The Arc of a Covenant: A Conversation with Walter Russell Mead and Michael Doran

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Michael Doran, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East
- Walter Russell Mead, Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow, Hudson Institute

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2134-the-arc-of-a-covenant-a-conversation-with-walter-russell-mead-and-michael-doran82022

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Michael Doran:
Hello everyone. And thank you for coming. I'm Mike Doran. I am the director here of the Center for Peace and Security in the Middle East. Hudson is a policy organization dedicated to preserving and strengthening American global leadership. The center I run is dedicated to supporting friends and punishing enemies in the Middle East, but-

Walter Russell Mead:
So peace for some, security for others.

Michael Doran:
Exactly. But it's very important to be able to distinguish a friend from enemy. Of course, at the top of our friend list is Israel. And so I'm very honored today to fill in for Senator Ben Sasse. I think you may all be aware, unfortunately Senator Sasse's plane was...his flight was canceled and he's stuck in Nebraska or somewhere. So it's my pleasure and privilege to fill in with him having a conversation with Hudson's own Walter Russell Mead about his new book, The Arc of a Covenant. This is about the US-Israeli relations. And Walter has an incredibly long series of titles. With your permission, Walter, I will read every one of them.

So where do we start here, Walter? You are the Ravenel B. Curry III Distinguished Fellow in Strategy and Statesmanship at the Hudson Institute. The Global View columnist at The Wall Street Journal and the James Clark Chase Professor of Foreign Affairs and Humanities at Bard College in New York. You have also authored numerous books. I won't name them all. I'll just tell you my favorite, which is Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World.

Walter Russell Mead:
No, you don't have to stop. You can keep going.

Michael Doran:
Okay. If you follow his column, you see that Walter never takes sides in any of our internecine wars, and he helps each side understand where the other is coming from. And he, unlike, I think, the rest of us, I have to include myself in that, he doesn't treat the people who disagree with him as enemies to be defeated. So the sum total of that is that you get a very sophisticated and different take on what's happening in the world today.
So I'll stop there, Walter. I'll just say that I appreciate it greatly. And I'm sure that everyone here in the audience appreciates it too. And so let's talk about your book because your book, I think, showcases all of these qualities that I just described and I've read it. Many of you haven't here. It's a very long book, but I think I can summarize it in one sentence, which is basically the Jews run American foreign policy, right?

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Save myself a lot of trouble. Not exactly.

**Michael Doran:**

Yeah, I got it wrong?

**Walter Russell Mead:**

No, I do think when I started to write the book or research the book back in the days of the first Bush administration not long ago, the idea was going around because I noticed that two things seemed to be true. One is that living in New York and moving in an academic and journalistic environment, I ran across a lot of Jews from time to time and they almost all hated George W. Bush with a great and mighty passion. And they spat on the ground when someone mentioned the Iraq war. They're absolutely opposed. And yet, when I went around the world and I had the misfortune, because I wrote *Special Providence*, a kind of a history of American foreign policy, the State Department would actually ask me to go to different countries and do lectures on the history of American foreign policy, which meant I got to learn a lot about how people in different parts of the world saw the United States and what questions they had. And pretty much everybody in all of these countries, and a lot of folks here at home, thought that the reason America was following the foreign policy that it did under George W. Bush was the Jews.

And so I'm trying to process this. I knew a few Jews who were supportive of George W. Bush, but I knew so many more who weren't. This got even sort of more confused. President Obama was elected. Enthusiastic support of American Jews. And during his two terms, he had many public fights with Israel yet remained far more popular with American Jews than he did with almost any other ethnic group in the United States, other than Blacks and African Americans. And yet, time and again, when people talked about why Barack Obama's policies weren't everything, the Palestinians dreamed of, over and over you heard, well, it's the Jews, the power of the Jews.

I would look at polls and see that American Jews actually supported the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal, at a higher level than the non-Jewish population. And yet still everybody's telling me, it's the Jews, the Jews. Then Donald Trump becomes president. And he orders the US Embassy to go to Jerusalem. He recognizes some of Israel's annexed territories, and is considered in many ways the most pro-Israel president of all time. I, myself, can't think of a single political figure in American history as deeply loathed and hated by the overwhelming majority American Jewish community as Donald Trump.

And I looked into it a little bit more as I looked at all of this and I saw that it wasn't, and some people, "Oh, yes, well, the ordinary Jews are against Bush and Trump and whatever, but the Jewish money, that's where it comes from." And I would look, and yeah, there were a handful of very wealthy Jews who supported Donald Trump, George W. Bush, but there were a lot more
Jews who supported their opponents. And if you actually add up the money, whether it's Israel-related money, or just general political giving, overwhelmingly, American Jews by their votes and their campaign contributions supported Trump's opponents, supported Bush's opponents, supported Obama. In other words, if American Jews actually did run our Israel policy, it would be well to the left of anything Obama proposed. All right? And yet everybody blames the Jews. I thought at one point that maybe the subtitle of the book should be “Don't Blame Israel on the Jews”. My publisher talked me out of that one.

