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The People Against the 800 Pound Gorilla

No More War for Israel?

by JEAN BRICMONT and DIANA JOHNSTONE

September 13-15, 2013

The past ten days have seen what could be the start of an historic turning point away from endless war in the Middle East. Public opinion in the United States, in harmony with the majority of people in the world, has clearly rejected U.S. military intervention in Syria.

But for this turn away from war to be complete and lasting, greater awareness is needed of the forces that have been pushing the United States into these wars, and will surely continue to do so until they are clearly and openly rejected.

An American friend who knows Washington well recently told us that “everybody” there knows that, as far as the drive to war with Syria is concerned, it is Israel that directs U.S. policy. Why then, we replied, don’t opponents of war say it out loud, since, if the American public knew that, support for the war would collapse? Of course, we knew the answer to that question. They are afraid to say all they know, because if you blame the pro-Israel lobby, you are branded an anti-Semite in the media and your career is destroyed.

One who had that experience is James Abourezk, former Senator from South Dakota, who has testified: “I can tell you from personal experience that, at least in the Congress, the support

Israel has in that body is based completely on political fear – fear of defeat by anyone who does not do what Israel wants done. I can also tell you that very few members of Congress—at least when I served there – have any affection for Israel or for its lobby. What they have is contempt, but it is silenced by fear of being found out exactly how they feel. I’ve heard too many cloakroom conversations in which members of the Senate will voice their bitter feelings about how they’re pushed around by the lobby to think otherwise. In private one hears the dislike of Israel and the tactics of the lobby, but not one of them is willing to risk the lobby’s animosity by making their feelings public.” Abourezk added : “The only exceptions to that rule are the feelings of Jewish members, who, I believe, are sincere in their efforts to keep U.S. money flowing to Israel. But that minority does not a U.S. imperial policy make.”[1]

Since we do not have to run for Congress, we feel free to take a close look at that highly delicate question. First, we’ll review the evidence for the crucial role of the pro-Israel lobby, then we’ll discuss some objections.

For evidence, it should be enough to quote some recent headlines from the American and Israeli press.

First, according to the *Times of Israel* (not exactly an anti-Zionist rag): “Israel intelligence seen as central to U.S. case against Syria.”[2] (Perhaps the fact that it is “central” also explains why it is so dubious[3].)

Then, in *Haaretz*[4]: “AIPAC to deploy hundreds of lobbyists to push for Syria action”. Or, in *U.S. News and World Report*[5]: “Pro-Israel lobby Seeks to Turn Tide on Syria Debate in Congress”. According to *Bloomberg*[6]: “Adelson New Obama Ally as Jewish Groups Back Syria Strike”. The worst enemies of Obama become his allies, provided he does what “Jewish groups” want. Even rabbis enter the dance: according to the *Times of Israel*[7], “U.S. rabbis urge Congress to back Obama on Syria”.

The *New York Times* explained some of the logic behind the pressure: “Administration officials said the influential pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC was already at work pressing for military action against the government of Mr. Assad, fearing that if Syria escapes American retribution for its use of chemical weapons, Iran might be emboldened in the future to attack Israel. ... One administration official, who, like others, declined to be identified discussing White House strategy, called AIPAC ‘the 800-pound gorilla in the room,’ and said its allies in Congress had to be saying, ‘If the White House is not capable of enforcing this red line’ against the catastrophic use of chemical weapons, ‘we’re in trouble’.”

Even more interesting, this part of the story was deleted by the *New York Times*, according to M.J. Rosenberg[8], which is consistent with the fact that the lobby prefers to act discreetly.

Now, to the objections:

There are indeed forces other than the Israel lobby pushing for war. It is true that some neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia or Turkey also want to destroy Syria, for their own reasons. But they have nowhere near the political influence on the United States of the Israel

lobby. If Saudi princes use their money to try to corrupt a few U.S. politicians, that can easily be denounced as interference by a foreign power in the internal affairs of the United States. But no similar charge can be raised against Israeli influence because of the golden gag rule: any mention of such influence can be immediately denounced as a typical anti-Semitic slur against a nonexistent “Jewish power”. Referring to the perfectly obvious, public activities of the Israel lobby may even be likened to peddling a “conspiracy theory”.

