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How to Talk About Israel

By IAN BURUMA

he Jewish Problem pops up in the strangest places. In the winter of 1991, at the height of the first gulf war, I asked a right-wing Japanese politician who still wields considerable power in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party to explain the Japanese role in the Middle Eastern conflict. After clearing his throat with some perfunctory remarks about oil supplies and United States-Japan relations, he suddenly stopped midsentence, gave me a shrewd look and said: "Look, we Japanese aren't stupid. We saw Henry Kissinger on TV. We know how America operates. We're perfectly well aware that this war is not about Kuwait. It's about Jewish interests. It's all about Israel."

Perhaps he had read too many books about Jewish conspiracies (Roosevelt was a Jew, Churchill was a Jew, Rockefeller was a Jew, etc.), for which the Japanese market seems to have an insatiable appetite. He was, in any case, not known for his intellectual finesse. But the idea that Israel or Jewish interests are somehow at the center of world events or, at the very least, at the center of American foreign policy in the Middle East is widely held, and not only outside the United States. No matter what the current American administration does to save the tattered "road map" toward an end to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, sinister motives are still bound to be imputed.

Earlier this year, Representative James Moran, a Democrat, said that "if it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this." In Britain, Tam Dalyell, a longstanding Labor member of Parliament, expressed a similar view. Tony Blair, he opined, was listening too much to a "cabal" of Jews around President Bush that included Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; an under secretary of defense, Douglas Feith; Richard Perle, a member of the Defense Policy Board; Elliott Abrams, director of Middle East Affairs in the White House; and the former presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer. "Those people drive this policy," Dalyell said.

Dalyell was "worried about my country being led up the garden path on a Likudnik-Sharon agenda" by British Jews close to Blair. He included among them Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, a Christian, whose rather distant Jewish family connections are very unlikely to make him a Likudnik.

The fact that James Moran had to apologize immediately, while the British M.P. was under no compulsion to do so, shows a profound difference between the United States and Europe, or indeed anywhere else in the world. Although Moran's opinion may be shared by other Americans, it is not something mainstream politicians can vocalize. Even legitimate criticism of Israel, or of Zionism, is often quickly denounced as anti-Semitism by various watchdogs. In European political discourse, not only is anti-Zionism quite acceptable, but so are vague

allegations of too much Jewish influence in public life, especially across the Atlantic. And in the non-Western world, it's not even necessary to keep such allegations vague.

Rarely can such a tiny country as Israel, and such a relatively small minority as the diaspora Jews, have been assumed to exercise so much influence in world affairs. The special relationship between Israel and the United States, and the supposed dominance of "Jewish interests" in Washington, is by now encrusted with so many layers of mythology and bad faith that it has become very difficult to discuss Israel's role in American politics critically and dispassionately. Yet not to talk about it invites only more conspiracy theories.

There are several myths to be considered. The first is the idea that the American or the British government is dominated or manipulated by Jews. In fact, none of President Bush's cabinet members are Jewish, and the last time individual Jews played a prominent part in any British government was under John Major. Straw, moreover, has spent more time and energy courting Iran than Israel. The well-being of Israel is not Blair's main concern either. In fact, an equitable deal for the Palestinians is more important to the British leader, who badly needs to rebuild his bridges with other European governments. That is why he wants Washington to push the Israelis harder to make peace with the Palestinians.

There is no doubt that Israeli lobby groups are well organized and well financed and have considerable clout in Washington. But then so do other lobbies. That is how the game is played. There was a time not so long ago when hefty books were written about the United States government falling into the hands of scheming Japanese lobbies. It is true that some people in the Pentagon, as well as influential organizations like the American Enterprise Institute and the Project for the New American Century, have close relations with the Likud Party, and especially with Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is much more in tune with American neoconservatism than Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is. Douglas Feith and Richard Perle advised Netanyahu, who was prime minister in 1996, to make "a clean break" from the Oslo accords with the Palestinians. They also argued that Israeli security would be served best by regime change in surrounding countries. Despite the current mess in Iraq, this is still a commonplace in Washington. In Paul Wolfowitz's words, "The road to peace in the Middle East goes through Baghdad." It has indeed become an article of faith (literally in some cases) in Washington that American and Israeli interests are identical, but this was not always so, and "Jewish interests" are not the main reason for it now.

