

# Tablet

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## Koch Dark Money Funds Anti-Israel Darlings

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April 22, 2018

In 2014, Massachusetts Institute of Technology political scientist Barry Posen learned he had fans in unexpected places. Officials at the Charles Koch Institute, a policy arm of the eponymous industrialist and deep-pocketed libertarian political donor, had read Posen's recently released *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*. As the title suggests, the book charts a less aggressive and more "strategic" U.S. stance abroad. "I got a call from the Institute saying 'Gee, there are people here who really like your book, they're trying to get into foreign policy and do different things,'" Posen recalled. " 'Can we sponsor a book event for you?' "

Posen now co-directs the Charles Koch Foundation-funded Grand Strategy, Security, and Statecraft Fellows Program, a joint Harvard-MIT initiative announced this past November to be led by Posen and his Harvard counterpart, *The Israel Lobby* co-author Stephen Walt. The program will allow graduate and post-doctoral fellows to spend a year each at Harvard and MIT, giving Posen and Walt the ability to select future members of the foreign policy elite. Posen says that he generally disagrees with much of the Koch brothers' right-wing political activities. But he is more than willing to accept their help—the project on Grand Strategy is now receiving \$3.7 million in Koch money over five years.

"We agree on this one thing," Posen said of his reasons for accepting support from the project's sole outside funders. "And given that we agree on this one thing and we often hear people pleading for more bipartisanship, it seemed to me: Why are you hesitating given that this seems to be a case where people of generally different political predispositions can come together in a particular area and work together on something they care about, something they all think is good for the United States?"

Conservatives and libertarians often argue that the Kochs are engaging in legitimate philanthropy and political activism and are only vilified because of how successful their efforts are. But liberals and progressives accuse the Kochs of manipulating the political system to produce unpopular policy outcomes that benefit their oil and mining-based businesses: The Kochs and the network of donors they help orchestrate have mobilized against the expansion of government social programs, supported work challenging climate science, championed extractive industries and low corporate tax rates, and promoted public school history curricula that downplay the horrors of slavery and anti-black racism in American society.

The idea that the Koch brothers, controversial funders of the hard-right and the main targets of Jane Meyer's investigative book *Dark Money*, are teaming up with the author of *The Israel Lobby* to re-align American foreign policy might confuse observers who are used to seeing debates around interventionism or US support for Israel as a simple contest between the right and the left. Yet in 2018, isolationist sentiment and anti-Israel conspiracy theories have found homes on both ends of the ideological spectrum. As Charles Freeman, a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia who has spoken at Charles Koch Institute-sponsored events and is known for his denunciations of Israeli influence in Washington, commented: "In general I'm pretty much appalled by what those guys do but in this case it seems in the foreign policy realm they're a useful antidote to militarism in Washington."

In May of 2016, the Koch Institute held a national security-focused conference in Washington featuring Freeman, Walt, and Walt's *The Israel Lobby* co-author John Mearsheimer. The event may have been what led the hawkishly pro-Israel Republican mega-donor Sheldon Adelson to drop out of the Koch's donor network. It also put pro-Israel Republicans on notice about a long-term threat to their position within the party. "Inside mainstream Republican circles, there is a lot of concern about what Koch is doing," said one senior Republican strategist. "It's being noticed."

Academics interested in foreign policy have noticed, too, and are lining up to take the Charles Koch Foundation's money. In addition to Harvard and MIT, University of Notre Dame's International Security Center got a \$3.5 million grant in 2015 to fund an existing program directed by Michael Desch, who describes himself as a foreign policy realist and takes a pragmatic view of his program's relationship with Koch. "I think in the real world people are more willing to say we have common interests, we can work together, and we can agree to disagree on some of these other issues," he said.

In May 2017, Tufts University's Fletcher School announced that they'd received a \$3 million grant to fund a new center for strategic studies; University of California-San Diego's Peace and Security Studies center got \$3 million from the Koch Foundation in August of 2017. The Koch Institute launched a foreign policy debate series in cooperation with the Brookings Institution in 2017, linking Koch to a place whose name is practically synonymous with Beltway centrism.

In a relatively short time, Charles Koch has entered the foreign policy conversation, not through supporting obscure think tanks or seeding provocative public activism but by partnering with some of the most respected institutions in America. The Koch move into foreign policy hints at the scope of the brothers' ambitions. "People will look at Koch the way we look back on Olin and Ford, or Carnegie and Rockefeller," Desch said, listing a number of brand-name foreign policy-related philanthropies. John D. Rockefeller, a rapacious industrialist who seeded the University of Chicago and the Council on Foreign Relations, "was hardly an uncontroversial figure," Desch pointed out.

