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by Alex Safian, PhD

Tony Judt, the *New York Times*, and the anti-Israel bandwagon

Whom did the *New York Times* choose to write an op-ed about the [controversy](#) over claims by two academics that the “Israel Lobby” distorts U.S. foreign policy to the detriment of U.S. interests? None other than [Tony Judt](#), who has [called Israel an “anachronism” which should be done away with](#) since it is allegedly “bad for the Jews,” not least because “the behavior of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everyone else looks at Jews.”

With publication today of Judt’s op-ed [A Lobby, Not a Conspiracy](#), and an earlier news article, [Essay Stirs Debate About Influence of a Jewish Lobby](#), the *New York Times* has published almost 2600 words on the Walt/Mearsheimer controversy, without even once hinting at its own conflict of interest – that [the Times itself was accused by the authors of a pro-Israel “editorial bias.”](#) How can the *Times* write about a controversy which it is a part of, without disclosing this to its readers? Just as inexcusable is that the *Times* has so far failed to report that the Walt/Mearsheimer paper has been shown to be littered with false allegations, phony quotations, and bogus references. It strains the imagination to understand how the *Times* could have decided it was not newsworthy that the article at the center of the controversy has had its [credibility shredded](#).

Not surprisingly, Judt’s take on the matter is of a piece with his own anti-Israel fulminations. He mischaracterizes the substantive refutations of the Walt/Mearsheimer paper, including criticism from their Harvard and Chicago colleagues, as a “somewhat hysterical response.” He claims that the paper “draws on a wide variety of standard sources and is mostly uncontentious” – the “wide variety” in fact being mostly cherry-picked newspaper articles containing anything portraying Israel in a bad light, along with multiple citations to extremists like Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein and the holocaust- denying, Saudi-friendly *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*.

As for the Walt/Mearsheimer paper being “uncontentious,” well, perhaps to the likes of Tony Judt, but not to most fair-minded observers. It’s remarkable also that a history professor apparently sees nothing wrong with the paper’s [made up quotations and bogus references](#).

Befitting this cavalier disregard for accuracy, Judt also uncritically parrots some of Walt/Mearsheimer's more ridiculous claims, as well as making up a few of his own. As an example of the former, consider Judt's claim that "prominent Israeli leaders and their American supporters pressed very hard for the invasion of Iraq ..."

Really? Who are these prominent Israeli leaders, and what exactly did they say or do? Does Judt have any proof for this claim? Is he unaware that Israeli leaders, including then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon, publicly identified Iran, rather than Iraq, as the main threat to Israel? There's much more to be said on this topic, as Professor Martin Kramer shows in his posting [Israel and the Iraq War](#), which demolishes in great detail the claim that Israel pushed the U.S. to attack Iraq. Too bad for Judt that apparently he missed it.

Judt also mischaracterizes Walt and Mearsheimer as disinterested scholars, going where their unbiased, scientific explorations take them: "political scientists with no interest whatsoever in the Palestinians." Certainly with regard to Mearsheimer, this is demonstrably and blatantly false. Before the Iraq War, Mearsheimer signed onto an absurd and embarrassing [Letter Against Expulsion of the Palestinians](#), which charged that Israel was quite likely planning to use the distraction of the Iraq war to expel Palestinians and possibly Israeli Arabs as well. According to the letter, signed also by such luminaries as Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, the "fog of war" could be :

... exploited by the Israeli government to commit further crimes against the Palestinian people, up to full-fledged ethnic cleansing... Escalating racist demagoguery concerning the Palestinian citizens of Israel may indicate the scope of the crimes that are possibly being contemplated.

In an interview about the petition in the [Chicago student paper](#), Mearsheimer went even further:

"The precedent is there [to forcibly expel Palestinians], and it behooves us to make sure it does not happen again," said John Mearsheimer, co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University and one of the letter's signatories.

