

BETWEEN REALITY AND MYTH:  
THE DEBATES ABOUT THE ISRAEL LOBBY IN THE  
UNITED STATES AND ITS IMAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF  
AMERICAN CONSPIRACY NARRATIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently, the subject of conspiracy theories gained significant prominence in Western, and especially American, scholarship. New approaches to researching the political culture of contemporary societies have demonstrated the crucial influence of subconscious attitudes in shaping group cohesion and national self-awareness.<sup>1</sup> Thus, conspiriological discourse appeared to be one of the crucial elements in the growth of nationalistic feelings and the increase of group cohesion. Even the national history of certain countries was examined from the point of view of conspiriological mentality.

Richard Hofstadter is one of the first scholars, who became interested in the role of conspiracy theories in American history. His essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* was the first attempt to trace a conspiriological mentality through the political history of the United States. Since that time a lot of publications describing “paranoid mentality” and its influence on American nation have been issued. These intense explorations allowed scholars to draw the conclusion that the conspiriological mentality in America is even older than the United States itself. European immigrants from Old World, primarily Puritans, brought their fears and traditional beliefs to the New World, thus, creating a whole tradition of suspecting “both neighbors and strangers of secret alliances and dangerous plots.”<sup>2</sup> Further groups of immigrants only strengthened this tradition, gradually contributing to the national repertoire of enemies.

At the same time, the unique cultural diversity, though it predated the creation of conspiriological mentality, created specific circumstances for the successful progress of Jewish community, that had long been the object of suspicion in the European tradition. Being one “other” among many, the American Jewish community enjoyed a prosperous and tranquil life until the end of the nineteenth century. However, even at the turn of the century when anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Zeljko Bratich, “Grassy-Knoll Edges: Conspiracy theories and political rationality in the 1990-s” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2001), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Goldberg, *Enemies within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2002), 2.

Jewish sentiments and antisemitic conspiracy theories became a dominant in public life, American Jews had enough capacity to defend themselves from allegations, based on the notion of “Jewish conspiracy” as well.

The Second World War is fairly considered as a determinantal event in the history of Western civilization. The reversal of the framework of international relations designated the beginning of Cold War, whereas the ferociousness of Nazi regime in Europe caused a reconsideration of the value of human life. In the history of the American Jewish community, the post-World War II period is commonly referred to as a “Golden Era”. The absence of any kind of artificial socioeconomic barriers and the gradual decline of anti-Jewish attitudes has made the United States an important state for the entire Jewish civilization. Moreover, the alliance with Israel, established in 1948, was conditioned geopolitically and the same system of values contributed to the strong public support of Israel amongst Americans.

However, the post-World War II period in American history is notable for its gradual introduction of conspiracy theories into the public discourse. Based on the suspicion and general disappointment in the politics of the federal government, conspirological discourse became a relatively fashionable trend, and has been popularized in the media, popular culture and literature of the country. At the same time, modern communication facilities increased the circulation of various conspiracy theories exponentially, and in the last 20 years the Internet actually became “a Petrie dish for conspiracies.”<sup>3</sup>

The actual widespread occurrence of conspiracy theories apparently included traditional ideas of the “World Jewish conspiracy” that in new circumstances took different forms. Though antisemitic attitudes did not disappear in the United States completely, being preserved basically in specific groups of society (such as white supremacists or Black communities), American

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Landes, “Mainstreaming Conspiracy Theories I: Culture Wars, Moral Equivalence and Suicidal Paradigms” (Paper presented at the conference on *Antisemitism, Multi-culturalism and Ethnic Identity* at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel, June 16, 2006), <http://www.theaugeanstables.com/2006/06/18/mainstreaming-conspiracy-theories-culture-wars-moral-equivalence-and-suicidal-paradigms.html> (accessed May 11, 2009).

antisemitism appears to a certain extent to be in the background of the “international antisemitism problem”.