But many of our friends insist that every war is driven by economic interests. Isn't this latest war to be waged because big bad capitalists want to exploit Syrian gas, or use Syrian territory for a gas pipeline, or open up the Syrian economy to foreign investments?

There is a widespread tendency, shared by much of the left, especially among people who think of themselves as Marxists (Marx himself was far more nuanced on this issue), to think that wars must be due to cynically rational calculations by capitalists. If this were so, these wars “for oil” might be seen as “in the national interest”. But this view sees “capitalism” as a unified actor issuing orders to obedient politicians on the basis of careful calculations. As Bertrand Russell put it, this putative rationality ignores “the ocean of human folly upon which the fragile barque of human reason insecurely floats”. Wars have been waged for all kinds of non-economic reasons, such as religion or revenge, or simply to display power.

People who think that capitalists want wars to make profits should spend time observing the board of directors of any big corporation: capitalists need stability, not chaos, and the recent wars only bring more chaos. American capitalists are making fortunes in China and Vietnam now that there is peace between the U.S. and those countries, which was not possible during hostilities. As for the argument that they need wars to loot resources, one may observe that the U.S. is buying oil from Iraq now, and so does China, but China did not have to ruin itself in a costly war. Like Iraq, Iran or Syria are perfectly willing to sell their resources, and it is the political embargoes imposed by the U.S. that prevent such trade. As for the “war for oil” thesis in the case of Libya, the Guardian recently reported that “Libya is facing its most critical moment since the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi with armed groups blockading oil fields and terminals, choking output to a 10th of normal levels and threatening economic disaster.”[9]As for Iraq, Stephen Sniegoski has shown, in *The Transparent Cabal, The Neoconservative Agenda, War in the Middle East, and the National Interest of Israel*, that the war was only due to the neoconservatives and that the oil companies had no desire whatsoever to go to war. Indeed, there is no evidence of an “oil lobby” sending its agents to urge Members of Congress to vote for war, as AIPAC is doing.

And how does one explain that many of the most determined opponents of war are found on the right of the political spectrum? Do the Tea Party, Ron Paul, Pat Buchanan, Justin Raimundo and antiwar.com, Paul Craig Roberts, among others, fail to see the wonderful profits to be made by capitalists in a devastated Syria?

The fact is that in the post-colonial period, wherever profits can be made through war, they can be made much more reliably in peaceful conditions, and most capitalists seem to have understood that. There is no need to conquer countries in order to purchase their resources, invest in their economies or sell them our products. Most countries are in fact eager for legitimate trade.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the huge military-industrial complex (MIC) benefits from wars. Doesn't the MIC need wars to maintain the lifeblood of military appropriations? Here the matter is complex. The MIC benefits above all from various hyped-up *threats* of war, most notably the Soviet threat during the Cold War, which kept the credits and contracts flowing through the Pentagon. But long, botched wars such as in Afghanistan or Iraq tend to give war a bad name, are economically ruinous and lead to questioning the need for the huge U.S. military. The MIC doesn't need another one in Syria. Many military officers are openly hostile to mounting an attack against Syria.

The interests that profit directly from recent U.S. wars – and not from mere “threats” – are very few. They are above all the giant construction firms, Bechtel, Halliburton and their subsidiaries, which, through their connections with officials such as Dick Cheney, win contracts to build U.S. military bases abroad and sometimes to rebuild infrastructure destroyed by the U.S. Air Force. This amounts to a recycling of American taxpayers' money, which in no way “profits” the United States, or American capitalism in general; besides, those construction firms are not big compared to major U.S. corporations. These profiteers could never pose as a “justification” for wars, but are the mere vultures feeding off conflicts.

The basic responsibility for war of the U.S. military-industrial complex is simply that it is there. And as Madeleine Albright famously said, “what is the use of having that splendid military if we don't use it?” In fact, ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union (and indeed arguably ever since the end of World War II), there is no obviously good reason to use it, and it might well be dismantled and resources redirected toward modernizing U.S. infrastructure and other useful and profitable activities. However, an intellectual industry called “think tanks” has developed in Washington devoted to justifying the perpetuation of the MIC. It specializes in identifying potential “threats”. Over the years, these think tanks have increasingly come under the influence of billionaire benefactors of Israel such as Haim Saban (founder of the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution). Since there are in reality virtually no serious threats to the United States calling for such colossal military strength, alleged “threats to U.S. interests” in the Middle East are invented by adopting supposed threats to Israel as threats to the United States. Example number one: Iran.

