more likely to do the bidding of the United States than an Israel at peace. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once noted, “Israel’s obstinacy serves our interests best.”

The United States and Israel under their right-wing governments do share a number of common

perceived strategic interests. However, rather than being a tail-wagging-the-dog situation, as apologists for U.S. policy contend, Israel still is very much the junior partner in the relationship and is playing that role to its own detriment.

Blaming the Jews

As part of its desperate strategy to defend its disastrous policies in Iraq, the Bush administration and its supporters are now using the defense of Israel as an excuse. While such claims have not more validity than claims that Saddam Hussein had operational ties to al-Qaida or still possessed WMDs, it carries the additional danger that Israel and its American Jewish supporters will end up getting blamed for the whole Iraqi debacle. The American Jewish newspaper *The Forward* noted how a number of pro-Israel American activists and prominent Israelis had criticized recent comments by President George W. Bush and other prominent Republicans who have recently played the Israel card to justify the increasingly unpopular war. For example, Dani Rothschild, a retired Israeli major general who had served as the Israeli army's top administrator in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, noted how "It could put Israel in a very awkward situation with the American public, if Israel would be the excuse for losing more American soldiers every day."

Using Israel as an excuse for unpopular U.S. policies in the Middle East is nothing new, either. Over the past decade, I have had the opportunity to meet with a half dozen Arab foreign ministers and deputy foreign ministers and have asked each of them why their government was still so friendly with the United States, given U.S. policy toward the Palestinians, the Iraqis, and other Arabs. Every one has answered to the effect that U.S. officials had explained to them that the anti-Arab bias in U.S. foreign policy was not the fault of the U.S.

government itself, but was the result of wealthy Jews who essentially ran U.S. foreign policy.

In short, American officials are utilizing classic anti-Semitic scapegoating by blaming an alleged cabal of rich Jews behind the scenes for being responsible for a widely-perceived injustice as a means of deflecting attention away from those who actually are responsible.

Similarly, some defenders of members of Congress who voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq and falsely claimed that Iraq still had "weapons of mass destruction" are now trying to deflect criticism directed at these powerful senators and representatives by claiming they were somehow forced into voting for the war by powerful Jewish interests. In reality, however, the only people responsible for authorizing the illegal and tragic U.S. invasion of Iraq are those individuals who cast their votes in favor of the resolution and should therefore be held personally responsible.

This does not mean the growing awareness of the tragedy of the Iraq war cannot be utilized to raise consciousness regarding certain institutional factors which helped make the invasion possible. Indeed, this could be a great opportunity for progressives to demonstrate that this tragedy was a result of not only the war mongering of the individual members of Congress and the administration who made it possible, but that it was also a reflection of the power of the oil companies, military contractors, right-wing ideologues, the corporate-owned media, and overall excessive corporate influence over our government's foreign and domestic policy. This, in turn, could spur demands for badly-needed radical reforms in the American political and economic systems.

It would be tragic if this opportunity for pressing for advancing such badly-needed social change

becomes sidetracked by the time-honored tactic of diverting attention from the real issues and instead “blaming the Jews.”

This does not mean those who exaggerate the role of Israel in propelling the United States to war with Iraq are necessarily guilty of anti-Semitism. There are any number of theories as to why the United States government decided to invade that oil-rich country. This one just happens to be wrong. Because this particular theory parallels dangerous anti-Semitic stereotypes which exaggerate Jewish power and influence, however, it is a particularly grievous misinterpretation, not just because it reinforces longstanding oppressive attitudes against a minority group, but because it diverts attention away from those who really are responsible for the unfolding tragedy in Iraq.

Indeed, that has largely been the functional purpose of anti-Semitism throughout Western history: to misdirect popular opposition to economic injustice, disastrous military campaigns, or other failures by political and economic elites onto a convenient and expendable target. It is critical, therefore, for

people to resist—particularly those who identify with the peace movement—buying into this myth that it was Israel and its supporters who were responsible for the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

*Stephen Zunes is Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy In Focus Project (www.fpif.org). He serves as a professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and is the author of *Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* (Common Courage Press, 2003.)*

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