

How (and How Not) to Talk About the Israel Lobby

There's a difference between fair and unfair criticisms of AIPAC—and it's time everyone, including AIPAC, acknowledges it.

[Stephen M. Walt](#) February 15, 2019, 12:11 PM



U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, speaks in Washington on Feb. 7. (Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images)

The recent uproar over Rep. Ilhan Omar's tweets criticizing the conduct of Israel's government and its U.S. supporters, especially the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), makes one thing clear: U.S.-Israel relations (and U.S. Middle East policy more broadly) remains a third rail that one touches at one's peril. The harsh responses to Omar are hardly surprising, and unfortunately—as in the past—this latest furor has

generated considerably more heat than light. But the breadth and vehemence of the reaction are still instructive.

Let's start with some obvious but vital points. Anti-Semitism has a long and loathsome history dating back centuries, and the vicious killings at a Pittsburgh synagogue last year remind us that it remains a threat today. Anti-Semites have fanned the flames with bizarre conspiracy theories about secret cabals (e.g., the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) and sinister claims about the influence of "Jewish money," along with divisive accusations of national disloyalty (as in the notorious Dreyfus affair in France). Such hateful beliefs and tropes have had fatal consequences, most notably the slaughter of Jews in the Holocaust, but it's important to recognize (as Omar has [acknowledged](#) learning recently) that the history of anti-Semitism and its current expression are more widespread than that particular horror.

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Given all that, Jews are understandably alarmed and angry when similar ideas or tropes are invoked today. Indeed, everyone should be. We should all be outraged when a world leader such as Hungary's Viktor Orban directs classic anti-Semitic accusations at someone like George Soros or when Republican politicians use [similar themes](#) in campaigns and fail to denounce [anti-Semitic chants](#) at political rallies.

But at the same time, we need to be able to talk openly and calmly about all the forces that shape U.S. politics today, including groups like AIPAC and related organizations that seek to influence U.S. policy toward Israel and

the Middle East. Bigotry and violence must be firmly rejected, but vigilance to prevent a resurgence of anti-Semitism should not be used as a political weapon to silence honest discourse now. As J.J. Goldberg, the former editor of the *Forward*, wrote in his insightful book *Jewish Power*, “It seems as though we’re forced to choose between Jews holding vast and pernicious control or Jewish influence being non-existent. ... [S]omewhere in the middle is a reality that none wants to discuss, which is that there is an entity called the Jewish community made up of a group of organizations and public figures that’s part of the political rough-and-tumble. *There’s nothing wrong with playing the game like everybody else*” (my emphasis).

Precisely. Goldberg’s candid acknowledgement of both the historical legacy and context and the present reality tells us a lot about how one should think and talk about the influence that different organizations and individuals play in U.S. Middle East policy. To be specific:

First, what groups such as AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Christians United for Israel, the Zionist Organization of America, the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and various other groups are doing, and what wealthy individuals such as Haim Saban and Sheldon Adelson have done for years, is normal political activity and wholly in line with the interest group basis of U.S. politics.

The U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of association and protects free speech, which means that any Americans who want to organize themselves and press for particular policies can do so within the confines of the law. The activities of the various groups and individuals comprising the Israel lobby are no different from what the National Rifle Association (NRA), the farm lobby, Big Pharma, the American Civil Liberties Union, or dozens of other interest groups do. There’s nothing secretive, conspiratorial, or illegitimate about it; it is how the U.S. system of government works.

Second, these groups and individuals are not a unified monolith, and there is no central leadership that directs their activities. Yes, there are a number of groups that actively work to preserve the so-called special relationship between the United States and Israel, but they sometimes disagree on specific issues, such as the merits of the nuclear deal with Iran or whether a two-state solution is the right answer to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. To suggest otherwise echoes the tropes described earlier and is simply incorrect.

Third, the Israel lobby is defined not by its members' religion or ethnicity but by its political agenda—i.e., working to promote staunch U.S. support for Israel. To be sure, this includes American Jews who are ardent in their support of Israel, but some Americans who strongly favor unconditional support for Israel—notably Christian evangelicals—are not Jewish. Moreover, there are many people in the U.S. Jewish community who are critical of Israel and its policies. For this reason, using terms such as “Jewish lobby” to talk about pro-Israel groups is both inaccurate and inevitably conjures up dangerous stereotypes.

Fourth, like other interest groups, the Israel lobby uses a variety of strategies to accomplish its goals. Some of its influence comes from campaign contributions to political parties or politicians (although AIPAC does not do this), some from direct lobbying on Capitol Hill, some from public outreach (op-eds, books, position papers, media appearances, etc.), and some from the role that pro-Israel individuals may play in the U.S. government itself. Once again, such influence is no different from the influence that oil or pharmaceutical companies gain when individuals sympathetic to their aims get appointed to run the Department of the Interior or the Food and Drug Administration. Focusing solely on one item such as campaign contributions misses a lot of the story and risks reinforcing old historical canards.

