

OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT OBAMA

December 22, 2012

History teaches the vital importance of appointing the right leader to control the massive US military machine that consumes about half our discretionary budget and determines life or death for hundreds of thousands elsewhere in the world as well as thousands of our own citizens in uniform. Through the Office of Special Plans in 2002-03 established by Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith who occupied the top civilian positions in the Pentagon, neoconservative, Israel lobby-associated figures were behind the duplicity used to launch the unjustified war against Iraq, disregarding international law and facts known to our professional intelligence services. These same forces have been pushing for a war with Iran that would be a disaster. Thus, your choice for Secretary of Defense and his resistance to these intense political pressures are of crucial importance.

It is widely rumored that you are considering nomination of former Senator Chuck Hagel to replace Leon Panetta as Secretary of Defense. We also note with regret that these same, familiar neoconservatives and Israel lobby have mounted a vigorous propaganda campaign against this prospective nomination.

Sen. Hagel stands accused by these detractors of insufficient loyalty to Israel for calling Israel's 2006 attack on Lebanon "the systematic destruction of an American friend," adding that the US relationship with Israel "cannot be at the expense of our Arab and Muslim relationships" which would be "an irresponsible and false choice." In fact, Israel's brutality and destructiveness in this war was also condemned by the testimony of one of its own rocket unit commanders in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz as "insane and monstrous," including indiscriminate use of cluster bombs and illegal phosphorous munitions against civilian populations.

Sen. Hagel stands further accused of political heresy, declaring that he was a United States, not an Israeli, senator. He is accused, in short, of recognizing where his responsibilities lie and that US interests do not automatically coincide with the wishes of Israel or its American lobby.

Sen. Hagel has not supported Israeli hysteria about Iran and Hezbollah, which we consider both prudent and respectful of international law. He supports talking to Hamas, a position consistent with your belief that we "should talk with our enemies." These viewpoints are not radical and are shared by several former Israeli Mossad, IDF and Shin Bet chiefs.

Moreover, these three Islamic adversaries of Israel are not enemies of the US, and Hagel's statements place him among the few American leaders who have publicly recognized "some daylight" between Israeli and US foreign policy objectives. We need more, not less, acknowledgment of this.

We agree with Sen. Hagel that the Israel lobby (what he unfortunately called the "Jewish lobby" in 2008) is far too influential in determining US policy decisions about Middle East war and peace. The lobby's long and systematic establishment, far-reaching network within American society, ruthless methods and inappropriate power have been extensively documented by numerous scholars, former legislators, senior Middle East correspondents and authors including Grant Smith, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, James Petras, J. J. Goldberg, David Hirst, Steven Sniegowski, Paul Findley and others. Two independent surveys of Congress have rated AIPAC, although representing not a US constituency but a foreign country, the second most powerful lobby in Washington.

Admittedly, Sen. Hagel misspoke in his reference to the "Jewish" lobby since, as reported in James Besser's New York Times op-ed last Wednesday, this lobby represents the views of a wealthy right-wing minority and less than half of American Jews, as well as Christian Zionists. But Hagel did not misspeak by declaring his independence from them and also recognizing that Israel's reckless, illegal and violent actions are often not in its own long-term best interests or ours. From the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty in 1967 through the 1973 "Samson option" through Israel's continuous intrusions into US electoral politics ever since, assertions of Israel's "friendship" with us is questionable. But if judged true, Hagel appears to understand that friends do not let friends drive drunk.

Irrespective of what might be best for Israel, we cannot allow a foreign country to presume to dictate American cabinet appointments and Middle East foreign policy. If you do not now nominate Sen. Hagel it will undoubtedly be widely interpreted as submission to Israel lobby pressure, reduce respect for your office, and further encourage the lobby's legendary strongarm tactics throughout the duration of your administration.