Indeed, Israel enjoys a zealous following among some gentiles, particularly Christian fundamentalists. (In electoral terms, Christian fundamentalists are more important to the Republican Party than Jews -- there are many more of them, the Christian Coalition is highly efficient and most Jews still vote for the Democrats anyway.) Even though Israel is often described as the only democracy in the Middle East, the Christian right's remarkable devotion to Israel is not necessarily driven by democratic principles. The "Christian Zionists" are convinced by a literal reading of the Bible that Christ will reappear only once the Jews have repossessed the Holy Land. Their other conviction, that Jews will either die in an apocalypse or be converted to Christianity, is not so reassuring. Still, the Rev. Jerry Falwell declared on "60 Minutes" that evangelical Christians would make sure no American president would ever do anything to harm

Israel. At a conference of the Christian Coalition held in Washington last year, there were more Stars of David than crucifixes.

Then there are the foreign-policy hawks for whom Israel has been a strategic inspiration. The notions of "pre-emptive" war and "regime change" were exemplified, if not exactly pioneered, by Israel. The Six-Day War of 1967 was launched by Israel in self-protection, admittedly in the face of far greater provocation than Iraq ever gave the United States. And the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was part of an Israeli effort to install a more friendly government in Beirut. Both actions, deplored by critics of Israel all over the world, were seen as marks of admirable resolve by friends of Israel in the United States.

What we see, then, is not a Jewish conspiracy, but a peculiar alliance of evangelical Christians, foreign-policy hard-liners, lobbyists for the Israeli government and neoconservatives, a number of whom happen to be Jewish. But the Jews among them -- Perle, Wolfowitz, William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, et al. -- are more likely to speak about freedom and democracy than about Halakha (Jewish law). What unites this alliance of convenience is a shared vision of American destiny and the conviction that American force and a tough Israeli line on the Arabs are the best ways to make the United States strong, Israel safe and the world a better place.

Not all Americans agree with this hard line, to be sure: a recent campaign by American Jews to press Sharon into accepting a two-state solution shows this. In fact, he now accepts it in principle. Whether he will comply with American pressure to stop building a barrier to keep the Palestinians more or less imprisoned inside the occupied territories is doubtful, especially when Palestinian suicide bombers continue to blow up buses -- and the Israeli government continues to kill Hamas leaders. And there is no sign that President Bush will make a serious effort to make the Israelis dismantle, or at least stop building, Jewish settlements in the Palestinian areas. The idea that Israeli and American interests, as defined by evangelical Christians, neocons and Likudniks, converge, as if by force of nature, is not seriously challenged in the United States.

To judge from much of the world's media, especially in Europe and the Middle East, this was always true. In fact, it was not. The turning point was the Six-Day War. It was then that many Europeans took up the Palestinian cause and Israel could count, for the first time, on the almost unconditional support of the United States. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman did join the Soviet Union in backing the United Nations resolution that gave Jews the right to found a state in Palestine. But he did so against the advice of State Department officials, who worried about antagonizing the oil-rich Arab nations. When Israelis fought for the survival of their state in 1948, the United States did nothing to help them. Both the Americans and the Soviets would later have good reasons for discretion about their respective attitudes at Israel's difficult birth.