So that kind of... and for me, when you see a mystery, when you see something that everybody thinks, but is clearly not true, right? That's a sign that you're onto an interesting problem and that if you study... I'm one of these stupid people who likes to study the obvious because they can't really study complicated things. And so I don't have a PhD or any advanced academic training, so I'm not equipped for serious intellectual endeavor. But when I can see that everybody thinks that something is the case, and yet it's patently obvious that it isn't, then I want to get started on writing a book. So that's what happened.

**Michael Doran:**

It is, it is fascinating. And that in that this is a subject that in which everyone has very strong ideas. And then when you start to peel back, what's going on, they don't really, they don't really correspond to the evidence. So, but something is there is this, I mean, you, your title points to it, *The Arc of a Covenant*, that there's a relationship between us, between us and Israel. Let's go back historically, because you start at the beginning, but maybe we don't have to start at the very beginning, but you can fill us in on some of the beginning. Let me just go right to the Blackstone Memorial because that's a great example. I think of what you're talking about. For those who haven't read the book, why don't you tell us a little bit about The Blackstone Memorial and the conclusions that you draw about it, but do go back to the beginning and tell us where did it come from? What are the deep cultural roots?

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Well, back in, I think it was 1891 and I don't have the book open in front of me so please don't... I mean, Mike is here, Mike, you can correct me if I get it wrong. No, a thumbs up. Okay. 1891, President Benjamin Harrison was peacefully sitting in the White House. And one day the secretary of state, James D. Blaine came in with a guy, William Blackstone, a kind of well-known sort of public intellectual of the day who'd written books on religion and politics and was associated with D.L. Moody who was kind of the Billy Graham of that time. And he had a petition to give President Harrison, which was, they wanted Benjamin Harrison to use America's diplomatic influence in the world to persuade the European countries to get the Ottoman sultan to create a Jewish national home in Palestine. And 1891, for those of you who know your Zionist history, is well before Theodor Herzl wrote *Der Judenstaat*, it's before the formation... There were Jewish Zionists at this time, mostly in Russia, what's now Ukraine, but not many and certainly not powerful. Excuse me. So now, interesting, here's a petition, but this petition is signed by John D. Rockefeller J.P. Morgan, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the house of representatives, who at the time was one William McKinley, who of course would go on to become president of the United States. It was endorsed by virtually every leading newspaper in sort of new England and the Mid-Atlantic states, which at the time was the part of America that ruled the rest of it. Actually, sort of is today. But that's another story.
Michael Doran:
Even the *New York Times*.

Walter Russell Mead:
The *New York Times*.

Michael Doran:
The *New York Times* was a Zionist paper.

Walter Russell Mead:
Right. Essentially, in the 19th century, the New York Times was owned by a non-Jewish family and was strongly pro-Zionist.

Michael Doran:
There you go.

Walter Russell Mead:
By the time of the Balfour Declaration, it had been bought by a Jewish family and was anti-Zionist. So this paradox is not new. Okay? So it was...there was a whole galaxy of people who signed it and it had almost no Jewish support. And the few Jews who sort of signed with...insisted that certain reservations be put in, basically saying, "We don't really mean this." And so you have, at a time when the Jewish community in the United States and abroad was anti-Zionist, or just A-Zionist, not interested in the subject at all, the American political, religious, journalistic and financial establishment wanted a Jewish state in Palestine.

So again, where does this come from? Why? And in a sense, it also... There's an impression people have that somehow Zionism is this Jewish agenda that powerful Jews sort of pushed on everybody else. But actually, when millions of Americans first heard about the small stirrings of a Jewish Zionist movement, their reaction wasn't "Oh, no. Now these Jews are going to go make us support a stupid Homeland in Palestine." But it was, "Oh, terrific. The Jews have finally figured it out. The Jews are getting with the program." And that remained a kind of a fundamental element of the way Americans thought about Israel or the Zionist movement and the movement to create a new state in Palestine, right up into the 1940s.

So again, where does this come from? Where did it go? The Blackstone Memorial itself, the president said, "Oh, that's very nice. Thank you so much for this extremely interesting idea. And I will...I'm turning it over to the secretary of state in order that we can examine the idea further," which meant the horrified State Department diplomats, did what horrified State Department diplomats often do today to sort of pro-Zionist memos, i.e. hide them somewhere where no one will see them and the original, the memorial, was actually lost. We only really know about it because when the Balfour Declaration was being debated, Louis Brandeis heard this story and looked up-

Michael Doran:
The head of the American Zionist movement.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

And Supreme Court Justice and very prominent guy who had never darkened the doors of a synagogue in his life, I think, until he joined the Zionist movement. But he actually dug up William Blackstone who went and got a revised version of the Memorial with even more signatures of prominent non-Jews calling on Woodrow Wilson to support the Balfour Declaration. Meanwhile, Henry Morgenthau, the most prominent political figure among American Jews of the day and a close friend of Woodrow Wilson, his ambassador to the Ottoman empire, went around...first, he took out himself, wrote a letter denouncing the idea of Zionism. And then he got something like 400 of the leading American Jews to sign a counterpetition urging Woodrow Wilson not to support the Balfour Declaration, the British declaration creating a Jewish national home.

