

US Defense nominee Hagel bows to right on Israel, Iran and militarism

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Thursday's Senate confirmation hearing for Chuck Hagel at times assumed the tone of an inquisition, with Obama's nominee for defense secretary pushed to recant previous positions critical of Israel and swear his support for unbridled US militarism.

Hagel, a Vietnam veteran and former two-term Republican senator from Nebraska, did his best to present himself as an unwavering proponent of the use of American armed might around the globe.

In his opening statement, he told the Senate Armed Services Committee: "My overall world view has never changed: that America has and must maintain the strongest military in the world, that we must lead the international community to confront threats and challenges together, and take advantage of opportunities together; that we must use all our tools of American power to protect our citizens and our interests."

While echoing the Obama administration's claims about ending the US war in Afghanistan, Hagel declared his backing for a continued occupation of the country by thousands of US troops past the formal 2014 withdrawal deadline. He stressed that there would be "two functions for US troops that remain in Afghanistan after 2014: counterterrorism, particularly to target Al Qaeda and its affiliates, and training and advising Afghan forces."

He vowed that Washington would continue to conduct its global war on terrorism "in places like Yemen, Somalia, and North Africa" and argued that the Pentagon must continue "to invest in and build the tools to assist in that fight, such as special operations forces and new intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technologies."

He also declared his commitment to keeping "all options on the table"—a euphemism for war—in the

bellicose campaign against Iran over its nuclear program.

Hagel went on to declare his support for maintaining Israel's "qualitative military edge" in the Middle East, modernizing the US nuclear weapons arsenal and preparing for "future threats and challenges"—meaning China—by "rebalancing [US] resources towards the Asia-Pacific region."

While Democratic members of the Senate committee for the most part worked to bolster this image of Hagel as representing seamless continuity with the military policies of his predecessors, Leon Panetta and Robert Gates, some of the nominee's former Republican colleagues grilled him relentlessly. They cited Hagel's previous statements and votes which they suggested, exposed him as insufficiently loyal to Israel, soft on Iran and unsupportive of the war in Iraq.

In particular, they cited an interview that Hagel gave for a book by former State Department official Aaron David Miller, in which he stated: "The Jewish lobby intimidates a lot of people up here. I am not an Israeli senator. I am a US Senator. This pressure makes us do dumb things at times."

These statements, and others criticized during the hearing, reflected concern within sections of the political establishment that absolute support for Israel and the most reckless actions in the Middle East could be harmful to the interests of American imperialism. Hagel has in the past advocated a more measured policy, but this is a position that is now completely marginalized.

In the course of his testimony, Hagel backed off from his statement, repeatedly reiterating his support for Israel and saying he regretted using the term "Jewish lobby" instead of "Israeli lobby" and "intimidate" instead of "influence." Several Democrats also pushed

him to provide clarity on his unconditional support for Israel.

This proved far too little for South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who insisted repeatedly that Hagel name individuals who were influenced by the Israeli lobby. Hagel refused. “I can’t give you an example,” he replied. If Hagel had been honest, he would have cited this interrogation itself and his own capitulation.

Hagel faced a similar browbeating from Arizona Republican Senator John McCain over his opposition to the 2007 “surge” in Iraq. While voting to authorize the war in 2002, Hagel became a critic of the Bush administration’s policy in Iraq. He also failed to support McCain in the 2008 presidential contest with Obama.

McCain repeatedly interrupted Hagel, demanding a “yes or no” answer to whether he had been right or wrong to oppose the surge.

Hagel refused to provide such a response, stating that he would “defer that judgment to history,” referring to the operation that claimed the lives of an untold number of Iraqis and 1,200 US troops. If Hagel had ventured to suggest that he had been right, it would have likely sunk his nomination, as the supposed “success” of the surge is accepted wisdom by Democrats and Republicans alike.

Others pilloried Hagel for, among other things: refusing to sign a 2001 letter from the Senate solidarizing itself with Israel and condemning the Palestine Liberation Organization and its leader Yassir Arafat, failing to vote for a 2007 resolution branding the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (part of the Tehran government) as a terrorist organization, and for referring to the Israeli assault on Lebanon in 2006 as a “sickening slaughter.”

Most Washington analysts predict that despite the virulent hostility expressed by leading Republicans on the committee, Hagel’s nomination will be approved by the full Senate. If any Republican moved to block the nomination by means of a procedural maneuver, at least five Republicans would have to join with the Democratic majority to achieve the 60-vote majority needed to prevent a vote on the nomination from being blocked.

Whatever the case, the nomination hearing proved a spectacle of self-debasement in which Hagel sought to

disassociate himself from the few positions he had taken as a senator that distinguished him from his fellow Republican—and Democratic—reactionaries. It likewise provided an unmistakable demonstration of the sharp shift to the right of the entire US political establishment and its unwavering commitment to militarism and war.



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