In that sense, the single cases when Israel or the American Jewish community happens to be found in the center of controversy (such as in the case of the working paper by John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt *The Israel Lobby and the U.S. Foreign Policy*), it inevitably poses the question to what extent these critiques of Israeli politics appear to be antisemitic. Moreover, recent political events in the United States again and again put the Israel Lobby in the spotlight and nourish innumerable conspiracy theories. Thus, the recent withdrawal of Charles Freeman for the new chairman of the National Intelligence Council once again demonstrated to what extent American public opinion is ready to slide into conspiracy myth creation when the discussion drifts toward the Israel lobby and its influence on American policy-making.<sup>4</sup> Taking into consideration the whole tradition of American antisemitism, the attempt to find an answer to this question and discover probable causes of such controversies seems an interesting object to explore.

One of the aims of the given work is to trace the roots of conspiracy theories in American history in order to discover and evaluate the possible “tradition” of conspirological myth creation and then look to the correlation between general conspiracy theories popular amongst Americans, and antisemitic conspiracy theories in particular.

Another aim of the work is to look at the tradition of American antisemitism, discovering its specific features and the qualities that distinguish it from the European antisemitic tradition. It seems necessary to look how the Jewish community has developed, and what the role of anti-Jewish attitudes in the relations with Gentiles has been throughout the whole American history.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Helene Cooper, “Israel Stance Was Undoing of Nominee for Intelligence Post,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/washington/12lobby.html?\\_r=3&partner=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/washington/12lobby.html?_r=3&partner=rss) (accessed May 11, 2009); Democracy Now! Freeman: “Israel Subverts US Government”, Youtube Web Site, Windows Media Player video file, 1:42, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVQrpi01QBg> (accessed May 11, 2009).

The analysis of the debates around the publication of the working paper about *The Israel Lobby and the U.S. Foreign Policy* allows us to probe into the usage of antisemitic claims and the nature of these debates. Since these debates are the noticeable event of contemporary scientific discourse and usually presented as a part of the so-called “new antisemitism”, it would be interesting to analyze the debates in the context of the whole framework of American antisemitism.

Thus, according to the desired goals, the first chapter is devoted to the tradition of American conspirological myth creation and thus discovers the roots and usage of conspiracy theories in the public discourse. The second chapter focuses on the history of American antisemitism, its specific features and distinction from European antisemitism by looking at the specific status of the Jews in American milieu. The third chapter is devoted to the debates surrounding the working paper *The Israel Lobby and the U.S. Foreign Policy* by John J. Mearsheimer and Steven Walt and exploring the role of antisemitic claims and stereotypes in the discussion. Moreover, this chapter aims to demonstrate to what extent these debates related to the current American foreign policy and appears to be the result of a certain crisis to determine the actual national interest.

The corpora of sources on which the certain research is based divides in three parts: works on the nature of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories; works on antisemitism; and researches on the lobbyism in the U.S. and ethnic interest groups in particular.

The topic of conspiracy theories became a part of scholarship only from the 1960s when Richard Hofstadter published his well-known book “*The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays*” describing the important place of conspiracy theories in American public politics.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Hofstadter established the basis for future research and gave rise to numerous studies in that field. All these works deal with the so-called “paranoid tradition” in American history, giving a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of the conspiracy theory in the

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: And Other Essays* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1996).

American context but differing in the main focus of the research. For instance, Daniel Pipes, a well-known scholar who deals with the contemporary history of the Middle East, published book on conspiracy theories in 1997, entitled “*Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From.*”<sup>6</sup> In spite of the journalistic genre of the given work, the author made fundamental research into the conspiriological mentality, making an analysis of certain features inherent to the phenomenon of conspiracy theory, its development and role in the contemporary world. One of the most interesting conclusions from this work is that conspiracy theories are typical in both the right-wing and left-wing ideology.

Mark Fenster makes a profound analysis of the so-called “paranoid style” in terms of the concept of Richard Hofstadter.<sup>7</sup> Combining a dual perception of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories (on the one hand, as a threat to political order, and on the other hand, as an entertaining, populist expression of democratic culture), the author analyzed the nature of conspiriological discourse in the contemporary United States concluding that conspiracy theories play an important role in the American political system.