So this story is so much more complicated and has so many more twists and turns than just about anybody knows. I've talked to people who are career middle east scholars, who didn't know about the Blackstone Memorial or about the sort of whole current of opinion that it represented. And again, as somebody who likes to write interesting books, to find this immense variation between the received history and Zionism in Israel, we're not talking about a subject that no one pays attention to. We're talking about a subject that's always on the front page. People are demonstrating on campuses all over the country. People are yelling and screaming and having teach-ins and their whole institutes devoted to this one subject, this one topic. And then you find that what everybody knows has so little to do with what actually happened. It was thrilling, frankly.

**Michael Doran:**

Just run us through...just briefly, run us through the pre-history for The Blackstone Memorial. What is that culturally and politically? What is that resting on?

**Walter Russell Mead:**

You go back far enough and the English speaking world was basically full of the same hostility and prejudice about Jews that you see so frequently, sadly, in the Christian world. And in fact, the British, the English drove the Jews out of England, hundreds of years before the French and the Spanish did. So when we talk about that horrible Spanish Inquisition and how Ferdinand and Isabella drove the Jews out of Spain, it was like Richard I or someone who, again, Mike might know, or even he might need to check with someone. And Mike might need to check with an intern on this one, get to the real people who know. But there was just a deep antisemitic feeling. One of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is actually an antisemitic story of child murder. I don't recommend it to you except as a historical document, maybe.

So, but then, you look sort of in the 1790s, and you see this amazing correspondence between George Washington and the Jewish synagogue in Truro, Rhode Island. By the way, at this time, I think there were only six synagogues in the United States. There were not many Jews here and the synagogues all hated each other. So establishing a pattern that I'm told we can still see in Jewish life today. But the Truro elders wrote to President Washington and sort of was like, "Are we going to be okay here?" And George Washington said, "Listen," he says, "In America,
we no longer talk about toleration as if one class of citizens existed on kind of the sufferance of another, but of everyone who obeys the laws is here of common right and full participation. Our country, our government recognizes no restriction on religion, no limit, whatever." And in writing this letter, which you know, is still read today and is really, I think, a wonderful statement of some core American principles and beliefs, Washington wasn't going out on a political limb. This is, he was expressing the kind of common wisdom of the day.

So how did the English-speaking world go from Chaucer writing stories about nasty Jews murdering innocent Christian boys to George Washington saying, "The Jews of Truro are absolute as much Americans as anybody else in Truro." He might not have liked Truro very much as a whole. I don't know. But anyway, those Rhode Islanders, they were up to a lot of crazy stuff around them, paper, money. Nevertheless, how did that happen? And as I looked--so this dragged me, and what I thought was originally going to be rather short and simple and fun book was turning into this immense quest. That's the trouble, by the way, when you start to write a book about something you don't know the answer to. You can discover it's a lot harder to do the book than you expected, but in this case, it was also more interesting.

Anyway, a lot of it goes back to the Reformation where...The Protestant Reformation changed the relationship of the English-speaking world to the Hebrew people, the Jewish people, in a lot of ways. One of them is if you ever pick up a Christian Bible and you look at it, more than two thirds of it is the old Hebrew scriptures. And if you seriously read the Bible...Harry Truman had read it five times cover to cover, I think, while he was in the White House...you spend a lot more time reading Jewish scriptures than specifically Christian scriptures. And you don't just find out about the Jews who were hostile to Jesus or questioned his mission or something. You find about David and Esther, and these great heroes of the faith, these wonderful people, and you see them as God's people and you see them suffering and you see them trying somehow to stay with God and you see God's tremendous love for the Jewish people. And this affected people, it affected their theology, their views of the place of the Jews in the world. Up until then, the classic Christian view was, well, the Jews used to be the chosen people, but then when they rejected Jesus, like that was it, and God just wasn't interested anymore. Yeah, if they want to get back in, they can convert to Christianity, then they'll be fine. But Jews qua Jews are just not part of the story anymore.

But based on some things that they read in the Epistles of St. Paul, based on a generally more favorable view of the Jewish people and some other things, you began to get a different theological picture. It seems from some of the Epistles of St. Paul, he talks about how in the end, part of the process in which God will bring about a kind of heaven on earth, is that the Jews will be converted in the last days. So the Jews still have a role to play. And because they also came to believe, and this was people like Cotton Mather in 17th-century Boston, were teaching two things. One, that God's promise of the land of Israel to the Jewish people was still valid. And two, because even when people don't keep their agreements with God, God keeps his agreements with people. This is a foundational element of a lot of Protestant theology at the time.

