

Hagel and Israel

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Introduction

Senator Chuck Hagel's nomination as Secretary of Defense is an internal American matter and, as such, should not involve Israel. In fact, the insertion of Israel into American political debates, often by its self-anointed supporters, does Israel a great disservice. Making it a partisan wedge or a hindrance on American interests harms Israel's long-term interests.¹ Having been dragged into the debate, Israelis deserve a truthful picture of Hagel's views and his record, not the caricature painted by right-wing propagandists. A candid inspection of the Senator's record leaves no doubt about his support for Israel and his commitment to its security. Chuck Hagel is responsible, knowledgeable, and courageous when it comes to Middle East policy. Presenting his independence and refusal to toe the radical right's party line as anti-Israel is demagoguery that serves neither the United States nor Israel.

Punditry

The controversy over Chuck Hagel and Israel stemmed and remains based in a statement he made in 2006 in an interview with Aaron David Miller, which was subsequently published in Miller's book *The Much Too Promised Land* where he said that "[t]he political reality is that ... the Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here."² The statement was condemned as borderline anti-Semitic by the Anti-Defamation League's Abe Foxman,³ Bill Kristol's *Weekly Standard*⁴ and Emergency Committee for Israel,⁵ and was strongly criticized by Senator Joe Lieberman,⁶ Senator Lindsay Graham,⁷ Senate republican aides,⁸ the Republican Jewish Committee,⁹ and the National Jewish Democratic Committee.¹⁰

But it is not the unfortunate implications of the phrase "the Jewish lobby" that makes Hagel's nomination upsetting to the world of the American Jewish and Republican establishment. Indeed, Malcolm Hoenlein, vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish

Organizations used it freely last month¹¹ and Dick Cheney defended the term when it was published in a 1990 cultural sensitivity handbook for troops stationed in Saudi Arabia.¹² The real reason for the uproar is Hagel's political step that falls out of rhythm with Israel's current government, and thus out with its lackeys in the Republican Party. The Likud dogmas of occupation, expansionism, refusal to talks with Hamas, and escalation of hostilities with Iran have seeped into the pro-Israel establishment and are the very ones Hagel — like most Israeli defense officials — oppose. Hagel is right where it matters: in his policy. He is steadfast when it comes to finding a realistic resolution to the Palestinian-Israel conflict, has an uncanny ability to view the expanse of the Middle East as a region and demand multilateralism, and has a realist, interest-based perspective when it comes to handling Hamas and avoiding a divided, fundamentalist Palestine.

A great deal of the vitriol aimed at Chuck Hagel has centered around the fact that he has not signed certain letters,¹³ but these are letters that hold no force and so mean very little to Hagel — and to Israelis. In fact, Connie Bruck of the *New Yorker*, reminds us that when Aaron David Miller interviewed Hagel back in 2006 the senator said, "I don't think I've ever signed one of the letters"—because, he added, they were "stupid."¹⁴ Miller, who, Bruck reports, described him as "a strong supporter of Israel and a believer in shared values," recently tweeted: "Hagel's interview w/me reflected common sense; not anti-israel bias. he'd make a fine Secdef if given chance."¹⁵ But the partisan attack dogs are immune to such reasoning. For them even clear displays of responsibility and reasonableness, like the following statement Hagel made in 2006, can serve as proof of disloyalty:

I'm a United States Senator, not an Israeli Senator. I'm a United States Senator. I support Israel. But my first interest is I take an oath of office to the Constitution of the United States. Not to a president. Not a party. Not to Israel. If I go run for Senate in Israel, I'll do that.¹⁶

So that's it — an unfortunate yet obviously benign slip of tongue and responsible independence unacceptable to the right wing establishment. The pundits have had their day. It's time to look at the facts: Hagel's voting record.

Hagel's Record on Israel

In 2006, the year he spoke with Miller, Hagel co-sponsored the “Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act.” Section two of the bipartisan bill, voted into law, states that it shall be US policy to:

(1) support a peaceful, **two-state solution** to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in accordance with the Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (Roadmap), and **oppose those organizations, individuals, and countries that support terrorism and violently reject such two-state solution**; (2) promote democracy and the cessation of terrorism and incitement in institutions and territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority (PA); and (3) **urge members of the international community to avoid contact with and refrain from financially supporting the terrorist organization Hamas until it agrees to recognize Israel, renounce violence, disarm, and accept prior agreements, including the Roadmap.**¹⁷ [Emphasis added]

The rest of the bill works to incentivize the Palestinian Authority to cooperate in ending terrorism in the West Bank, but this section is telling: It is Hagel’s stance on Israel. And this is not the only time Hagel has come out hard as pro-two states, something many believe is not the current stance of the Israeli government and increasingly not the stance of the organized American Jewish community. During the Bush years he was vocal about Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians as a regional issue, the solution to which could only come with two states — one of which is unabashedly Jewish. In a World Affairs Council speech in 2003, he said:

We should also not further complicate and inhibit progress by putting the most sensitive items up front, like the “Right of Return” for Palestinians. Israel’s Jewish identity should not be negotiated and can never be compromised. But we should not be setting conditions before we even get to the starting line.¹⁸

He considered Bush’s Road Map a “working document” and cautioned: “none of the parties should be wedded to the fine print,” making it clear that “[t]he first steps need to be about security” and that it was “[t]he Palestinian Government” that “must take identifiable steps to end the threat to Israelis from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the al-Aqsa Brigade, and other terrorist groups.” Hagel holds a realist, interest-based vision for the Middle East, shared by most senior Israeli defense officials. His comments pale in comparison with many of theirs, such as the recent criticism of Netanyahu by former head of Shin Bet, Yuval Diskin.¹⁹ In framing the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict as a regional issue, which only then becomes a matter of American concern, he is able to capture the essence of why Israel's security is, in fact, important to the United States and to the rest of the world:

