

More Ignorance Than Anti-Semitism

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Former U.S. Mideast negotiator Dennis Ross advocates meeting head-on allegations that undue Jewish influence and a concern for Israel's defense lie behind President Bush's strategy on Iraq.

Rep. James P Moran, a seven-term Democratic congressman from northern Virginia, brought a verbal firestorm upon himself by suggesting that American Jews have pushed the United States toward war with Iraq. "If it were not for the strong support of the Jewish community for this war with Iraq, we would not be doing this," Moran, who has a history of anti-Israel statements and political support from American Muslims tied by federal authorities to investigations of terrorist financing, told a March 3 anti-war meeting in Reston, Virginia. Jewish leaders, he went on, "are influential enough that they could change the direction of where this is going, and I think they should."

Jewish officials immediately called for Moran's resignation, saying his caricature of a monolithic Jewish community concerned more about Israel's security than American interests reeked of anti-Semitic stereotypes. Moreover they noted that polls show American Jews generally are less supportive of war against Iraq than is the country as a whole.

Republicans immediately condemned Moran. Top Democrats, including some who previously called him a friend of Israel, distanced themselves, forcing him to step down from his post as leader of the party's mid-Atlantic region. Potential opponents began lining up to contest his re-election in 2004. Moran, meanwhile, was quick to apologize, even disclosing that his daughter was in the process of converting to Judaism. "I slipped up and I said something that has been properly taken as offensive. I wish I had caught myself and reflected on it before I said it," he said.

Despite the apology, Moran's remarks touched off a media debate across the U.S. over what role, if any, Israel's defense plays in President Bush's thinking, and the influence of prominent American neoconservatives, several of them Jews, who have pushed for war with Iraq. The Report asked former White House top Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross for his perspective. Ross currently directs the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, serves as a commentator for Fox News, and is the honorary ("but very involved," he says) chair of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, which explores long-range challenges facing Jews globally. His book on the peace process, "Missing Peace," is due out next year.

How significant is the controversy?

Dennis Ross: It's a tempest in a teapot, but it's also the kind of issue that has to be met head-on because it's so insidious, conjuring up the issue of dual loyalty, which is such a canard that it has to be confronted forcefully to delegitimize it. When a statement like this is made, it must be demonstrated just how wrongheaded it is.

Can you explain Moran's comment?

I know Moran as someone interested in serious issues and in dialogue. I can't try and divine motivations and intentions. His apology speaks for itself and is enough for me. But the question is how dangerous a sentiment his comments reflected.

Is this anti-Semitism?

I would characterize it much more as ignorance than anti-Semitism or even anti-Zionism. It reflects a hidden desire to find conspiracies to explain what is happening to us, when what is happening is very difficult and not easily accepted.

Does it reflect a widespread sentiment in official Washington?

I don't believe so. I speak to plenty of people in the Congress and elsewhere in Washington on a regular basis. I haven't heard this issue being raised, including among those who are strongly opposed to the war. You are more likely to hear them say that the White House is motivated by a desire for control over Iraqi oil.

What about average Americans?

Undoubtedly, this plays well among people who have anti-Semitic leanings. But I don't believe very many Americans think this way. The latest polls show the majority of Americans support the president's position on taking on Iraq, and I believe they do so based on how President Bush has explained it, which is to say because it serves America's defense.

And abroad, in Europe for example?

I'm afraid it is widespread, because they are largely against the war and people are inclined to seek out hidden conspiracies when confronted with terrifying situations that seem irrational to them. The conspiratorial approach is a stab at rationality, as misguided as it may be.

This wouldn't be the first time Europeans have envisioned a Jewish conspiracy.

Certainly there's a greater propensity for this in Europe. I don't think we should over-generalize, but, yes, the propensity is there.

If the war goes badly, will Jews be blamed?

No, I don't think so. The questions that arise will challenge the validity of the policy. The focus will be, for good or ill, on the administration and the decisions it has made.

How should American Jews react to the Moran flap?

Exactly the way they have; aggressively and without fear of fueling the controversy by publicly saying this is wrong.

Some Jewish spin-doctors have suggested it's better not to comment on how a war with Iraq might benefit Israel.

That's a somewhat different issue. This is about the American Jewish community, not Israel. When something is as wrong as what Moran said, you cannot be afraid to take it on.

Interview by Ira Rifkin. ❖

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