So that was one. And number two was that the Jews indeed would return at some time to the Promised Land and this would be a sign of God's action in the world. To predict this in 1680, 1650, this was widespread among English-speaking Protestants at the time. There's a reference to it in Paradise Lost from John Milton. Sir Isaac Newton wrote about it. It was sort of in the air, in the culture. So there were these ideas. This is where you start to get this idea of Christian
Zionism, so to speak. And it remained kind of intrinsic. Then as the Americans embark on their own independence and with their democratic experience, the Americans start to think, "Well, we're kind of like the Hebrews, right? The ancient Hebrews. We are one nation that has a global mission. We are bringing democracy into the world. We're bringing freedom into the world. This is not just for ourselves. This is for the world." And so there's a kind of a kinship there that people felt. And in a lot of political rhetoric, people would use it during the revolution. Preachers would compare the sufferings of the Americans fighting the British to the sufferings of the Israelites and so on. And so there's this sense of kinship as well.

And the final thing about this, and this is—again, people sometimes say, "Well, this is all a religious feeling that people had." But a lot of secular Americans in the 19th century... And by the way, there was a surprisingly large number of secular Americans in the 19th century... Had a somewhat different approach to this. They looked at the... everybody had these literary education, and people in the old days, they read things. Okay? They read books and they knew about old books and old things. And the history of the Romans, the Greeks and the Hebrews, the Jews through the Bible, and then Greek and Roman literature was incredibly important to people.

And as they read the poets of ancient Greece, oh my gosh, the country was so beautiful and so rich, the people were so brave. They had democracy. They read the great Latin poets, Horace, saw beautiful Italy was, Livy, the heroism of the ancient Romans, the wonderful Republican democracy they had. And then they looked at the current state in the 19th century of the Greeks and the Romans, and it was pretty pathetic. The Greeks were oppressed by the Ottoman Turks. The Italians were carved up. A lot of them were ruled by the Pope and good American Protestants thought that was a bad thing. Actually, so did most of the people the popes ruled. Ruling countries has never been like one of the great strengths of the clergy of any denomination, I think we can safely say.

Michael Doran:
Bite your tongue.

Walter Russell Mead:
And so they thought that, "Look, if the..." And of course the Jews, again, ancient Palestine, land flowing with milk and honey abundance, people like Mark Twain would go there, say, "It's the only thing..." Like he said, "It's almost as bad as Arizona out there." And the Jews were poor and oppressed and despised. Okay? And for a lot of these secular Americans, the idea was that if the Greeks, and the Romans, and the Jews would embrace American principles, democracy, agriculture, virtue, simple virtues, then their lands would bloom again and the peoples would bloom again. And the new Italians would be like the ancient Romans, and the new Greeks would be like the ancient Greeks, and the new Jews would be like the ancient Hebrews. And they saw this in parallel. And they also thought that if these people adopted these American ideals and it made them flourish, this would be a sign to the whole world that America was right, that we knew how to live and that the American way was not just a good way for Americans, but it could renew and restore people all over the world.

And so Americans actually went and fought in the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman empire. Julia Ward Howe's husband was a decorated hero of the Greek War of Independence.
Americans were wildly supportive of the Italian wars of unification. They actually tried to get Garibaldi to take a post as a general for the Union in the American Civil War. And so this idea of the Jews as the third of the great peoples of classical antiquity who would be redeemed by American principles, and then would demonstrate the truth of American principles to the... So when the Jews...

And actually in the 19th century, several times, Americans tried to get Jews to start farming in the Holy Land. Jews were not interested, but if you’re ever in Jerusalem, you could go visit the American Colony Hotel, a very nice hotel that was actually... is what’s left of one of these American efforts to teach Jews to farm. And as far as I can tell, the Jews would sort of say, "That's so hot. I don't want to farm. I want to study Torah. Leave me alone." But the Americans said, "No, no, no. If you do these things you'll flourish, the land will flourish, you'll be strong and great." So when the kibbutzniks come along, right, and now the Jews are saying, "Oh my gosh, yes, we got to farm our own land. We've got to become strong. We have to be a democracy," and the land starts turning green, and this despised people starts becoming strong and confident, and then of course, it goes on to defeat enemies much larger than itself and emerge, until today, it's a leading country of technology, all of these things on all kinds of levels, to so many Americans the success of Israel looks like a vindication of America itself.

Michael Doran:

So let's just dive into a couple little themes here, and then we'll open it up for questions. But you just made the essential connection that Americans, when they look at Israel, they see themselves. And so when they debate about Israel, they're debating about themselves and you developed this in a number of different ways. We can't go into all of them, but let's go to one that's near and dear to my heart. I owe Walter a great debt of gratitude. He helped me understand myself with his exploration of the Jacksonian sensibility. I knew that I had attitudes like other Americans, and I knew that they were not well-represented here in Washington, DC and in publications.

Walter Russell Mead:

What clued you into that, Mike?

Michael Doran:

Yeah, kind of the look I got when I would say things and people would look at me like a dog hearing a high pitched whistle. After a while I picked up on that. So why don't you just tell us a little bit about the Jacksonian attitude toward Israel? I find that fascinating.