Stephen Walt is also no stranger to controversy. Outside of the academic community, where he is known as a leading proponent of the "realist" approach to foreign policy, Walt is best known for co-authoring *The Israel Lobby*, which popularized the notion that a shadowy and extremely

powerful network of pro-Israel political activists had hijacked aspects of U.S. foreign policy in a way that ran against both the national interest and perhaps even American democracy itself. Criticisms of the book often portrayed it as a fevered conspiracy theory whose methodological failures included taking boastful AIPAC fundraising letters at face value and ignoring the fact that two thirds of the American public—i.e., voters—reliably support Israel.

Walt's co-author, John Mearsheimer, gave credence to accusations of non-scholarly animus through his own subsequent public statements and actions. Mearsheimer infamously blurbed a 2011 book by Gilad Atzmon, a writer, jazz musician, and anti-Israel extremist, who both the Anti-Defamation League and Palestinian solidarity activists have accused of anti-Semitism. Walt used his blog at *Foreign Policy* to run Mearsheimer's defense of his endorsement of Atzmon's book. Mearsheimer has appeared at more than one Koch-sponsored event, including an International Students for Liberty conference in 2016.

Despite, or because of, the book's failings, *The Israel Lobby* and the *London Review of Books* article preceding it made Walt and Mearsheimer heroes of Israel's critics on the left: a 2006 essay in *The Nation* treated the pair as if they were the only public intellectuals courageous enough to decry the fraud that the Jewish state's supporters were perpetuating against the American public. The fact that today Walt and Mearsheimer are being promoted by one of the most prolific and vilified donors on the American right is a revealing moment of cross-ideological convergence.

Charles Freeman, who spoke at the Koch Institute's 2016 Washington conference, doesn't think that *The Israel Lobby* goes far enough, calling it "cautiously written," and "truly amazing in terms of its blandness." Freeman believes that the United States "is paying a high price for its identification with Israel," calling the close relationship "an underlying cause, not the only one, of anti-American terrorism with global reach and of the wars we've been fighting in the Middle East." The former ambassador clarified that he has no ties with the Koch Institute, aside from speaking at a couple of their events. Even so, he theorizes that Charles Koch could be acting against the "prevalence of political correctness" that Freeman detects in foreign policy discussions.

"You cannot say a kind word or speak in terms other than pejoratively of Mr. Putin's Russia and now Mr. Xi's China," said Freeman. Discussions of Israel are similarly constrained, he believes, "but in that case it's more than just political correctness," he asserted. "Because there's a significant group of people who have an identity with Israel that makes them passionate and sometimes unscrupulous in pursuing their passions against people who are critical of Israel."

Questions of the passions and scruples of Israel's domestic supporters in the United States aside, deeper affinities between the Walt school of foreign policy "realists" and the libertarian Koch brothers would also appear to be at work. While skepticism toward the United States' alliances isn't the core idea behind foreign policy realism, it's a view that realists often share. It's not uncommon to hear realists question the United States' supposedly lopsided commitments under NATO, or its alleged willingness to provide strategic cover for its allies' misbehavior. An

obsession with alliances, realists believe, also restrains America's freedom of action with adversaries that often pose the greatest direct threat to national security and American interests.

When asked to diagnose problems with the current foreign policy consensus, Walt discussed the "narrowness of the conversation within the foreign policy elite. There's lots of sort of sharp elbows thrown on tactical questions but the general well-established consensus on what America's role in the world ought to be is not conducive to a healthy debate and hasn't worked particularly well the last 25 years or so."

Walt believes that Koch can have a positive impact on the discourse surrounding U.S. foreign policy. "I think the contributions of the Kochs and just about everyone else who funds work in foreign policy, whether it's funding universities or funding think tanks or the Council on Foreign Relations, is contributing to a lively public debate on these questions."

Overtly, at least, Koch Institute foreign policy programs do not seem to pay special attention to Israel—so far. "We think that the U.S. is going to be a friend of Israel," said Will Ruger, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute and the Koch Institute vice president of research and policy. "What we're really focused on is the kind of bigger macro question of how do we avoid problems like Iraq, how do we avoid problems like we saw with the nation-building project in Afghanistan—should we be expanding NATO to include Georgia and Ukraine, should we sell arms to Ukraine?"

