

Column One: Intelligence and the anti-Israel lobby

Contributed by Caroline Glick , THE JERUSALEM POST
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Ill winds are blowing out of Washington these days. On Thursday, The Washington Post headline blared, "Intelligence Pick Blames 'Israel Lobby' for Withdrawal."

The article, by Walter Pincus, described how former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia Charles "Chas" Freeman is blaming Israel's Jewish American supporters for his resignation Tuesday from his post as chairman of the National Intelligence Council.

In a diatribe published on Foreign Policy's Web site on Wednesday, Freeman accused the alleged "Israel Lobby" of torpedoing his appointment. In his words, "The tactics of the Israel Lobby plumb the depths of dishonor and indecency... The aim of this Lobby is control of the policy process through the exercise of a veto over the appointment of people who dispute the wisdom of its views... and the exclusion of any and all options for decision by Americans and our government other than those that it favors."

He continued, "I believe that the inability of the American public to discuss, or the government to consider, any option for US policies in the Middle East opposed by the ruling faction in Israeli politics has allowed that faction to adopt and sustain policies that ultimately threaten the existence of the State of Israel. It is not permitted for anyone in the United States to say so. This is not just a tragedy for Israelis and their neighbors in the Middle East; it is doing widening damage to the national security of the United States."

The Washington Post's article quoted liberally from Freeman's diatribe. It also identified the Jewish Americans who wrote against Freeman's appointment, and insinuated that AIPAC - which took no stand on his appointment - actually worked behind the scenes to undermine it.

While it described in lurid detail how one anti-Freeman Jewish blogger quoted other anti-Freeman Jewish bloggers on his Web site, Pincus's article failed to report what it was about Freeman that caused the Jewish cabal to criticize his appointment. Consequently, by default, Pincus effectively endorsed Freeman's diatribe against the all-powerful "Israel Lobby."

Pincus's reportorial malpractice wouldn't have been so problematic if his article had just been one of many articles in the Washington Post about Freeman's appointment. But, like The New York Times, the first mention the Washington Post made of the story was on Tuesday, after Freeman announced his resignation.

The Washington Post's news editor, Douglas Jehl, admitted that a conscious decision had been made to ignore the story. In an e-mail published in the Weekly Standard Jehl wrote, "We did initially elect not to write a story about the campaign against Mr. Freeman."

As the Standard's Stephen Hayes notes, Jehl's statement is notable because it shows that he and colleagues never considered whether Freeman's record was newsworthy in and of itself. That is, they never asked whether the controversy surrounding it was justified. Had they asked that question, perhaps they would have reconsidered their decision to ignore the story.

Freeman was a career US diplomat until his retirement in the mid-1990s. He served as ambassador to Saudi Arabia during the first Bush administration. In his memoirs, former secretary of state James Baker claimed that in that position, Freeman was afflicted by "clientitis." Instead of advancing US interests with the Saudis, Freeman championed Saudi interests to the US government.

In 1997, Freeman became president of the Saudi-funded Middle East Policy Council. There Freeman continued his outspoken support for Saudi positions against the US. In January 2009, for instance, he praised Saudi King Abdullah for coercing the second Bush administration into supporting Palestinian statehood.

Freeman castigated the Bush administration as "the world's first genuinely autistic government." Then he bragged that it was only due to Abdullah's "threat... to downgrade relations with the United States," that the administration finally announced its support for Palestinian statehood.

According to financial records made public in recent weeks, the Middle East Policy Council has received millions of dollars from the Saudi government and royal family over the past several years.

Saudi Arabia is not the only country with interests and values that conflict with US interests and values that Freeman has championed and earned a living from. Until accepting his appointment as chairman of the National Intelligence Council, Freeman was a paid member of the Chinese government-owned China National Offshore Oil Company's international advisory board. CNOOC has been the target of a US Treasury probe due to its multi-billion dollar contract with Iran to develop the South Pars gas field.

As with the case of Saudi Arabia, Freeman's political sympathies go hand in hand with his financial ties. In a list-serve e-mail in 2006, Freeman criticized the Beijing Politburo for being too lax with the pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989. As he put it, "the truly unforgivable mistake of the Chinese authorities was the failure to intervene on a timely basis to nip the demonstrations in the bud."

As Martin Cramer, Steven Rosen and other Jewish writers have noted in their reporting on Freeman in recent weeks, Freeman's positions on Israel closely mirror the Saudi Foreign Ministry's positions. So it is that in 2006, for instance, Freeman blamed US ties with Israel for the September 11, 2001, attacks. As he put it, "We have paid heavily and often in treasure for our unflinching support and unstinting subsidies of Israel's approach to managing its relations with the Arabs. Five years ago, we began to pay with the blood of our citizens here at home."