Walter Russell Mead:

Well, this is from my book *Special Providence*, where I talk about the Jacksonian tradition in American foreign policy, named after Andrew Jackson. And we talk about that for quite a while, but just to sort of narrow it down a little bit, once when Andrew Jackson was in command of US forces in Southern Georgia, Indians and Native Americans, escaped slaves and others were buying arms and ammunition from British merchants in, it was still Spanish, Florida, and attacking Americans. Or as we might say today, the British merchants were supplying weapons of mass destruction to the terrorists. And Andrew Jackson had absolutely no doubt what to do.
He sent the US forces across the international boundary into Spanish territory, arrested the British traders, brought them back to American territory, tried them before a military tribunal and hanged them, which is sort of, in a brief compass, everything that Europeans hate about American foreign policy. Right? And it was wildly popular in the United States.

And so that kind of security-focused, unilateralist, we don't need no stinking badges, if you’re in a fair fight, you're doing it wrong kind of thinking, just we'll take that as Jacksonian. It's also very populist and democratic. No one American is better than others and all you snooty professors don't know any more than me. And by the way, it's not the military officers and the generals who are really the backbone of our country, it's the people in their militia. So their well-armed militia. So that's the Jacksonian tradition. And you might think of all American subcultures, this would be like classically, in a lot of countries, this type of person can often be kind of antisemitic. You know, the clannish, xenophobic, very much oriented toward their own values and their own religious culture and so on. But if you sort of look at American politics today, the Jacksonians are very pro-Israel on the whole. I mean, there's variation in everything, but in general. Think about Sarah Palin. When she was governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin had a flag of Israel on her desk, as governor of Alaska. Hint, she was not going after the Jewish vote in Alaska.

**Michael Doran:**

It was the money.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Okay? Who are the most prominent pro-Israel commentators in America today? It's people like Carl Tucker, it's people on Fox News, far more pro-Israel than some of the other networks. All right? So why is this? Several reasons? One of them is this thing we've talked about how Israeli success demonstrates the truth of American values. So, they look good, we look good. But there are also ways in which some of the reasons that people hate Israel, or oppose Israel, actually don't work that way for the Jacksonians. I'll give you an example. Say a few rockets from Gaza come over the frontier and bomb a few Israeli settlements, most of them explode harmlessly in the desert, maybe one hits a preschool, something, but couple of casualties, whatever. And then nothing happens. And then a couple more come over. And then, at some point, the Israelis don't send an equal number of rockets into Gaza, but come in with all their force and tanks and crush, crush, crush, crush. Right?

Lots of people around the world say, "Well, what the Palestinians did was wrong, but the Israeli response was disproportionate." Okay? You hear that word a lot. Jacksonians don't think that way. All right? Then they say, "And, oh my goodness, there were civilian casualties when the Israelis bombed. There were children in the school building underneath which the Palestinians had all those rockets and children were killed when the Israelis took out the rockets. And the Jacksonian idea. Again, imagine if a few rockets came over the frontier from Mexico, or the Japanese dropped a few little bombs on Pearl Harbor, how Americans respond to that, how American Jacksonians. It's like, first of all, anybody who die... You should be disproportionate. The whole thing is you crush them and crush them and crush them until they never dare to attack you again, because terrorism is wrong, their attacks on you are wrong. This was the way that Jacksonians thought about attacks by Native American tribes on American settlers. You teach them that it's a bad idea.
Franklin Roosevelt actually, during World War II, people said, "Well, we shouldn't require unconditional surrender because then that'll unite the Germans behind Hitler and prolong the war." Franklin Roosevelt's attitude was, "Look, in 1918 the Germans didn't learn what war was because the war ended without it being fought on German soil. This war is not going to end until the German people understand what war is and then they will never do it again. We know now, 80 years ago there may be two pacifists, you know, for our liking. But that lesson, that's a Jacksonian attitude. And so Jacksonians actually wish more countries handled problems like terrorism the way Israel does. They think there'd be less terrorism if that was done. So a lot of the sort of news coverage and so on that makes people who are not Jacksonian in they're thinking go, "Oh, those Israelis, it's just too much. Cut the Palestinians a break, for crying out loud."

The Jacksonian attitude is, "You know what? Every death in the war that was started by terrorists, the person responsible without other terrorists, right, the people who attacked, we're defending ourselves, and we do not need to feel guilty." Just as most Americans did not feel guilty when they heard about the nuclear bomb dropping on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It's like, "You bombed Pearl Harbor, look what happens. Don't do it again." And so in many ways, the way Israel conducts itself in the world, and I... By the way, Israel is actually a lot more careful about things like civilian casualties and so on that I'm presenting in this sort of very quick and sketchy overview. But this strikes Jacksonians as the right thing to do. And then Israel, from a Jacksonian point of view, is a great ally. Unlike those whining, carping, Europeans, right, who never pay for their own defense and then always criticize America for everything we do. All right? Israel doesn't even ask for US bases on its soil, surrounded by these other countries. And yes, Israel gets aid from the United States, but compare that to the value of what we do for the NATO allies. And Israel certainly pays its fair share of its own defense costs. So Israel seems like a better ally to Jacksonians than Germany or France. Not so much England. All right? But Israel, in the Jacksonian mind is kind of up there in the top tier of allies. And so when American candidate politician, by the way, goes out on the hustings and says, "I'm pro-Israel," what a lot of the audience hears... The American non-Jewish audience, both religious and secular, hear that politician saying, "I'm pro-American."