Mearsheimer endorsed the letter because he sees significant evidence that Israel might use force to expel the three million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and perhaps also the 1.2 million Palestinians living inside the borders of pre-1967 Israel. (*Chicago Maroon*, Jan 10, 2003)

Is this what Judt understands as "having no interest in the Palestinians?"

Judt also falsely claims that overseas the Walt/Mearsheimer paper has been "prominently dissected and discussed," while in "America ... it's been another story: virtual silence in the mainstream media" and "self-censorship ... [that is] bad for the United States ..."

Virtual silence? Self-censorship? Really? What about the articles by the AP on April 5, and by the UPI on April 3, and by the *Boston Globe* on April 6, March 31, March 29,

and March 26, and by the *Chicago Tribune* on April 6, and by the *Chicago Sun Times* on March 27, and by the *Baltimore Sun* on April 18, and by the *Los Angeles Times* on March 26 and March 29, and by the *Washington Post* on April 15, April 11, April 5, April 3, and March 26, and by *Newsday* on April 7, and by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on April 3, and by the *New York Times* on April 12, ... etc.

In other words, what Judt calls “virtual silence” and “self-censorship” in the “mainstream media” amounts to more than 65 articles, op-eds and editorials. And this is not counting the hundreds of newspapers which likely picked up the AP and UPI coverage.

False assertions aside, no article by Judt would be complete without wild leaps of illogic, and this article is no exception. Consider his citing the “impeccably conservative *Jerusalem Post*” describing Paul Wolfowitz as “devoutly pro-Israel.” Well it’s true, there is one article in the *Jerusalem Post*, presumably not a paper that Judt would usually rely upon, that does describe Wolfowitz in such terms. Of course, maybe the article – which offers no proof – is wrong about this, maybe Wolfowitz is not “devoutly pro-Israel,” or pro-Israel at all. But say he is – does the existence of one pro-Israel deputy secretary in the U.S. government prove anything at all? Does it prove that the “Israel lobby” is manipulating foreign policy? Since not even Judt makes such a claim, what exactly is the point of bringing it up?

And does Judt dispute that many administrations, including perhaps the present one, harbor important officials who are “devoutly anti-Israel” (like Brent Scowcroft, James Baker, Caspar Weinberger, Bobby Ray Inman, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, to name a few). Using his own logic, would Judt say that the presence of such officials in high places proves that there is an *anti-Israel* cabal at work?

Judt also employs a common artifice of anti-Israel propagandists – claiming that the thing he is decrying about Israel, in this case the “Israel lobby,” is actually bad for Israel and the United States, putting him in the position of supposedly looking out for the best interests of both countries. (Why he would do so, since he thinks Israel should not exist, is not clear.) And naturally, he quotes some Israelis to support this position – again, so what? One can come up with quotes from Israelis, or Americans, for that matter, supporting pretty much any position, thereby proving nothing.

Why, Judt concludes, has “America chosen to lose touch with the rest of the international community on this issue?” Why he asks, speaking for “Europeans, Latin Americans, Africans [and] Asians,” has the United States bucked the anti-Israel bandwagon? Judt’s implication, of course, is that if Mugabe, or the Chinese dictators, or Chirac, differ with America, then they are right and America is wrong.

Of course, as Judt must know, America differs with these countries on many other issues besides Israel. Americans, for example, are a very religious people, which Europeans in particular (except for Muslim Europeans) have left behind. Does that difference mean that Americans are wrong to be so religious? Would Judt propose that

the government enact anti-religious legislation so that we can be more like the Europeans? Maybe so, especially since evangelical Christians are often such strong supporters of Israel.

But what the esteemed historian fails utterly to understand is American exceptionalism, to use Alexis de Tocqueville's phrase. America is different, and proudly so. This country was founded by people who fled Europe, who didn't want to be like Europe, who were happy to leave behind Europe's hatreds and intolerance.

In that, perhaps we Americans see a similarity to the Israelis, who, while not founding a new nation, re-founded an ancient one, that, like America, was conceived in liberty.