People on the left are not wrong in supposing that Washington would want to defend “American geo-strategic interests”. Those certainly exist, and are a proper object of controversy. But the crucial question here is whether support for Israeli policy aims in the Middle East is among them. Indeed, there is a sector of the U.S. foreign policy establishment that promotes an aggressive global foreign policy that amounts to a sort of world conquest, with U.S. military bases and military exercises surrounding Russia and China, as if in preparation for some final showdown. But the fact is that the most active advocates of this aggressive policy are the pro-Israel neoconservatives of the Project for the New American Century that pushed the Bush II presidency into war against Iraq, and now, as the Foreign Policy Initiative, are pushing Obama toward war against Syria. Their general line is that U.S. and Israeli interests are identical, and that U.S. world domination is good, or even necessary, for Israel. Such close identification with Israel has caused the United States to be intensely hated throughout the Muslim world, which is not good for the United States in the long run.

Perhaps because genuine, material or economic U.S. interests in going to war are so hard to find, the emphasis has shifted in the past decade to alleged “moral” concerns, such as “the responsibility to protect”, packaged with a catchy brand name, “R2P”. Today, the strongest advocates of going to war are the various humanitarian imperialists or liberal interventionist, who argue on the basis of R2P, or “justice for victims”, or alleged “genocide prevention”.

There is a large overlap between humanitarian interventionism and support for Israel. In France Bernard Kouchner, who first invented and promoted the concept of the “right to intervene”, stated in a recent interview that “Israel is like no other country. It is the result of the terrifying massacre of the Holocaust.” It is therefore “our duty” to protect it. Bernard-Henry Lévy prodded the French government to start the war against Libya, making no secret that he considered he was acting as a Jew for the interests of Israel; he is now the foremost and fiercest advocate of bombing Syria. In both France and the United States, advocates of “humanitarian” intervention justify bombing Syria by referring to the Holocaust in the past and to a hypothetical, and totally unsubstantiated, intention by Iran to risk national suicide by attacking Israel in the future.

In the United States, these concerns of the Israel lobby are given ideological and institutional expression by such influential advisors as Samantha Power, Madeleine Albright and the two Abramowitz’s (Morton the father and Michael the son, in charge of “genocide prevention efforts” at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum). The argument is used repeatedly that because “we” did not intervene quickly enough against Auschwitz, we have an obligation to intervene militarily to prevent other possible slaughters.

On September 6, the Cleveland Jewish News published a letter from “leading rabbis” urging Congress to support President Obama’s plans to strike Syria. “We write you as descendants of Holocaust survivors and refugees, whose ancestors were gassed to death in concentration camps,” the letter said. By authorizing bombing raids, the rabbis said, “Congress has the capacity to save thousands of lives”...

Without such dramatization, obscuring the reality of each new crisis with images of the Holocaust, the whole notion that the best way to promote human rights and protect populations is to wage unilateral wars, destroy what is left of the international legal order and spread chaos would be seen for the absurdity it is. Only the fervor of the champions of Israel enables such emotional arguments to swamp reasonable discussion.

But one may reasonably ask what are the interests of Israel itself in inciting the United States to fight in Syria? Israelis seem to have frightened themselves into believing that the very existence of another power in the region, namely Iran, amounts to an existential threat. But the mere fact that a policy is pursued does not mean that it is necessarily in the interests of those who pursue it. That is again ignoring the “ocean of human folly”. Napoleon and Hitler had no interest or desire in bringing Russian troops to Paris or Berlin, but their policies led to precisely that. The emperors of Germany, Austria and Russia had no interest in launching the First World War, since, in the end, they all lost their thrones as a result of the war. But launch it they did. The future is unpredictable, and that is why it is difficult to deduce intentions from consequences. Israel’s hostile policy toward its neighbors can reasonably be seen as self-defeating in the long run.

Oddly enough, some observers deny the obvious, arguing that Bashar al Assad has allowed Israel to occupy Syrian territory on the Golan Heights and has kept the border quiet (without explaining what else he could have done, given the relationship of forces) and concluding that Israel has no interest in toppling him. But what matters is that Assad is allied with Hezbollah and with Iran. Israel hates Hezbollah for its successful resistance to Israeli occupation of Lebanon, and sees Iran as the only potential challenge to Israeli military supremacy in the region.