Michael Doran:

There we go.

Walter Russell Mead:

Right? "And my values are your values and Israel is a symbol of that agreement." And by the way, politicians who are more nuanced or anti-Israel are, in the same way, are communicating to different American audiences. "Look, I don't buy this hyper American crap anymore than you do. Right? And I'm a dissident, and I see it differently, and I do not think those Israelis are doing it right." So for people on the Left and the Right, pro-Israel and anti-Israel, your stance on Israel policy is ultimately less about Israel than about the way you identify yourself and your political community in the United States.

Michael Doran:
Perfect. I have many more things I wanted to ask you about, but let's open it up to the audience who are here. Yes, sir. I think maybe do we... We want to wait and give you a microphone.

Audience Member:

Thank you. My name is Chris. Walter, thank you for that. I just have a follow up actually on your very last comment, which you've talked a lot about the origins of this pro-Zionist, pro-Israeli streak in American foreign policy and American public opinion. There's another strain in this country, obviously, which is the anti-Israeli, anti-Zionist, which is, if you go to a college campus today is quite prevalent. Even in Congress, down the street, you have members who are openly supportive of BDS movements, et cetera. What's your analysis of the origins of that and the prevalence of that and where that's going?

Walter Russell Mead:

Okay, well, there... I mean, it's a complicated story again, but there is... There is a long strain of anti-Zionist thinking in the US. At the time.... It's actually a hundred years ago this year that Congress, by overwhelming bipartisan majorities, adopted the Balfour Declaration into American law, 1922. And at the hearings, when this law was being debated, you actually had, for example, Arab Americans, mostly Christian, testifying about what that meant for Palestinian Arabs and why they opposed it, and it was very eloquent and very clear testimony. So you have a sympathy, an anti-colonialist sympathy with the aspirations of the Arabs of the region. And that has deep roots.

You also have among American missionaries, linked to many Middle Eastern Christian communities. There's a strong strain of anti-Zionism there. The American University of Beirut, which I believe you have some familiarity with, was actually one of the institutions where American missionaries and mostly Christian Arab intellectuals sort of developed the idea of a secular Arab nationalism, where people, Christians, and Muslims, it didn't matter what your religion was, if you spoke Arabic and had Arab culture, you were a member of the Arab nation. And for the missionaries, the hope here was that creating a secular Arab identity would further the integration of Arab Christians into the broader community, and hopefully, perhaps some of the Muslims might come to respect Christians and maybe even Christianity a little bit more as the Arab Christians emerge from the kind of isolation and marginalization that some of them had been in.

And this secular Arab identity, which you see with the Ba'ath parties in Syria and Iraq, and you saw in Nasser, and so on, the secular Arabism, not an Islamism, right, was very much opposed to Zionist because it was the struggle for Arab independence, the struggle to liberate Arab lands. And here were the British carving off a chunk of Palestine and saying, "Okay, this is for the Jews." And you find Presbyterian the Presbyterian church. One of the Presbyterian churches of the US, I believe, has just endorsed BDS. A lot of Presbyterians who had deep roots with the American University of Beirut were trying to persuade their fellow Presbyterian friend, Woodrow Wilson, that support for Zionism was a bad idea during World War I.

So you have that you have a Christian movement and then Arab Christians have embraced secular Arab nationalism because it really works very well for them. It's also being ostentatiously anti-Zionist is a way for Christians in the Arab world to sort of say, "I'm with you. I'm with the
Arabs. I'm on your side. Don't isolate me. Let me be part of you." And so you have a lot of institutional ties and personally, that is another sort of element of this.

Another thing is that in the forties and fifties, people don't know this story as much as they should, but actually support for Israel in the US was a left-wing cause. Adlai Stevenson was much more pro-Israel. Eleanor Roosevelt, I actually write in my book, probably had more to do with Israelis, with Truman's policy on Israel than all the Zionist lobbyists in America combined. But it was a left-wing cause. And at the time, if you listen to the way American socialists, Democratic Socialists of America and other groups described the conflict, it was like basically a bunch of virtuous Jewish settlers, and then a bunch of like Hitler-supporting Arab crazies and fanatics who refused to endorse the sacred UN partition resolution and stuff like that.