"I don't believe the Middle East came up in our proposal as a substantive matter," MIT's Posen recalled.

Yet, as with many matters Koch-related, there is a sizable gulf between what the Institute and its grant recipients say they're doing and how their activities are described—often plausibly enough—by others, and how they evolve over time. The rise of realism is widely viewed as a possible hazard for the U.S.-Israel relationship, regardless of the form it might take. "The Kochs can really strengthen the academic voices that in my view claim to be espousing realism and are in fact arguing for isolationism and almost always are arguing against the kind of relationship between the United States and Israel that we've seen under the last five or six presidents," said Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a senior State Department and National Security Council official under various Republican administrations.

According to Ruger, the Institute's foreign policy programs are aimed at "trying to elevate challenges to the status quo here in Washington in terms of how Washington thinks about America's role in the world." This status quo, which is "defined by unnecessary and exhausting ventures abroad," is widely accepted among both Democrats and Republicans, Ruger said. "The foreign policy debate has been so narrow," he added. "You might differ a little bit this way or that way depending on if you're a conservative or liberal, but there's been a knee-jerk reaction to use military force, and to think that the U.S. has to be engaged anywhere in the world."

In Ruger's view, both parties are unwilling to reassess their support for an allegedly militarized and overly meddlesome foreign policy that's proven incapable of advancing or even clearly articulating the U.S. national interest. He says that the Koch Institute can at least start an

academic-level conversation on better, more strategic paths forward that will in turn start to percolate beyond the academy. “There’s a lot of great scholarship happening on campus, particularly in the vein of the kind of realist tradition that has a lot to contribute to the academic conversation about grand strategy, and that can bridge the gap and start to have an impact on the national conversation in foreign policy,” Ruger explained.

Ruger, a political scientist and Afghanistan war veteran, was open about the Koch Institute’s broader objectives in foreign policy and even about some of their policy preferences: “We believe in global engagement when it comes to liberalizing trade,” he noted. But policy might be a limiting framework for thinking about the Kochs’ goals in foreign affairs. Ruger cited the Ford Foundation as a potential model—the philanthropy is credited with jump-starting national security and strategic studies after backlash to the Vietnam War decimated the field in the 1970s.

The scholars overseeing Koch-supported programs take a similar view of their role in the intellectual ecosystem. Desch, for instance, also drew a connection between the academy and policy world. “They’re supporting a perspective that is pretty strong in the academy among international relations scholars but at least in recent years has been less evident in the policy community,” he said of the Koch Institute.

In turn, there is at least some evidence to suggest that the “perspective” to which Desch is referring includes a Walt and Mearshimer-type stance towards the United States’ ties with Israel. In articles in both 2004 and 2006, Desch argued that American Holocaust guilt helped explain the country’s strategic support for Israel. Challenging “the received wisdom about the Holocaust,” Desch argued that there was little the United States or its allies could have done to save more than a few hundred thousand Jews during WWII; citing nothing more than general statements from U.S. presidents made decades after Israel’s founding, Desch then argues that this misplaced or perhaps manufactured sense of moral failure had been a driving force behind the entirety of the U.S.-Israel relationship. “I think that the Holocaust remains one of a number of mutually reinforcing elements in the US-Israel relationship,” Desch explained by email, explaining that his view of the topic was shaped by historians like Peter Novick and Tom Segev. In both articles, Desch darkly hints that unnamed individuals in George H.W. Bush’s circle blame his 1992 electoral defeat on his opposition to Israel’s settlement policies, another claim for which there is scant factual proof. Both Walt and Posen say that there won’t be any ideological litmus test for their programs’ fellowships, and both insist that the Koch Institute will not have control over programming, grants, or anything else. “We don’t have to pick fellows who have a worldview that we think would align with the Kochs,” said Walt.

The Eurasia Group Foundation, the nonprofit wing of a political-risk-consulting firm founded by political scientist Ian Bremmer, received \$1.19 million from the Koch Foundation for a research program in early 2018. Bremmer says the Institute approached him after the publication of his latest book, *Superpower*. “They were interested in supporting research into my conclusions around ‘independent America,’ ” Bremmer wrote by email. “My sense is they believe a more constrained and strategic approach to foreign policy is one they align with.”

