

The controversy over US Congressman Moran: anti-Semitism, Zionism and the Iraq war

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21 March 2003

A remark made earlier this month to an antiwar meeting by US Congressman James Moran of northern Virginia has provoked a firestorm of criticism. Major US Zionist organizations have demanded that he resign his seat for associating the “Jewish community” with the Bush administration’s drive to war in Iraq.

The Anti-Defamation League took out an ad in the *Washington Post* denouncing Moran and accusing him of resurrecting “the dangerous anti-Semitic canard about Jewish influence and control of US foreign policy.” Democratic leaders vied with Republicans in censuring Moran, who was immediately stripped of his post as a Democratic regional whip in the House of Representatives. Six Jewish Congressmen issued a statement advising Moran not to run again, while the *Washington Post* published an editorial entitled “Blaming the Jews,” which declared Moran “unfit to serve in Congress” and voiced hope that the Democrats would “make an effort to find a better candidate” when Moran is up for reelection next year.

Within days, two potential challengers for his congressional seat had announced themselves, hoping, no doubt, to garner substantial resources from the pro-Israel lobby for a bid to oust the incumbent.

Moran is the former mayor of Alexandria, Virginia and his district, considered to be a safe district for the Democrats, is one of the wealthiest in the state. He is considered a middle-of-the-road Democrat, with strong ties to both the military and the high-tech industry, the two largest employers in the area.

He is a typical political operator, embroiled in two recent corruption scandals involving substantial loans from businesses that could benefit from his vote. He cannot be described in any way as a principled opponent of US foreign policy or the financial interests that drive it.

The current furor arose from a remark Moran made while speaking before an audience of about 120 people gathered in a local church to oppose a war on Iraq. Moran responded to a woman who rose to identify herself as Jewish and wonder aloud why more Jews were not participating in the forum. Referring to the seeming inevitability of war, the Congressman commented: “If it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this. The leaders of the Jewish community are influential enough that they could change the direction of where this is going, and I think they should.”

Moran’s remark was politically crude and inaccurate—reflecting the thinking of a Democratic hack who sees the world in terms of “voting blocs,” campaign contributors and lobbyists. What was meant by the “Jewish community” and “Jewish leaders” was not spelled out. There is certainly not enough there, however, to brand him an anti-Semite.

The motive of the Republicans in doing so was transparent: they cynically hoped to use the incident to curry favor with Jewish organizations that play a significant role in both campaign financing and

political lobbying. Democrats jumped on the bandwagon in an effort to conciliate this same constituency.

Seizing upon an unguarded comment made before a small audience to create a scandal of national proportions has a certain history on Capitol Hill. It is a time-tested means of settling scores, regulating political discussion and, in this case, intimidating those who might consider opposing the policies of Israel and its American Zionist supporters.

But there is an added political dimension to the Moran story. As one Democratic Party official told the *Washington Post*, the Congressman “touched a raw nerve at a moment of very high danger to the world. It’s bad timing in the extreme.”

What is this “raw nerve”? There is a growing popular realization that Israeli interests play an inordinate role in the foreign policy of the US in general, and the plans for another war in the Persian Gulf in particular. Under conditions in which there is suspicion and unease among broad sections of the American population over the ever-changing pretexts given by the Bush administration for its war against Iraq, this perception has grown.

Moran was wrong to lump together the “Jewish community,” by which one could infer all Jews in America, with the “leaders of the Jewish community,” by which Moran no doubt meant the established pro-Israeli lobby. At the same time, there is more than a kernel of truth to what he said. Major American Jewish organizations that are staunchly pro-Israel do exert significant influence in Washington, particularly on US actions in the Middle East. Were such organizations to actively oppose a war on Iraq, it would complicate the Bush administration’s drive to war.

Whether Moran is an anti-Semite cannot be ascertained from this one remark. Moreover, the false identification between Jews as a whole and pro-Zionist groups is unfortunately not unique to Moran. Indeed, this very conception has been assiduously promoted by the Zionists themselves, who react to any criticism of their own politics or the actions of the Israeli state as *prima facie* proof of anti-Semitism.

Much ink has been spilled across the editorial pages of the major national dailies in recent weeks dismissing charges that American Zionists and Israeli interests are playing a substantial role in the current drive to war. In most cases, these opinion pieces set up anti-Semitic straw men in order to knock them down.

The *Washington Post*’s Richard Cohen, for example, wrote that the Clinton administration “had many more Jews in important positions than does the pro-war Bush administration.” He continued: “...it’s preposterous to suggest that George Bush would heed the Jewish community, which largely votes Democratic, over his conservative Christian base, whose support of the war approaches 102 percent...”

Bill Keller of the *New York Times*, a supporter of the war, penned a similar piece entitled “Is it good for the Jews?” He wrote: “Making the

world safer for us—defusing terrorism and beginning to reform a region that is a source of toxic hostility to what we stand for—happens to make the world safer for Israel as well. But the idea that Israel's interests are driving one of the most momentous shifts in American foreign policy is simple-minded and offensive.”

It is true that the war against Iraq is not being fought at the behest of Israel. It is a war to assert US imperialist hegemony in the Middle East and internationally. Those who argue otherwise—most of them from certain precincts of the Republican right wing—do indeed dabble in anti-Semitism.

That there exist neo-Nazi groups and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists counting up Jews in Washington (probably adding Rumsfeld to the list) and ranting about a “Zionist occupation government” is indisputable. But the real issue is not the ethnicity or religion of those in the administration who promote war in Iraq, but their politics.