But as on the Left, on the one hand, Israel--Israel, by the way, in the fifties was the most socialist of the democratic countries and American socialists and left-wingers would use the example of Israel to show, look, you can have like an almost totally socialist economy that is a democratic society and is militarily strong. Therefore, all of your arguments about why America shouldn't be socialists are refuted. So Israel was the golden boy of the Left. But in the 1970s, as Israeli politics moved to the right...and one of the things about the difference between politicians like Menachem Begin and BiBi Netanyahu versus the more familiar Israeli labor politicians is that they were almost Thatcherite in the way they were reforming the Israeli economy.

So Israel moves to the right on economic terms and it abandons the sacred cause of socialism because the Israelis feel it's not working. Well, that's not great for the Left. And then Israel moves from being an endangered nation largely populated by refugees, to being a regional superpower, right, that has a good relationship with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger... And then begins to look like kind of an ally of everything you don't like in the West, if you're a good social Democrat.

So the Left...and by the way, Europeans were often more pro-Israel than Americans in the 1950s and '60s. When the Six-Day War started, thousands of French, tens of thousands of French students marched to the Israeli Embassy in Paris to volunteer to serve in civilian jobs in France to release more Israeli soldiers to the front. Okay, today, if a big war broke out between is Israel and the Palestinians, thousands of Frenchmen would be marching to the Israeli embassy, but the message would be very different. So the left became anti--some of them became anti-Zionist, some of them became anti certain Israeli policies, but became much more critical and it became. And in Black America, the Martin Luther King generation of civil rights activists were very pro-Israel, from the time when Israel was a very Left-wing cause.

From Malcolm X on, you began to get a sense of some American Blacks beginning to identify with the Palestinian as an oppressed people, rather than with the Israelis and the Exodus and the story of Moses and so on. So you begin to get this cluster of anti-Israel...I think, and you got some good old-fashioned antisemitism too, on the far-left and the far-right. So all of these things, I think, go to help form the--all these streams flow into this river.

Michael Doran:

Here with the blue tie.

Audience Member:
So you’ve done a really well job at analyzing the Jacksonian reasoning rationale for why they would support Israel. Could you also briefly touch on the other three traditions of what are their thinking in terms of why they would support Israel as well?

Walter Russell Mead:

Okay, well, they would have different... Actually, they've had different opinions, these different schools. But Wilsonians originally were very pro-Israel, by and large, with some exceptions because... Again, the relationship of the Jewish cause to human rights and minority rights is an interesting one. In Europe, traditionally, the Right was, was antisemitic. If you think about France and the Dreyfus case, it was the Catholic Church...sorry, Mike...and the army that was very anti-Dreyfus. And it was the Liberals, the Left, people like Zola who were in favor of a fair trial for Dreyfus and ultimately got his release.

And so the idea of the Jews as a minority who face persecution almost everywhere, and discrimination, made support for Jewish rights, an important thing for Wilsonians. It got an extra dose of strength after World War II. Because again, picture World War II, suddenly you have nuclear weapons, you have the horrible devastation of World War II. And you’d had World War I, and then 20 years later, World War II. World War III, what will that be? They say, World War III would be fought with nuclear weapons and World War IV with sticks and stones. That the desperate desire to avoid another one of these horrible wars and the United Nations, by all kinds of people, was seen as the one hope where humanity could finally stop war and we could settle difficult political problems through the UN. The problems that had caused most of the, of the wars of the past century had been nationalist conflicts. Greeks versus Turks, Serbs versus Croats, all those kinds of conflicts and French versus Germans being sort of the center in a way and the most destructive.

All right, well, if we’re going to be able to avoid new world wars, we have to have an international body that is capable of adjudicating these things. And you know what? The solutions are always going to be compromises because whenever you have a national conflict, each side has a map in its head and the maps do not match. And so nobody’s ever going to get everything they want, and we have to have an international organization that will settle these things and then its decisions have to be respected, or it’s going to be war, war, war, war. All right?

So the first big territorial question that comes before the United Nations is when Britain, which had a mandate over Palestine under the League of Nations, is we just give up. Here, you win, you settle it. Oh. Okay? And then, through various things that I describe in the book that are fascinating and devious and so on, it ends up that both the United States and the Soviet Union support a partition plan for Palestine in the United Nations. So here you see the two great powers and the UN agreeing on a peaceful solution to this bitter national dispute, and then the Jews accept it and the Palestinians and the Arabs reject it. All right? So for many Wilsonians committed to the rule of international laws, the only way to achieve peace, the cause of Israel and the cause of world peace become fused. And that was a very powerful force in American politics for a very long time and you can still hear echoes of it today.

Hamiltonians tended to be a little bit friendlier toward the Arabs with all that oil. Hamiltonians seeing commerce and trade as key, and sort of a strong relationship between the American government and large corporations as being a key element of national strength. But
interestingly...and I'll just quickly tell this story about the arms trade in the '70s. The '70s, you had OPEC and suddenly the Arabs just have so much money, and Arab...it becomes very important in the United States to have a really good political relationship with the Arab countries, obviously. All right. And yet it's in the 1970s that we first start not only selling arms to Israel, but we start providing military aid to Israel to help them buy arms. Well, to a lot of people, this looks, "Ah, this must be the Jewish law," because there's no other reason that when the Arabs are really important, the Americans would offend the Arabs by selling arms to Israel. So, "Aha." You see the Jews really do control because this is crazy, there's no other theory that could account for it.