In 1956, during the Suez crisis, the United States actively opposed Israel's interests. It was an interesting little war in light of today's fashionable clichés about dovish anti-Zionist Europeans and hawkish pro-Israeli Americans. Israel's biggest supporter and arms supplier in the 1950's was not the United States, but France. That is how Israel got its nuclear bomb. Britain was more ambivalent and tended to lean toward the Arabs. But when President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, often depicted in the European press as an Arab Hitler, nationalized the Suez Canal, thus cutting out the British and French corporate owners, the British joined the French in an attempt

to grab it back. They enlisted the Israelis in this enterprise by encouraging them to attack Egyptian "terrorists" in the Sinai, after which Britain and France would order both sides to withdraw from Suez. The inevitable Egyptian refusal would then be followed by a short, sharp conflict and possibly even a "regime change" in Cairo. All went well until the Soviets threatened to intervene on behalf of the Egyptians and President Dwight D. Eisenhower forced France and Britain to back off and the Israelis to get out of the Sinai.

The French remained Israel's staunchest allies until 1967, when Gen. Charles de Gaulle decided to withdraw his favors. Having only just divested France of its last colonial possessions in North Africa, de Gaulle decided to cultivate the Arabs. He called the Israelis a "domineering" people and warned them against going to war. As he put it to the Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban: "You will be considered the aggressor by the world, and by me. You will cause the Soviet Union to penetrate more deeply into the Middle East, and Israel will suffer the consequences. You will create a Palestinian nationalism, and you will never get rid of it." De Gaulle was not totally wrong on any of these counts.

Until 1967, Israel was a great liberal European cause. Almost everyone on the left supported it. The promised land of kibbutzim and open-shirted pioneers represented, after all, a socialist dream. Conservatives supported Israel, too, especially the type of people who thought that Jews were all very well as long as they stuck to their own kind. This attitude was not new. Arthur Balfour, the British foreign secretary whose famous declaration in 1917 opened Palestine to Jewish immigration, was against Jewish immigration to Britain and told Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist leader, that he shared the "anti-Semitic postulates" of certain well-known Jew-baiters.

Guilt, too, had a great deal to do with European good will toward Israel in the 50's and early 60's. This was a time when Jewish characters in German novels took on a saintly air and anti-Semitic remarks (in public) were treated as a kind of blasphemy. Anti-Semitism didn't disappear, of course, but open expressions of it were frowned upon, at least in Western Europe. If the word "Jew" had to be uttered at all, people lowered their voices, as if embarrassed by the very sound of it. Britain, never having been under Nazi occupation, was less vexed. Having grown up in guilt-ridden Holland, I can remember how shocked I was, sometime in the mid-60's, to hear a young lawyer in London make disparaging remarks about Jews.

Philo-Semitism is better than pogroms, to be sure, but there was something unreal, and even a little unsettling, about this dutiful sense of collective guilt. It was as if Jews, including Israeli Jews, once again were not treated in the same way as other human beings, which can quickly lead to resentment, not among Jews so much as among gentiles. Zvi Rex, an Israeli psychoanalyst, once put his finger right on this sorest of points. "The Germans," he said, "will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz." This harsh analysis applies to some extent to non-Jews all over the European continent. Nobody likes to be made to feel guilty, especially for the sins of his father.

So it was with a certain sense of relief, in the aftermath of the 1967 war, that the European left, led by Communist publications like *L'Humanite* in France, could point its finger at Israelis and conclude that Jews, far from being saintly, were behaving just as badly as everyone else and,

indeed, perhaps worse. Once it became clear that the Israelis were not going to give back their conquered territories, the Palestinians became the prime victims to be protected from persecution, and the Jews became the Nazis. Here is L'Humanite on July 20, 1967: "Six million Jews were not slaughtered by the Nazis so that young sabras could on occasion behave like young Hitlerites."

In fact, Europeans, especially on the left, had a double guilt complex. One complex concerned the widespread collaboration in the destruction of European Jewry; the other was about the colonial past. France's war in Algeria ended only in 1962, after eight years of torture, terrorism and a near civil war in France. Israel had backed France in this last stand for European colonial rule. Taking up the cause of Palestinians, Vietnamese and other postcolonial peoples fighting for their "liberation" was a way to atone for past European sins. And because Western imperialism, since the late 60's, was largely associated with Israel and the United States, anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism came to mean the same thing. In this respect, if in little else, the editors of L'Humanite and General de Gaulle were entirely on the same wavelength.