We cannot step back from the Middle East. Our interests in defeating international terrorism, halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and protecting our vital interests, all depend on our success in rebuilding and re-shaping alliances and international institutions. What we do in the Middle East, and how we do it, will have profound implications for global security.²⁰

Like many other senators, Hagel joined the majority of his colleagues in co-sponsoring bills that congratulated Israel on her 50th and 60th anniversaries as well as "congratulated residents of Jerusalem and the people of Israel on the 30th anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem."²¹ If all of this was not enough to prove that Hagel supports the growth and blossoming of the modern state of Israel, we should look at his policies on Hamas and Iran.

On Iran, Hagel has proven his thinking to be sensible, regional, and multi-lateral. He tends to support multilateral sanctions on Iran and is skeptical of unilateral ones. He rightly considers military intervention a last resort, yet, like Obama, he supports keeping all options on the table.²² Like Yuval Diskin, Meir Dagan, Shlomo Gazit and many other Israeli experts,²³ Hagel believes that a strike on Iran is not the best course of action at this time.²⁴ In 2006, on the floor of the Senate, he said,

An Iran with nuclear weapons raises the specter of broader proliferation and a fundamental strategic realignment in the region, creating more regional instability. America's approach to the Middle East must be consistent and sustained, and it must understand the history, the interests, and the perspectives of our regional friends and allies.²⁵

When it comes to Hamas, the accusation leveled against Hagel surrounds his signature on a 2009 letter as part of a bi-partisan effort urging the Obama administration "at least explore the possibility" of opening talks with Hamas.²⁶ While some argue that this sets a difficult precedent of holding talks with terrorists, the argument was made that "If one is serious about achieving a peace between Israel and the Palestinians, then you have to encourage a reconciliation between the various Palestinian political factions,"²⁷ a reasonable and thoughtful

position. Let us remember that it was Netanyahu who negotiated with Hamas for the return of captured soldier Gilead Shalit and for a cease-fire ending operation Pillar of Defense.²⁸

Hagel has gone on the record a number of times as a multilateralist. Just last month, Hagel stated that the US shouldn't be the first hand in Syria, saying that it was preferable to "work through the multilateral institutions that are available, the U.N., the Arab league. The last thing you want is an American-led or Western-led invasion into Syria." To him, foreign policy is a matter of national interest; he has said that leading by ideology "gets a nation into a lot of trouble..."²⁹

Hagel has shown that he is able to see Israel's regional complexity, take an accounting of its dynamism, and act courageously to put forward a moderate multilateralist vision.³⁰ After examining his record on Israel, his credibility on national security, and his understanding of the region, we believe that those who have Israel's real interest at heart should applaud his nomination for US Secretary of Defense. Only those who cherish the status quo and conflate Israel's real interests with the reckless ideology of its current government should be concerned. Hagel's rational, multilateral, and interests-based approach might be precisely what is needed to reignite and reshape the administration's engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Notes

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² Stephens, Bret. "Chuck Hagel's Jewish Problem" *Wall Street Journal*, 17/12/2012 available at http://professional.wsj.com/article/global_view.html?mg=reno64-wsj

³ Rubin, Jennifer. "Exclusive: ADL pans possible Chuck Hagel pick," *The Washington Post*, 18/12/2012, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2012/12/18/exclusive-adl-pans-possible-chuck-hagel-pick/>

⁴ Abrams, Elliot. "Mr. Hagel and the Jews" *The Weekly Standard*, 7/1/2013, available at http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/mr-hagel-and-jews_693993.html

⁵ Emergency Committee for Israel, YouTube advertisement and new website (as of 08/01/2013): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fU6c9H2levE> and <http://www.chuckhagel.com/>

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- ¹¹ "Top Jewish Leader Says Chuck Hagel Nomination on Monday is 'Most Likely'," *Algemeiner*, 30/12/2012, available at <http://www.algemeiner.com/2012/12/30/breaking-top-jewish-leader-says-chuck-hagel-nomination-on-monday-is-most-likely/>
- ¹² Kaczynski, Andrew. "Dick Cheney Apparently Didn't Mind The Term 'Jewish Lobby,'" *Buzzfeed*, 07/01/2013, available at <http://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewkaczynski/dick-cheney-apparently-didnt-mind-the-term-jewis>
- ¹³ Specifically, letters calling the EU to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, letters in support of Israel in 2000 during the intifada, and letters urging President Bush to highlight Iran's nuclear program at the G-8 summit.
- ¹⁴ Bruck, Connie. "Chuck Hagel and his Enemies," *The New Yorker*, 26/12/2012, available at <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/12/chuck-hagel-and-his-enemies.html>
- ¹⁵ Ibid., Herb.
- ¹⁶ Kessler, Glen. "Chuck Hagel and Israel in context: A guide to his controversial statements," *The Washington Post*, 08/01/2013, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/chuck-hagel-and-israel-in-context-a-guide-to-his-controversial-statements/2013/01/07/be1cc3f8-591c-11e2-9fa9-5fbdc9530eb9_blog.html
- ¹⁷ Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006, Pub. L. no 109-446, Stat 3318 (2006) available at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/109/hr4681/text>
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- ²⁶ Bryan Bender and Farah Stockman, "Top US Officials Urge Dialogue With Hamas" *Truthout*, 14/03/2009, available at <http://archive.truthout.org/031709N>
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