

The Larger Question of Chuck Hagel

Exclusive: The up-in-the-air nomination of Chuck Hagel to be Defense Secretary has become a test of whether the Israel Lobby can still shoot down an American public servant who is deemed insufficiently passionate regarding Israel, a test that now confronts President Obama, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

The Israel Lobby is hell bent on sabotaging President Barack Obama's tentative plan to appoint former Sen. Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense. And with Obama now dithering about this selection the Lobby and its neocon allies sense another impending victory.

Perhaps The New Yorker's Connie Bruck described Hagel's predicament best in assessing why the Israel Lobby is so determined to destroy the Nebraska Republican though he is "a committed supporter of Israel."



But, as Bruck explained, "Hagel did not make the obeisance to the lobby that the overwhelming majority of his Congressional colleagues do. And he further violated a taboo by talking about the lobby, and its power." Hagel had the audacity, in an interview for a 2008 book, to say something that you are not supposed to say in Official Washington, that the Israel Lobby pulls the strings on many members of Congress.

In Aaron Miller's book, *The Much Too Promised Land*, Hagel is quoted as saying that Congress "is an institution that does not inherently bring out a great deal of courage." He added that when the American Israel Public Affairs Committee comes knocking with a pro-Israel letter, "you'll get eighty or ninety senators on it. I don't think I've ever signed one of the letters", because, he added, they were "stupid."

Finding Other Reasons

Yes, it's true that when the neocon editors of the Washington Post decried the prospect of Hagel's appointment to run the Pentagon, they cited a bunch of other reasons without mentioning Hagel's independent thinking regarding Israel. For instance, the Post's editors fretted over a September 2011 interview with the Financial Times, in which Hagel said, "The Defense Department, I think in many ways, has been bloated. So I think the Pentagon needs to be pared down." What heresy!

The Post's editors also questioned Hagel's interest in avoiding another war with Iran, calling his interest in meaningful engagement with Iran "isolated." The Post noted that Hagel "repeatedly voted against sanctions, opposing even those aimed at the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which at the time was orchestrating devastating bomb attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq. Mr. Hagel argued that direct negotiations, rather than sanctions, were the best means to alter Iran's behavior."

Though the Post noted that Hagel also wrote an op-ed last September that contained the usual refrain about "keeping all options on the table," the neocon editors worried that a Defense Secretary Hagel might not be enthusiastic enough in carrying out the war option against Iran. Obama "will need a defense secretary ready to support and effectively implement such a decision," the Post wrote.

Yet, despite the Post's avoidance of any mention about the controversy over Hagel and the Israel Lobby, you can bet that the editors were particularly worried that Hagel might become a strong voice within the Obama administration against simply following Israel's lead on issues in the Middle East.

If Obama were to actually nominate Hagel rather than just float his name as a trial balloon and recoil at all the efforts to prick holes in it the message would be a strong one to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israel Lobby that the old rules for the game are changing, that they can no longer blackball American public servants from key jobs in Washington.

Defecting on Iraq War

As a two-term senator, Chuck Hagel's other real sin was that he was one of the few defectors among congressional Republicans regarding the Iraq War. Though Hagel voted for President George W. Bush's war authorization, he eventually recognized his mistake and fessed up.

Hagel said he believes the Iraq War was one of the biggest blunders in U.S. history. He sharply criticized the Bush/Cheney foreign policy as "reckless," saying it was playing "ping pong with American lives." Such comments have made

Hagel particularly unpopular with the top tier of hawkish Republican senators, such as Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and John McCain of Arizona.

But Hagel's ultimate offense, as far as Official Washington is concerned, is his unusual record of independent thinking that could, in Israel's eyes, endanger or even derail business as usual with the U.S. He is considered a realist, a pragmatist. Moreover, there can hardly be a more offensive remark to Israeli ears than the one made by Hagel to author Aaron Miller reflecting the sad state of affairs in Congress:

"The Jewish Lobby intimidates a lot of people up here" [on the Hill], but "I'm a United States Senator. I'm not an Israeli senator."

This remark, and others like it, have raised doubts in Israeli and pro-Israeli circles as to whether Hagel has the requisite degree of "passionate attachment" to Israel. This has generated a volley of vicious invective characterized so well by former Ambassador Chas Freeman in "Israel Lobby Takes Aim Again." This invective is aimed at forcing Obama to drop any plan to put Hagel in charge of the Pentagon. After all, it takes courage to counter character assassination.

Why the Fear?

What really lies behind this? I suspect the fear is that, were Hagel to become Secretary of Defense, he would take a leaf out of his book as Senator and openly insist, in effect, that he is the American Secretary of Defense and not the Israeli Defense Minister.

This, in turn, gives rise to a huge question being whispered in more and more corridors of power in Washington: Is Israel an asset or a liability to the U.S., when looked at dispassionately in the perspective of our equities in the Middle East and our general strategic defense?

Hardly a new conundrum. Many decades ago, Albert Einstein, who feared the consequences of creating a "Jewish state" by displacing or offending Arabs, wrote:

"There could be no greater calamity than a permanent discord between us [Jews] and the Arab people. Despite the great wrong that has been done us [in the western world], we must strive for a just and lasting compromise with the Arab people. Let us recall that in former times no people lived in greater friendship with us than the ancestors of these Arabs."