The United States, meanwhile, began supplying Israel with fighter jets in 1968 and became an ever more reliable friend. But Zionist lobbies were not the main reason. It was the politics of the cold war that paved Washington's road to Jerusalem. Even though President Lyndon Johnson liked the macho Israelis, some of his closest advisers, including Vietnam hawks like Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow, a national security adviser, argued against supporting Israel's 1967 war. But Johnson decided that the United States had to stand by Israel to thwart Soviet designs on the Middle East.

If American Jews had anything to do with this, it was because many of them criticized the war in Vietnam, and Johnson needed something to appease these loyal Democratic voters. Since Israel, by then, was becoming a primary focus of Jewish identification -- as religion, Yiddish and other Old World memories were fading -- American support for Israel was a popular move among Jews. And besides that, Israel was not only more democratic than America's client states in Southeast Asia but a much brighter military success to boot.

The steady alignment of American interests with Israel made it possible for American Jews to be good Jews, good Democrats and good American patriots too. This same period gave birth to neoconservatism, in which Israel played a major role. The career of Norman Podhoretz might serve as an illustration. He was once a man of the left who wondered, when "thinking about the Jews," whether "their survival as a distinct group was worth one hair on the head of a single infant." But, as he explained in a speech on the occasion of his retirement as editor of Commentary in 1995, he began to change his mind in the 60's, when he became "much more aggressive in defense of Jewish interests in general and of Israel in particular." One reason was a sense of shock when defeat in Vietnam threatened to turn the United States into a demoralized, enervated, even isolationist power, which would no longer stand up for good against evil in the world.

The other came roughly at the same time. Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories made radical leftists in the United States as receptive as Europeans to Arab and Soviet depictions of the

Zionists as neo-Nazis. Disgust with this kind of "liberalism," as well as with a perception of American weakness, pushed former leftists, like Podhoretz and Irving Kristol, managing editor of Commentary, to the right. Convinced of "the inextricable connection between the survival of Israel and American military strength," Podhoretz began to see American dovishness in foreign affairs as a direct threat to Israeli survival. This feeling may be shared by some European Jews too, but without the swagger that goes with being a superpower citizen. Ruth Wisse, a professor of Yiddish literature at Harvard, remarked about Podhoretz that "because of the national confidence that America nurtured in him, he is immune to the self-doubt and apologetics that eat up so many of his co-religionists from inside."

This confidence is what Podhoretz and other neoconservatives sought to save from the wreckage of Vietnam. One of their most powerful political allies in this enterprise was Senator Henry (Scoop) Jackson, mentor of Richard Perle, among others. Jackson, a gentile, a Democrat and a staunch cold warrior, was the perfect bridge on which former leftists could cross over to the right, without actually joining the Republican Party. Henry Jackson was a founder of the America-Israel Friendship League. Israel, to him, was not a sentimental issue but an essential part of his vision of the United States as a nation destined to free the world from tyranny. Arab nationalism and Soviet Communism were seen as equally dangerous in this rather Manichaeic view of a worldwide battle between good and evil.

It goes with Manichaeism (which is, of course, what appeals to Christian fundamentalists too) that battles are not only strategic but also existential. And this, in the eyes of many neocons, is what puts Israel and the United States in the same boat. Podhoretz again: "Just as the fervent wish of the Arab world to wipe the Jewish state off the map derives not from anything Israel has done or failed to do, but rather from its existence alone, so we" -- the United States -- "are hated not because of our policies but because of who and what we are."