Lastly, no interest group gets its way all of the time. The Israel lobby

doesn't control every aspect of U.S. Middle East policy, just as the NRA doesn't control every aspect of gun control and health insurers didn't get everything they wanted with Obamacare. But no one who has worked on foreign-policy issues in Washington or studied them with any objectivity would deny that AIPAC and related groups have considerable clout (which AIPAC brags about on its website), and policymakers remain sensitive to the lobby's concerns, as any number of former officials have testified. But words matter, and using words such as "control" conjures up creepy and inaccurate images of shadowy puppet masters pulling strings.

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Recent spats aside, Israel's right-wing government sees the illiberal nationalist leaders of Poland and Hungary as natural allies. They share a hostility toward human rights, Enlightenment values, and the European Union.

Given all that, Omar's tweets were both unfortunate and careless, and they stemmed from ignorance that she has subsequently acknowledged. But I do not believe they are evidence of anti-Semitism, and I don't think it is helpful to respond to them with alarmist accusations and demands for her resignation. For starters, Twitter was the wrong medium: There's simply no way to address the complexities of these issues in 140 (or even 280) characters. Second, her suggestion that AIPAC gives money to congressional candidates was factually incorrect. AIPAC engages in lots of face-to-face lobbying, runs a big annual conference, does grassroots work in local districts, sponsors congressional trips to Israel, and provides guidance to pro-Israel groups and individuals about candidates' views on U.S.-Israel relations, but it doesn't donate to congressional campaigns. If you're going to wade into this minefield, it's important to get your facts right.

But here's the kicker: Though Omar deserved to be educated about the unfortunate manner and content of her critique, she would still have been pilloried even if she had been more sensitive to the history of anti-Semitism and offered a nuanced and well-documented argument. Why? Because being aware of, sensitive to, and deeply opposed to anti-Semitism and offering an informed, factual picture of the lobby's activities affords little or no protection to anyone who is critical of Israel's actions, is concerned about the one-sided nature of the U.S.-Israel relationship, and disagrees with the policy positions that groups like AIPAC endorse.

How do I know? Let's just say I have some experience with this phenomenon.

In [my 2007 book](#) with John Mearsheimer, we began by observing that any discussion of this topic "takes place in the shadow of two thousand years of history, especially the centuries of very real anti-Semitism in Europe." We described that history as a "shameful record." We also condemned its more recent manifestations—such as the hatemongering of people like David

Duke—and we “categorically reject[ed]” the hateful canards about Jewish finance, media control, and “dual loyalty.”

We were quite critical of some of the positions that groups like AIPAC and others had advocated for, but at no point did we suggest these activities were illegitimate, just that the consequences had been a disaster for the Middle East and for the United States. While critical of many of Israel’s actions, we also expressed our admiration for its many achievements and wrote the book in the hope that a more balanced debate over these critical issues and policies would ensure a more secure Israel in a more stable Middle East. Our book said repeatedly that the United States should come to Israel’s aid if its survival were ever in jeopardy, and we argued forcefully for a two-state solution.

Yet despite these points repeated throughout the book, we faced essentially the same firestorm of criticism that Omar’s brief tweets occasioned. We were openly and repeatedly denounced as anti-Semites or “Jew-baiters,” falsely charged with having done our research on neo-Nazi websites, and in many cases accused of saying the exact opposite of what we actually wrote. Our critics were not just Twitter trolls but were in many cases prominent individuals with intellectual and political credentials. Even 12 years later, it makes me shake my head that we were in effect condemned as haters for pointing out that AIPAC and other like-minded organizations were extremely effective at accomplishing what they openly advertised they were trying to do!

Why does any serious criticism of Israel or the lobby generate this sort of firestorm, no matter how well one understands the sensitivity of these issues and no matter how carefully one expresses one’s views? Because after more than 50 years of occupation, the repeated and disproportionate pummeling of a captive population in Gaza, and the steady rightward drift of Israeli domestic politics, support for Israel is declining in the United States. Only by discrediting and shaming those who point out some of

these difficult realities can the pro-Israel lobby keep the debate one-sided and U.S. unconditional support sustained.

So the reaction to anyone of any prominence who criticizes Israel's actions or the current special relationship must be to condemn, marginalize, and if possible silence them. If their careers are permanently damaged so much the better, as that may deter others from speaking up in the future. The result is that there is still no honest or accurate discourse about such matters in the United States.

I believe that such efforts will ultimately backfire. Most Americans—including the vast majority of American Jews—prize freedom of speech, mutual tolerance, and basic human rights. They rightly resent efforts to silence dissenting voices, and they understand that the traditional protections of a liberal society are essential to preserving the security of minority populations everywhere.

Most importantly, only an open and honest discourse on these topics is likely to produce a Middle East policy that would be better for the United States and Israel alike. As J Street [noted](#) in its own response to the controversy surrounding Omar: “It does nothing to advance the true interests and needs of Israelis or Palestinians, nor those of the American Jewish community.”

Exactly.

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