But, actually, what was going on was in the 1970s. Some of us I see around here are old enough to remember the 1970s. A few of you may have been to schools old-fashioned enough to still teach something about the 1970s. But the Arabs were not very popular in the United States in the 1970s when they jacked up the price of oil and caused years of stagflation. People hated them, in fact. And the idea that the American government was now going to turn on the spigots and sell them unlimited quantities of arms...what? I mean, even today, think about arms sales to Saudi Arabia. They're not popular. Okay? And they were even more unpopular because the Arabs... If the Arabs had all those weapons, where might they turn them? Obviously, Israel. And people were really worried about that.

So really, in order to safeguard our oil trade and our balance of payments, we were going to sacrifice Israel. You couldn't get arms packages through Congress on that basis, but also there was a national security problem. Israel had shown repeatedly that if it felt its security was threatened, it would attack first. So if the United States started selling a bunch of arms to governments that Israel considered hostile and threatening, Israel would act to attack and destroy those arms. So your policy aimed at securing your interests and pacifying, the Middle East would actually cause huge crises and you couldn't get it through Congress anyway.

So what do we sort of ultimately come up with was the idea that, well, we'll sell Israel enough weapons so that Israel will feel safe. Okay? And then, so that we'll never sell the Arab countries enough weapons to destroy Israel, right? And then, with this, we're able to get it all through Congress. But as Israel pointed out at the time, looks, the reason Saudi Arabia is buying all these weapons is because it has oil and the price of oil has gone up. In Israel, as you might have heard, we don't have any oil. In fact, it was a great saying that Golda Meir said that Moses led the children of Israel through the Middle East for 40 years, until he found the only place where there was no oil.

So, are you going to...you're going to start an arms race in the Middle East and Israel doesn't have the money to pay. But on the other hand, if we give aid to the Israelis so that they can keep up their end of this, we'll be able to sell arms to the Arabs, arms to the Israelis, and the big American arms corporations will be happy, the foreign policy gurus will be happy. And that's what we did. And it was consensual. There would be fighting over the edges, but in fact, the Arabs...in a sense, for the Arabs, the more arms and the better arms the Israeli gets, it means the more arms and the better arms they get. Right? So if the Israelis get F-35s, they're going to get F-16s or whatever it might be.

So the Hamiltonians made their peace, even though they kind of remained identified with oil interests. Jeffersonians, those are the folks who want as few US ties as possible. They're often the people who are a school that tends to be more anti-Israel because they don't want us to be
in the Middle East in the first place. And they see American support for Israel as one of the things that keeps dragging us into the Middle East. And so they basically want to cut the cord. Not all Jeffersonians, but you'll find, in general, that the more sort of isolationist or realist, and I'm using both of these in quotes, somebody is...there's a better chance that they're going to be skeptical of the US, Israel relationship.

Michael Doran:

We've got time for one more here. This gentleman over here, then I think we'll have to wrap it up.

Audience Member:

I'm Mishillen. My question is, based on your analysis, how would it be best for America and in what ways would America continue to remain support of Israel?

Walter Russell Mead:

Well, it seems to me that, ultimately, American policy toward Israel has been governed and is governed largely by our vision of world politics overall. So if, for example, Americans decide we've had enough of this global engagement and it's over and we need to come back to fortress America, then I think you'll see the relationship become distant because we'll have less reason to be supportive of Israel. If, on the other hand, people say, "Well, the threat from China, other things mean that we need to have a global vision," then you're going to see, well, the Middle East is important because China's active in the Middle East, and the oil from the middle east remains important. So then therefore Israel becomes important.

But I would say that a key thing to understand is that Israel now is a much more important state and a much more valuable ally. And, in fact, a much more formidable adversary than ever before. That if the United States were to wake up one morning and say we've had it with this whole Israel thing, we wash our hands, to use a biblical metaphor of Israel. It's not that a suddenly friendless Israel would be driven into the sea. It's that Russia, China, India, and some other countries would be lined up wanting access to that Israeli technology, access to all the things that Israel can do and can contribute.

So Israel is a valuable ally. Now, I say that knowing that for many people, there are real human rights issues there, and I'm not trying to downplay this, but if we sort of stand back for a moment, Israel is not a helpless client that the United States, out of the simple goodness of its heart, has decided to help. Israel is a regional superpower in a region that remains critical to the world's energy supply, that has immense implications for Russia, for the Iranian nuclear program, for China's future in the Middle East and many other things besides. So my guess would be that the United States is going to continue to see a significant value in the Israeli relationship, and I also think the Israelis are likely to see a significant value in their relationship with us.

Michael Doran:

Okay. Well, that's a great note to end on. Please join me in thanking Walter for this very fascinating and revealing discussion.