Then, too, like the Saudi government, Freeman argues that Arab terrorism against the US is solely a consequence of US support for Israel. Were the US to abandon its alliance with Israel, all Arab terror against the US would stop.

DESPITE PINCUS'S attempt to hide it, the main reason Freeman's appointment was controversial was not the opposition it garnered among pro-Israel American Jews. The main controversy surrounding his appointment as the Obama administration's top intelligence analyst revolved around his financial and political ties to potential and actual US adversaries.

Indeed, according to Newsweek, it was these connections - and specifically Freeman's ties to the Chinese Politburo - that scuppered his appointment. According to Newsweek, the White House withdrew its support for Freeman because House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was angered by his support for Beijing's repression of Chinese democracy activists, which she described as "beyond the pale." Freeman's animus towards Israel apparently played no role in the White House's decision to show him the door.

Whatever the reason for his resignation, it is a good thing that Freeman was forced to resign. It is a very good thing that the man writing the US's National Intelligence Estimates and briefing the president on intelligence matters is not a hired gun for the Saudi and Chinese governments who believes that Jewish Americans have no right to participate in public debate about US foreign policy. But while his appointment was foiled, the fact that a man like Freeman was even considered for the post tells us two deeply disturbing things about the climate in Washington these days.

First and foremost, Freeman's appointment gives us disconcerting information about how the Obama administration intends to relate to intelligence. Freeman was appointed by Adm. Dennis Blair, President Barack Obama's director of national intelligence. Blair stood by Freeman's appointment even after information became known about his financial ties to foreign governments and his extreme views on Israel and American Jews were exposed. Blair repeatedly extolled Freeman for his willingness to stake out unpopular positions.

On Tuesday, Blair appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee. There he answered questions about Freeman and about Iran's nuclear weapons program. Just as he defended Freeman, so Blair defended the Islamic Republic. He claimed that there is no way to infer from Iran's satellite program that it is expanding the range of its ballistic missiles. He claimed that just because Iran is enriching uranium, there is no reason to believe that the mullahs are interested in building a bomb. That is, America's top intelligence officer is willing to take Iran's word on everything.

On the other hand, he isn't willing to take Israel's word on anything. Although he acknowledged that his nonchalant assessment of Iran was based on the same information as Israel's dire assessment of Iran, Blair scoffed at Israel's views, claiming that they are colored by the Jewish state's fears. In his words, "The Israelis are far more concerned about it, and they take more of a worst-case approach to these things from their point of view."

What Blair's staunch championing of Freeman's appointment and his casualness regarding Iran's nuclear program indicates is that like Freeman, he assumes the best of America's adversaries and the worst of its friends. This approach to intelligence analysis will be destructive not just for the US's relations with its allies, but for America's own national security.

THE SECOND disturbing development exposed by Freeman's appointment is the emergence of a very committed and powerful anti-Israel lobby in Washington. In the past, while anti-Israel politicians, policy-makers and opinion-shapers were accepted in Washington, they would not have felt comfortable brandishing their anti-Israel positions as a qualifying credential for high position. Freeman's appointment shows that this is no longer the case. Today in Washington, there are powerful circles of political players for whom a person's anti-Israel bona fides are his strongest suit.

In the weeks since Freeman's appointment first came under scrutiny, his defenders have highlighted his hatred of Israel as the reason for their support for him. Just as Pincus's post-mortem write-up of Freeman's appointment and resignation barely mentioned his ties to Saudi Arabia and China, and focused on Jews who opposed his appointment, so in recent weeks, his defenders - both non-Jewish and Jewish - have highlighted his hatred of Israel and its American supporters as the primary reason for defending it. The likes of Steven Walt, M.J. Rosenberg and Matthew Iglesias didn't try to explain why Freeman was right to support the suppression of freedom in China. They didn't support his claim that the Saudi king is among the most profound and thoughtful leaders in the world. They didn't repeat his assertion that the US had the September 11 attacks coming to it.

They felt that the fact that he raised the hackles of Americans who support Israel was reason enough to support him. Whether his views on other issues are reasonable or not was of no interest to them.

From September 11, to Russia's invasion of Georgia, from Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections to the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate that claimed Iran ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003, it is clear that in recent years, the US intelligence community has regularly substituted wishful thinking for true analysis. Freeman's appointment and the emergence of the anti-Israel lobby as a major force in Washington policy circles show that turning the US away from Israel has become a key component of that wishful thinking.

But, as they say in the world of intelligence, forewarned is forearmed.

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