Memories of an Anti-Semitic State Department

by **Dennis Ross (/experts/dennis-ross)**

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Articles & Testimony

A veteran diplomat reflects on how Jews have been perceived within the national security apparatus over the years, and why false presumptions only impede efforts to formulate better policies in the Middle East.

The former C.I.A. officer Valerie Plame Wilson made news with her Twitter account last week when, on the first day of Rosh Hashana, she shared an article that said, "America's Jews are driving America's wars: Shouldn't they recuse themselves when dealing with the Middle East?" The article, which appeared on a fringe website, said that Jewish neoconservatives were pushing for a war with Iran. Ms. Wilson, whose identity as a covert operative was leaked in 2003 by members of the George W. Bush administration nettled by the opposition of her husband, Ambassador Joseph Wilson, to the Iraq war, repeated the well-worn narrative that Jewish neoconservatives promoted the invasion of Iraq -- and are beating the drum for a conflict with Iran.

Of course, most Jews are not neoconservatives, and most neoconservatives are not Jewish. In any case, it was two influential non-Jews, Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who played the central role with President Bush in deciding to invade Iraq in 2003. Ignoring the old saying about when you are in a hole you should stop digging, Ms. Wilson made some excuses and then mentioned that she is of Jewish descent. Finally, she apologized.

I have little interest in piling on Ms. Wilson. But the whole affair brought back some memories about how Jews were perceived within the national security apparatus for a long time. When I began working in the Pentagon during President Jimmy Carter's administration, there was an unspoken but unmistakable assumption: If you were Jewish, you could not work on the Middle East because you would be biased.

However, if you knew about the Middle East because you came from a missionary family or from the oil industry, you were an expert. Never mind that having such a background might shape a particular view of the region, the United

States' interests in it, or Israel. People with these backgrounds were perceived to be unbiased, while Jews could not be objective and would be partial to Israel to the exclusion of American interests.

Sometimes, I would find this view expressed subtly. Other times it would be overt, including well after Secretary of State George Shultz tried to change the culture of the State Department during the early years of the Reagan administration. For Mr. Shultz, being Jewish was no longer a disqualification from working on Arab-Israeli issues. He was more interested in your knowledge than your identity. He made me, someone who is Jewish and was working on the National Security Council staff at the time, a member of the small team working with him on Arab-Israeli diplomacy. (Daniel Kurtzer, who is also Jewish and a career Foreign Service Officer, was on that team as well.)

When James Baker became secretary of state in 1989, he continued to help remove suspicions about Jews from the national security establishment. And yet, I remember well the time in 1990, when I was the head of the State Department's policy planning staff, I was visited by a diplomatic security investigator who was doing a background check on someone who had listed me as a reference. This person was being considered for a senior position in the George H. W. Bush administration, not one directly involved with the Middle East.

At one point, the investigator asked me a question that is routine in these background checks: Was this person loyal to the United States? I answered yes, without a doubt. But his follow-up question was if this person had to choose between America's interests and Israel's, whose interests would he put first? There was nothing subtle about this presumption of dual loyalty.

"Why would you ask that question?" I asked, even though I realized I might not be helping the person using me as a reference. He answered, "Because he is Jewish." So I went on: If he was Irish and had to work on problems related to Ireland or if he was Italian and had to work on Italy, would you ask that question? Initially, the investigator did not seem to know how to respond, but then I saw a look of recognition. He suddenly realized that I was Jewish. And, at that point, he changed the subject.

This investigator was not a rookie. And his experience with senior State Department officials led him to believe it was natural to ask this question. Like most mythologies which take on a life of their own, the idea that Jewish Americans might have dual loyalties was not challenged or questioned, it was assumed. That made it all the more insidious.

Just like Ms. Wilson tweeting that Jews are pushing for a new war. It is the definition of prejudice. How can it not be when you label a whole group and ascribe to all those who are a part of it a particular negative trait or threatening behavior? It is the same today with those who single out all Muslims as dangerous extremists. It is just as unacceptable.

Today, surging nationalism and xenophobia promise to create even more prejudice. These attitudes foster an "us versus them" mentality. The "other" is a threat. And once you have singled out groups, the leap is small to imposing limits on them, quarantining them and rationalizing violence against them.

Rather than be worried about being mistrusted and accused of dual loyalties, Jewish Americans should feel proud. In uncertain times, identity can provide a source of security and comfort. And having a strong identity, being comfortable with who you are and whom you are connected to, need not come at the expense of others. As my rabbi, Jonathan Maltzman, pointed out in his Rosh Hashana sermon, the particular and the universal have always been embedded in Jewish identity.

Indeed, to live a Jewish life one must be committed to the Jewish community, but also to others. Jews have an obligation to promote justice, mercy, compassion, tolerance and peace.

In the United States, diversity of peoples and opinions is our strength as a democracy. Listening to one another, as opposed to labeling one another, can restore civil debate. It is certainly the only way to produce better policies. And it might even introduce greater care and civility to Twitter.

Ambassador Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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