The roots of neoconservative disillusion with liberalism and the almost obsessive promotion of American power go deeper than Vietnam, however. In Podhoretz's case it goes back to his childhood experiences on a school playground in Brooklyn, where he was bullied by his black schoolmates. Blacks, he had always been told, in good liberal fashion, were poor and persecuted, while Jews were rich and powerful. Neither rich, nor powerful, young Norman grew to hate the boys that beat him up with such ease. As he explained in a famous essay, "My Negro Problem -- and Ours," he hated them, but also admired them, for "they were *tough*; beautifully, enviably tough, not giving a damn for anyone or anything. To hell with the teacher, the truant officer, the cop; to hell with the whole of the adult world that held us in its grip and that we never had the courage to rebel against."

This is highly revealing. What Henry Jackson, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu and George W. Bush have in common is that they enabled bookish men to feel tough, beautifully, enviably tough. Too much can be made of the connection between the Chicago philosopher Leo Strauss and officials in the current Pentagon, but one aspect of Strauss appears to have rubbed off on them. Born in Germany, Strauss was a liberal rationalist in his youth. He had hoped, he said, that anti-Semitism would end with Jewish assimilation in a liberal democracy. The Nazis taught him otherwise. By the 1920's he began to regard liberals as

weaklings, powerless to stop the violent mob. If one thing ties neoconservatives, Likudniks, and post-cold-war hawks together, it is the conviction that liberalism is strictly for sissies.

y the time Israel was attacked by Egypt and Syria in October 1973, it could no longer be doubted which side the United States stood on, but the size of American largess increased enormously. Before the Yom Kippur War, Congress agreed to an annual loan to Israel of more than \$500 million. After the war, this was increased to \$2.1 billion in loans and grants, much of which went into purchasing American military hardware. Again, the influence of Jewish lobbies can be easily exaggerated. President Nixon was not known for his warm feelings toward Jews, and most Jews did not vote for him, but he saw Israel as a vital pawn in the great game with the Soviets, especially when they were supplying Egypt with arms.

Once Egypt made peace with Israel in 1979, and switched patrons from Moscow to Washington, challenging the Soviets was no longer a major American concern. But the revolution in Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, produced another enemy to confront. And this new confrontation outlasted the cold war. For Khomeini's brand of revolutionary Islam inspired others. Among the Palestinians, who had always been relatively secular, Islamist extremism gradually merged with Palestinian nationalism. The intifadas began with throwing stones, but degenerated into suicide attacks on Israeli citizens, organized by Palestinians with support from parts of the Arab world. Seen from a particular perspective in America, then, especially after 9/11, Israel and the United States, bound together by cold-war concerns in the 60's and 70's, were now thrown together in an existential "war against terrorism." This shaped a climate in which it is not just potentially anti-Semitic to be critical of Israeli policies, but downright unpatriotic, too.

If political perspectives have become muddled in the United States by an identification with Israel that is too rarely critically examined, non-Americans are mostly incapable of separating what they think of Israel from what they think of the United States. That is why the Japanese politician I interviewed during the first gulf war automatically identified American policy with "Jewish interests." Japan, like much of the modern world, feels uncomfortably dependent on American economic and military power. When people need to invent a malevolent face for this overwhelming might, they often reach for the prejudices of a hateful past. The Japanese politician may never have heard of the 19th-century Russian forgery "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," but it was widely read in prewar Japan and is enjoying a popular revival in the Middle East today.

It is perfectly possible, of course, to take a critical view of Israeli policies, and of their support in Washington, without being anti-Semitic. It is equally possible to be critical of American policies without being irrationally and emotionally anti-American. Just so, you can be opposed to capitalism, or "globalization," without wishing to unleash or condone suicide attacks on Manhattan. What is disturbing, however, is the way these views now increasingly come together in a hostile cocktail. Most mass demonstrations in Europe, and elsewhere, against the war in Iraq contained banners in support of the Palestinians, even the religious extremists of Hamas, and against the global symbols of capitalism. For some people on the left, being opposed to Israel, or Zionism, goes beyond specific policies in Gaza or the West Bank; Israel is seen as the colonial Western presence in an Arab world, an American client state locked into global capitalism. Even

if the Israelis treated the Palestinians with the most scrupulous generosity -- which they do not -- this impression would persist.