Even so, it is not certain that Israel's war aim would be to overthrow Assad. A clue to Israel's strategy is provided by a September 5 article in the *New York Times*[10]: "Israeli officials have consistently made the case that enforcing Mr. Obama's narrow 'red line' on Syria is essential to halting the nuclear ambitions of Israel's archenemy, Iran. More quietly, Israelis have increasingly argued that the best outcome for Syria's two-and-a-half-year-old civil war, at least for the moment, is no outcome. For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad's government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis."

"This is a playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don't want one to win — we'll settle for a tie," said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. "Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here. As long as this lingers, there's no real threat from Syria."

So, the real goal of the limited strikes (and the reason why they ought to be limited) would be to send a message to Iran, about its nonexistent nuclear arms program and, in Syria, let both sides "bleed to death". How nice! Waging a war based on the flimsiest of evidence only to prolong a bloody conflict may not be a very moral endeavor for all those who claim to act out of passion for "our values" and for deep concern over the "suffering of the Syrian people".

In its zeal to serve what it considers Israel's interests, AIPAC and its affiliates practice deception concerning the issues at stake. The lobby misrepresents the interests of the United States, and even ignores the long term interests of the Jewish people whom it often claims to represent. It is pure folly for a minority, however powerful and respected, to try to impose an unpopular war on the majority. Since Israel often claims to represent the Jewish people as a whole, if the majority of Americans are forced to pay an unacceptable price for "defending Israel", sooner or later voices will be raised blaming "the Jews". Indeed, this can be seen by a brief look at what already gets written, anonymously of course, on social media, ranging from various conspiracy theories to outright Jew-bashing.

We, who are totally opposed to the notion of collective guilt, wish to avoid such an outcome. Far from being anti-Semitic, we deplore all forms of "identity politics" that ignore the diversity within every human group. We simply want to be able to say "no" openly to the pro-Israel lobby without being subjected to moral intimidation. This has nothing to do with Jewish religion or identity or culture: it is entirely political. We claim our right to refuse to be drawn into somebody else's war. We believe that these endless wars are not "good for the Jews" – or for anyone else. We want to contribute to efforts at mutual understanding, diplomacy, compromise and disarmament. In short, to strengthen "the fragile barque of human reason" adrift on the ocean of human folly. Otherwise, that folly may drown us all.

For now, the threat of war has been avoided, or at least “postponed”. Let us not forget that Iraq and Libya also gave up their weapons of mass destruction, only to be attacked later. Syria is likely to abandon its chemical weapons, but without any guarantee that the rebels, much less Israel, won’t retain such weapons. The popular mobilization against the war, probably the first one in history to stop a war before it starts, has been intense but may be short-lived. Those whose war plans have been interrupted can be expected to come up with new maneuvers to regain the initiative. These past days have given a glimpse of what can be accomplished when people wake up and say no to war. This must be an inspiration for continued efforts to make diplomacy prevail over bullying, and mutual disarmament over endless war. If people really want peace, it can be possible.

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Notes.

[1] <http://www.uruknet.de/?p=m28769>

[2] <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-intelligence-seen-as-central-to-us-case-against-syria/>

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-intelligence-seen-as-central-to-us-case-against-syria/>

[3] For a discussion of the “evidence,” see, for example, Gareth Porter: How Intelligence Was to Support an Attack on Syria, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/18559-how-intelligence-was-twisted-to-support-an-attack-on-syria>.

[4] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.545661>

[5] <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/09/06/jewish-lobby-seeks-to-turn-tide-on-syria-debate-in-congress>

[6] <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-09-04/adelson-new-obama-ally-as-jewish-groups-back-syria-strike.html>

[7] <http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-rabbis-urge-congress-to-back-obama-on-syria/>

[8] <http://mjayrosenberg.com/2013/09/03/new-york-times-deletes-this-paragraph-in-which-white-house-says-aipac-is-key-to-war/>

[9] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/03/libya-oil-supplies-tripoli>

[10] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/06/world/middleeast/israel-backs-limited-strike-against-syria.html?_r=0