Realpolitik, including the increasing isolation of Israel and the U.S. in the Middle East, is breathing some life into this old attitude and generating consideration of a new approach necessity being the mother of invention.

Few have been as blunt, though, as Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has been described as the “unofficial dean of the realist school of American foreign policy experts.” In a recent talk, the former national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter minced no words:

“I don’t think there is an implicit obligation for the United States to follow like a stupid mule whatever the Israelis do. If they decide to start a war, simply on the assumption that we’ll automatically be drawn into it, I think it is the obligation of friendship to say, ‘you’re not going to be making national decisions for us.’ I think that the United States has the right to have its own national security policy.”

Even Petraeus Lets It Slip Out

Back when Gen. David Petraeus was head of CENTCOM, he addressed this issue, gingerly but clearly, in prepared testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2010 on the “challenges to security and stability” faced by the U.S.:

“The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests. ... The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel.

“Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships ... in the area and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.”

Petraeus’s testimony provoked a sharp rejoinder from Abe Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League, one of the leading American Zionist lobby groups. Foxman protested:

“Gen. Petraeus simply erred in linking the challenges faced by the U.S. ... in the region to a solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and blaming extremist activities on the absence of peace and the perceived favoritism for Israel. This linkage is dangerous and counterproductive.”

Petraeus or someone on his staff had inadvertently touched a live-wire reality that is becoming increasingly debated in official circles but remains taboo when it comes to saying it out loud. Fearful that he would be dubbed an “anti-Semite,” Petraeus began a frantic attempt to take back the words, which he noted were only in his prepared testimony and were not repeated in his oral presentation. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons, Likud Conquer DC, Again.”](#)]

As Ali Abunimah of the *Electronic Intifada* describes it, this taboo proscribes “stating publicly that U.S. ‘interests’ and Israeli ‘interests’ are not identical, and that Israel might be a strategic burden, rather than an asset to the United States.”

Ironically, while Foxman and hardline Zionists were objecting vociferously, Meir Dagan, then-Israel’s Mossad chief told a Knesset committee, “Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden.”

Taboo or not, an un-passionately-attached realist like Chuck Hagel presumably would be able to see that reality anathema in Zionist circles for what it is.

As prospective Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel would bring something else that would be extremely valuable to the job, a real-life understanding of the horrors of war. He volunteered for service in Vietnam in 1967 at the height of the fighting there, rejecting his local draft board’s suggestion that he re-enroll in college to avoid Vietnam. A combat infantry squad leader, he was twice wounded in that crucible. Do not let anyone tell you that this does not have a lasting effect on a man.

First in Three Decades

Were Hagel to become Secretary of Defense, he would become the first in 30 years to bring to the job direct battle experience of war. One must trace 14 former secretaries of defense all the way back to Melvin Laird (1969-1973) for one who has seen war up-close and personal. (Like Hagel, Laird enlisted and eventually earned a Purple Heart as a seaman in the Pacific theater during WWII.)

Given this real world experience, the Israelis and their supporters in the U.S. might well conclude that Hagel would not be as blasphemous as his predecessors when it comes to sending troops off to war and even less so for a war like the prospective one with Iran.

Hagel’s past statements suggest he would urge more flexibility in talks with Iran on the nuclear issue and on Palestine, as well. This leaves him vulnerable to charges from the Israel Lobby, but even some pro-Israel stalwarts reject the far-fetched notion that this makes him “anti-Semitic.”

In comments to the *New Yorker*’s Connie Bruck, for example, Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-New York, has drawn a sensible contrast between Hagel’s apparent inclination toward more flexibility with Iran on the nuclear issue and the more familiar attitude which Ackerman described as: “You know ‘Let’s bomb them before the sun comes up.’”

If recent reports are correct in suggesting that Obama intends to enter more

than just *pro forma* negotiations with Iran, he would have in Hagel the kind of ally he would need in top policy-making circles, someone who would support, not sabotage, chances for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Recall that in 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was able to put the kibosh on a plan that had been suggested by Obama himself, and carefully worked out with Tehran by the President of Brazil and the Prime Minister of Turkey, that would have been a major step toward resolving the dispute over Iran's enrichment of uranium. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[U.S./Israel Challenged on Iran.](#)"]

Avoiding "Complicity"

The year just ending has been a rollercoaster for U.S.-Israeli relations. It started with Obama's rather extreme professions of fealty to Israel. In a pre-Super Bowl interview with Matt Lauer on Feb. 5, the President said:

"My number one priority continues to be the security of the United States, but also the security of Israel, and we're going to make sure that we work in lockstep as we proceed to try to solve this problem [Iran], hopefully diplomatically."

Speaking to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in March amid suggestions that his devotion to Israel was still not enough Obama again used the first person in assuring the pro-Israel lobby group: "when the chips are down, I have Israel's back."

By late August, as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was suggesting that Israel might ignore Obama's sanctions strategy on Iran and launch a preemptive strike on its own, Obama used Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey to say that he (Dempsey) did not wish to be "complicit," if the Israelis chose to attack Iran. In September, Secretary Clinton was publicly brushing aside Netanyahu's pleading for U. S. endorsement of his various "red lines," and Obama was too busy to receive Netanyahu when he came to the U.N.

What lies in store for U.S.-Israeli relations in Obama's second term? It is too early to tell. But whether or not the President decides to tough it out and nominate Chuck Hagel for Secretary of Defense is likely to provide a good clue.

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