Robert A. Goldberg presented a more historical perspective in his approach to the given phenomenon by choosing various popular conspiracy theories (Rosewell, JFK Assassination, etc.) to demonstrate how different groups of American society perceive and promote conspiracy theories.<sup>8</sup> Goldberg traces the roots of “paranoid mentality” in communities of the first settlers, which was later extended to the mainstream cultural trend of contemporary America.

The collection of essays edited by Harry G. West and Todd Sanders also contributes to the research of the topic in the ethnography of suspicion and discovering of various representations of conspiratorial thinking about power in various national cultures (from Nigeria

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (n/a: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, *Enemies within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2002).

and Russia to South Korea and United States of America).<sup>9</sup> It demonstrates the correlation between the transparency of public institutions in contemporary society and their perception by people through the prism of hidden forces behind the facade of transparency.

In the framework of lobbyism in the U.S., the concept of the ethnic interest groups is one of the crucial issues, and thus the scholarship concerning American foreign policy and its correlation with ethnic interest groups' activities is rather vast. The work of Tony Smith published in 2000 covers the issues of ethnic groups involvement in foreign affairs, the role of multiculturalism and its' influence on representation of ethnic minority group interests in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> The latest research of Allan Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis, "*Interest Group Politics*," covers numerous issues on the topic of lobbyist groups in domestic and foreign U.S. politics.<sup>11</sup> Noting certain peculiarities in the development of group interest politics, the authors concluded that despite the ostensible openness of the lobbying system it had not improved equal representation or the monitoring of the cash flow to politicians.

The issue of Israel lobby groups has been a matter of interest among political scientists for at least the last twenty years. Thus, works of David H. Goldberg and Abramo F.K. Organsky were first in that line and were published in the same year, primarily focusing on similar precedents (Yom Kippur war and followed U.S. support to Israel, U.S. financial aid to Israel, AWACS sale etc.).<sup>12</sup> However, while David H. Goldberg, aside from the given cases, had concentrated on the history and comparative analyses of Canadian and U.S. Israeli lobbyist groups to make a comparison of their efficiency, Abramo Organsky aimed at the deconstruction of the myth of the powerful Israel/Jewish lobby in the U.S. by comparing aid and assistance programs to Israel with other countries in the Middle East region.

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<sup>9</sup> Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, eds. *Transparency and conspiracy: ethnographies of suspicion in the new world order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Tony Smith, *Foreign attachments: the power of ethnic groups in the making of American foreign policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Cigler, Allan J. and Burdett A. Loomis, eds. *Interest group politics*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> David Howard Goldberg, *Foreign Policy and Ethnic Interest Groups: American and Canadian Jews Lobby for Israel* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood press, 1990); Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organsky, *The 36 Billion Dollar Bargain: Strategy and Politics in U.S. Assistance to Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).



The historiography of antisemitism and works on the phenomenon of the “new antisemitism” are estimated to number in the hundreds. However, this work will primarily be based on researches which deal with exploration of antisemitic stereotypes and particularly antisemitic conspiracy theories.

Thus, Norman Cohn’s *Warrant for Genocide* is essential in the framework of antisemitic conspiracy theories.<sup>13</sup> Investigating the history of the notorious forgery, in “The Protocols of the elders of Zion”, the author intently explores not only of each component of the anti-Jewish myth of the all-powerful Jews controlling the media, governments and presenting a Fifth column in every country, but also shows how this myth shaped negative attitudes towards Jews and what destructive consequences it eventually had. Bernard Harrison, E. Erickson Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Utah, in the course of Alan Dershowitz’s *A Case For Israel*, made another research on the topic of “new antisemitism” focusing basically on the correlation between anti-Israel accusations and left-wing ideology which is crucial for understanding the debates around the Mearsheimer-Walt’s working paper.<sup>14</sup>

Although each of the mentioned topics has enough coverage, some issues still have blind-spots which this paper intends to explore. For example, the debates around the working paper of John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt became a cause for a numerous publications, however, there has been no study published that analyzes the possible reasons of that controversy and evaluates its’ influence and place in American antisemitic discourse.

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<sup>13</sup> Norman Rufus Colin Kohn, *Warrant for genocide: the myth of the Jewish world-conspiracy and the Protocols of the elders of Zion* (London: Serif, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Harrison, *The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and Liberal Opinion*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).