With the installation of the Bush administration, a tight-knit political grouping that coalesced under the Reagan administration came back into office. Known as “neo-conservatives,” this group is closely tied to an interlocking chain of Washington think tanks that are characterized by their promotion of US militarism and the expansionist policy of the Israeli right. Several of these individuals have made substantial fortunes in the private sector brokering US, Israeli and Turkish arms contracts.

This group includes among its most prominent members: Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; Richard Perle, the chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board; Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith; and Elliott Abrams, convicted for lying to Congress during the Iran-contra crisis and recently placed in charge of Near East Affairs on Bush's National Security Council.

These individuals constitute a right-wing ideological faction, whose views no more represent those of most American Jews than Richard Cheney's reflect the thinking of most Methodists. Indeed, repeated polls have indicated that Jews nationally oppose war against Iraq in a larger proportion than the general population.

Even within the spectrum of Israeli politics, these officials represent a decidedly reactionary layer. Feith and Perle served as advisors in 1996 to the incoming Israeli Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu, authoring at the time a document entitled “A clean break: a new strategy for securing the realm.”

This document repudiated any “land for peace” proposal calling for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. Instead, it urged an aggressive Israeli policy to reshape the regional “strategic environment” through the toppling of the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. It advised the incoming Israeli government to win US support for such a goal by posing the Middle East conflict in terms reminiscent of the Cold War struggle against the Soviet bloc.

Four years earlier, Perle—who came under a cloud in the 1980s for having accepted payments from an Israeli arms firm that later sold weapons to the Pentagon—joined Abrams in the creation of the Committee on US Interests in the Middle East. This outfit was formed with the aim of scuttling the Oslo negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization and pressuring Washington into unconditional support for Israel's control of the occupied territories.

Does not the presence of these individuals in key decision-making positions on US military strategy and the Arab-Israeli conflict provide Israel with enormous influence on US policy? Even raising this question is answered by the Israeli lobby in the US with cries of “anti-Semitism.”

This merely echoes the position of the Israeli government itself, which dismisses criticism of its increasingly reactionary and brutal policies against the Palestinian population as anti-Semitic. Thus, the Sharon government, responsible for killing over 2,200 Palestinians in the last 30 months, calls charges that Israeli troops massacred civilians in Jenin a “blood libel.”

Anti-Semitism, a foul and reactionary outlook with a long and deservedly infamous pedigree, is in fact strengthened by this duplicitous attempt to silence any opposition to Zionism and the colonialist policies of the Israeli state by labeling it an attack on the Jewish people.

The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* published a recent column making precisely this point: “It is hard not to think that Israel contributed to this blurring of distinctions. Cabinet ministers and spokesmen in Israel were too quick in accusing Israel's critics of anti-Semitic motives—even when the criticism was specific and directed at government policy, with no derogatory intentions toward Jews in general....On the other hand, when Israel notes that the overwhelming majority of Jewish people stands behind it, it is creating the equation between itself and the Jews.”

This “blurring of distinctions” has been the hallmark of the Israeli state since its creation. It was the centerpiece of Zionist ideology that the Jews could exist as a people only through the carving out of their own national state. Long a distinct minority in terms of Jewish politics, it took the greatest crimes of the twentieth century—Stalinism's liquidation of its socialist and internationalist opponents followed by the Nazi Holocaust and the murder of 6 million European Jews—to create the conditions in which Zionism could realize its reactionary project.

These terrible events also had their impact on the political thinking of a layer of Jewish intellectuals who previously oriented towards the socialist movement, but then turned sharply to the right. The political godfather of the so-called neo-conservative movement that spawned the likes of Abrams and Perle was Irving Kristol, who in his youth was a socialist and briefly a member of the Trotskyist movement. In his recent speech before the American Enterprise Institute outlining his “vision” for remaking the Middle East, Bush began his remarks with a verbal nod to Kristol.

There is no question that the predominant pro-Israeli Jewish organizations in the US have swung violently to the right in recent years. Through their rabid defense of the indefensible actions of the Israeli government against the Palestinians and their unconditional backing for US militarism, they have dishonored a long-standing association of Jewish intellectuals, professionals and workers with opposition to oppression in all its forms.

Increasingly, these Zionist “leaders” and organizations have allied themselves with reactionary elements within and around the Bush administration, including Christian fundamentalist anti-Semites who fervently support Israeli aggression, seeing it as a short cut to Armageddon (and the destruction of “heathen” Jewry).

The Israeli lobby will seek retribution against Moran, not only for a remark in a Virginia church, but also for earlier statements criticizing Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza and questioning the level of US aid to the Zionist state. The threat is significant, as Rep. Cynthia McKinney (Democrat of Georgia) found out. Her critical remarks about Israeli policy resulted in a flood of money raised by the Zionist right into her opponent's coffers, helping deny her another term.

Such a political hit will be aimed not at anti-Semitism, but at defending a corrupt set of relations between officials, arms manufacturers and influence peddlers in Washington and Tel Aviv. It will be designed to send a message to other politicians that any criticism of the US-Israeli military-industrial complex is political suicide.

Like Israel itself, these Zionist organizations provide no answer to anti-Semitism or the dangers of war and fascism that today arise with greater force than at any time since the end of the Second World War. Indeed, they only fuel these dangers.



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