Not every demonstrator against Ariel Sharon's government or American imperialism is an anti-Semite, to be sure, but the ready identification of Jewish interests with the United States or, in the past, with Britain is old and loaded with prejudice. Since the early 19th century, many Europeans associated the City of London, as Wall Street is today, with financial power, materialist greed and economic imperialism. To ethnic nationalists in Germany and elsewhere, Britain and France, with their relative openness to immigrants, were seen as mongrel nations, where citizenship could be bought for a crock of gold.

This is what Hitler meant when he called France, Britain and the United States "Jewified." He took the view, popularized by all manner of third-rate scribblers, that a Jewish cabal was manipulating Western powers behind the scenes. French universalism and Anglo-Saxon capitalism, so it was believed, threatened the unique values of culture and race. And behind all this were the Jews, pulling strings in their cosmopolitan network of banks, newspapers and movie companies.

The United States is now the biggest capitalist power in the world. To the extent that it is an empire, it is driven by economic interests, but also, these days, by a mission to spread "American values," as if they were universal. Hollywood is seen in the outside world as part of this, and so are Wall Street, the Pentagon and the International Monetary Fund. This, alas, is precisely the kind of thing anti-Semites have always associated with Jewish conspiracies. And since Israel is America's most favored ally in the Middle East, and the Palestinian cause has become the universal litmus test of liberal credentials, the idea that Jewish interests are driving American foreign policy is even more widely believed, if not always openly stated. American foreign policy and ancient prejudices are reinforcing each other in a vicious circle.

For Israel, the American embrace is an ambiguous advantage. Although perhaps vital for the nation's survival, it also makes Israel the hub of global hostility toward the United States. It is, in any case, doubtful that the fate of Israel is best served by its dependence on an alliance with Christian fundamentalists and people on a mission to liberate the world with military force. It may well be that Israel's interests coincide with those of the United States for the moment, but this should not be a given, never to be examined or reassessed.

The first condition for a reasoned examination would be to disentangle Israel's politics from all the anti-Semitic myths and other leftovers of a murderous past. This is not so easily done, since Israeli leaders have too often abused history themselves. The Israeli bomb attack on an Iraqi nuclear installation in 1981 might have been justified in many legitimate ways, but to say, as Prime Minister Menachem Begin did, that it was to protect "the children of Israel," asking foreign reporters, "Haven't you heard of one and a half million little children who were thrown into gas chambers?" is to dangerously confuse the issue. The same was true when Prime Minister Sharon warned the United States last year not to repeat the mistakes of 1938 and sell out Israel like Czechoslovakia. Such false analogies serve only to invite equally odious comparisons from Israel's critics.

Disentangling American and Israeli interests and government actions is, if anything, even harder. To see Israel as nothing but a cat's paw of American imperialism in the Middle East is a crude distortion. And to hold Washington responsible for every Israeli action against the Palestinians is equally misguided. But it is neither anti-Semitic nor blindly anti-American to point out that the United States could have done much more to stop Israel from humiliating the Palestinians by turning the occupied territories into a kind of Wild East of gunslinging settlers and hounded natives.

Finally, the politics of the Middle East may be murderous, but it is not helpful to see them as an existential battle between good and evil. As long as such a view persists, among zealots in Washington, Jerusalem and Nablus, the struggle between Jews and Arabs will be forever obscured by a fog of noxious myths and fantasies. Religious fanaticism is confounding the politics of Israel, as well as that of its enemies. And its influence is felt in the United States as well. Americans are right to support Israel's right to exist in peace, but criticism of Israeli policies should not be stifled by Christian visions of Armageddon, right-wing zealotry or memories of the culture wars in Brooklyn. This would not be good for America, and it is certainly not good for the Jews.

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