When Bremmer announced the grant on Facebook, he quipped “btw, climate change isn’t real” in the post’s comment section, as if to wink away the inevitable criticisms that come with accepting Koch money. Bremmer says the Kochs will have no control over his program and doesn’t view the Kochs as being all that different from any other controversial donor. “Some people complained on social media” after the grant was announced, he wrote by email, “but some did when I used to do work with [George] Soros as a political scientist too.”

Contrary to what the foreign policy community recipients of Koch largesse often claim, there isn’t always a set division between the brothers’ intellectual affinities and their political goals. As early as 1978, Charles Koch wrote about the need to fund university programs that could produce “rare, exceptionally capable scholars or communicators willing to dedicate their lives to the cause of individual liberty.” In a 2012 article titled “The Structure of Social Change,” Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation president Richard Fink wrote that think tanks, activist groups, and universities are “complementary institutions, each critical for social transformation.”

According to Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, a Columbia University political scientist who has studied the Koch donor network, the Kochs believe that changing the government or the broader public’s approach to a political issue is a gradual process: Academic ideas gain policy currency and eventually become coherent and established enough to form the basis for politicians’ views of the world. Hertel-Fernandez described the Kochs “philosophy of change,” explaining, “they believe that politicians are just reading from the scripts that are produced by other people... if you really want to affect change you don’t just elect another set of politicians, you create scripts that politicians can read from.” That involves “supporting academics that produce research that can help form the discourse on a whole range of issues.”

For opponents of the Kochs, this kind of long-term organizing advances a sinister agenda to reshape American politics, largely for their own self-interest. “It’s kind of like a production process,” said Ralph Wilson, a co-founder of UnKoch My Campus, which researches the brothers’ donations in higher education. “They’re engineers originally.”

Wilson’s group has uncovered evidence that they believe ties the Kochs’ higher-education-related giving directly to their political operation. Wilson cited a secret recording taken at a 2014 Koch donors summit in which attendees talk about “leveraging science and universities,” something that is “key if we’re going to help people understand not only the threats associated with collectivism, but also the advantages of a free society,” as one discussant explained.

UnKoch My Campus alleges links between Koch philanthropies and scholars with white nationalist and neo-Confederate sympathies, and has published a book-length study claiming Koch interference with academic programs that the network funds at Florida State University, a report based largely on successful Freedom of Information Act requests for university documents. For Wilson, the Kochs’ academic giving is inseparable from their broader political goals. “Any time they fund a university for their own purposes they’re essentially renting the legitimacy of that campus’s name,” he said.

The Kochs’ strategy hints at something that the brothers’ critics tend to miss: The Kochs have had to master the years or even decades-long process of building an intellectual and policy

infrastructure to advance their ideas because their views often haven't had much support within the Republican party—at least at first. As Hertel-Fernandez noted, the brothers' giving increased after the Iraq War and the Medicare prescription-drug benefit, two decidedly non-libertarian policies that a Republican president shepherded into existence.

Republicans in Washington are already wondering whether their entrance into foreign policy presages future ideological friction.

One Republican strategist I interviewed thinks that Koch-style foreign policy is a nonstarter with today's party, which believes in a massive and forward-deployed U.S. military, a close relationship with Israel, and a host of other non-realist-friendly positions. "It's stupid and it's annoying and it's unfortunate," the strategist said of the Kochs' foreign policy activities. "I don't want to trivialize it, I don't want to be dismissive, it would be stupid not to take it seriously given the resources and the network they have. But, at the end of the day, what—the Republican party's going to slash the defense budget? I don't buy that."

Another conservative think-tank scholar summed up the main issue the Kochs face in breaking into any new area of policy: They're part of an ideological minority that's only taken seriously on issues of widespread agreement within the American right. "They're not realists; they're libertarians. That's their problem," the scholar said. "They are completely self-limiting."

Still, the Kochs think on a longer timescale than most other donors. The election of Donald Trump, who touted his supposed opposition to the Iraq War and openly questioned the value of NATO and other U.S. military commitments, may have opened up the space for foreign policy debate on the right. "You have to congratulate the Kochs for coming in at a moment of plasticity, when even the fundamentals of American foreign policy are up for grabs," said Abrams, of the Council on Foreign Relations. "If you think of 2018 compared to say 2000, I think that the isolationist arguments have more of an audience at both ends of the political spectrum. I think one should not be too quick to say, nah, they can't have any impact."