

Chuck Hagel and Linkage

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Former Nebraska senator Chuck Hagel is President Obama's nominee for secretary of defense. Much has already been said about the pros and cons of the nomination, and much more will be said during confirmation hearings in the Senate. Here is one possible line of questioning: given the centrality of the Middle East in U.S. military planning, how does Hagel think the region works? If the United States has limited resources, and must apportion them judiciously, where is it best advised to invest them?

Hagel has a view of this, expressed on numerous occasions. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the core problem of the Middle East. Until it is resolved, it will be impossible to make progress in treating any of the region's other pathologies. Hagel claims to have reached this conclusion by talking with leaders of the Middle East. He's just repeating what they tell him, he has said. So it's interesting to go back and see just what they did tell him—an exercise made feasible via WikiLeaks. (If you belong to that class of persons who have to avert their eyes from WikiLeaks, don't follow the links and take my word.)

The Core Conflict

But first, let's look at how Hagel thinks the Middle East works. In 2002, he put it [this way](#):

The Arab-Israeli conflict cannot be separated from America's foreign policy. Actions in the Middle East have immense consequences for our other policies and interests in the world. We are limited in dealing with other conflicts until this conflict is on a path to resolution. America's policy and role in the Middle East, and the perception of our policies and role across the globe, affects our policies and interests in Afghanistan, South Asia, Indonesia, and all parts of the world.

This is a broad exposition of the idea of "[linkage](#)," which might best be described as a Middle Eastern domino theory. The assumption is that in places as far afield as Afghanistan and Indonesia, people are so preoccupied with the fate of the Palestinians that they cannot see the United States (which supports Israel) as a friend. These millions of people have their own conflicts that impact U.S. interests, but they won't respond to American efforts to resolve them, unless the United States conjures up something for the Palestinians first. Often this claim is made regarding the Arabs. Hagel effectively extended it to the entire Muslim world.

In 2006, Hagel put it [this way](#):

The core of all challenges in the Middle East remains the underlying Arab-Israeli conflict. The failure to address this root cause will allow Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorists to continue to sustain popular Muslim and Arab support—a dynamic that continues to undermine America's standing in the region and the Governments of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and others, whose support is critical for any Middle East resolution.

The vocabulary here—"core," "root cause," "underlying"—is taken from the standard linkage lexicon, which elevates the Arab-Israeli or Palestinian-Israeli conflict to a preeminent status, above all others. It is this conflict, practically alone, that prompts the rise of terrorists, weakens friendly governments, and makes it impossible for the United States to win Arabs

and Muslims over to the good cause. That same year, he again [described](#) the “underlying” Arab-Israeli conflict as the “core” of the region’s maladies:

In the Middle East, the core of instability and conflict is the underlying Arab-Israeli problem. Progress on Middle East peace does not ensure stability in Iraq. But, for the Arab world, the issue of Middle East peace is inextricably, emotionally and psychologically linked with all other issues. Until the United States helps lead a renewed Israeli-Palestinian peace process, there will be no prospect for broader Middle East peace and stability.

In 2008, Hagel developed this into a full-blown “ripple” theory, in a passage in his book, *America: Our Next Chapter* (p. 82). There he wrote that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

cannot be looked at in isolation. Like a stone dropped into a placid lake, its ripples extend out farther and farther. Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon feel the effects most noticeably. Farther still, Afghanistan and Pakistan; anything that impacts their political stability also affects the two emerging economic superpowers, India and China.

The notion that the greater Middle East would be a “placid lake” were it not for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can only be regarded as extreme, even for someone in the grip of linkage fever. But Hagel, doubling down, extended the conflict’s baleful influence even beyond the world of the Arabs and South Asian Islam, suggesting that it “affects” India and China in a detrimental way, although he didn’t explain how.

That same year, Hagel made the most far-reaching [claim](#) for linkage. By this time, Americans knew considerably more about the complexities of the Middle East than they had known in 2002. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had demonstrated the salience of deep conflicts that defined the politics of the region, and that went back in time before there was an Israel. The great Sunni-Shiite divide, the region-wide Kurdish question, the rivalries of tribes, the chasm between rulers and ruled—all were sources of conflict and instability with long and autonomous histories. That’s what makes Hagel’s 2008 statement so striking: he was clearly aware that the linkage thesis looked shakier than ever, but he dug in his heels anyway:

The strategic epicenter of the Middle East [is] the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Why do I say that more than any other reason? It is the one issue, the one issue alone, the Israeli-Palestinian issue alone. Fixing that alone is not going to fix every problem in the Middle East. We understand that. We have religious hatred. We have centuries of it. We have regional, tribal issues. Yes, all complicated. But that one issue, the Israeli-Palestinian issue shapes almost every other issue, not just the optics of it, but the reality of it. It is allowed to—as it plays itself out to dominate relationships, to dominate the people who would like a different kind of world. I know that there is a lot made on the issue of—well it’s important, but it certainly doesn’t affect everything. It does.

In this remark, Hagel was clearly struggling to force all of the new and “complicated” American knowledge about the Middle East into his old template. He knew that his linkage thesis looked less plausible than it once did. How exactly could the Israeli-Palestinian issue “affect everything” and “shape almost every other issue,” not just the “optics” but the “reality”? Hagel couldn’t say how, except to assert that “it does.”

But Hagel, knowing his bald assertion might seem dubious, did something new. He invoked the authority of Middle Eastern leaders:

I don’t know any other way to gauge this, than you go out and listen to the leaders. You listen to Jewish leaders, and you listen to Arab leaders. You sit down with all the leaders with all those countries, and I have many times, different leaders, and they will take you right back to the same issue. Right back to this issue. Now I am not an expert on anything, and I’m certainly not an expert on the Middle East. Most of the people in this room, especially those that were on the panels tonight know a lot more about this issue than I do. But I do listen. I do observe. I am somewhat informed. That informs me that when the people of the Middle East themselves tell me that this issue has to be dealt with or there will not be a resolution to any other issue in the Middle East.

No other issue in the entire Middle East can be resolved until Israel and the Palestinians deal with theirs: this was Hagel’s long-standing belief, now placed in the mouths of authoritative interlocutors, those Middle Eastern leaders he met on his travels, and who always took him “right back to this issue.”

Meeting Arabs and Jews

On the face of it, this is a plausible assertion. It is often said that Arab leaders never miss an opportunity to browbeat

American officials over U.S. neglect of the Palestinians. A senior American diplomatic once made this [complaint](#): “Every American ambassador in the region knows that official meetings with Arab leaders start with the obligatory half-hour lecture on the Palestinian question. If we could dispense with that half-hour and get down to our other business, we might actually be able to get something done.”

But are these the sorts of discussions that Hagel had with Arab leaders? We don’t have a record of all his meetings with them, but we have several accounts, via WikiLeaks. These seem to contradict Hagel’s own assertion that his Arab interlocutors always came “right back to this issue.” In fact, it was usually the third or fourth item on the agenda, sometimes raised not by Arab leaders but by visiting Americans. Arab leaders who met Hagel expressed a very wide range of concerns, usually focused on Iran and Iraq. (There is one important exception, to which I’ll come in a moment.) Here are the publicly documented instances, from his trips to the region between 2004 and 2008:

— On December 1, 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan had lunch in Amman with Hagel (as well as Senators Joe Biden, Dianne Feinstein, and Linc Chafee). The [account](#) may not be complete, but the discussion as reported focused only on Iraq and the “negative role” of Iran. King Abdullah, looking ahead to Iraqi elections in January, “worried that elections held without credible Sunni participation could lead to cantonization or civil war,” and opined that Iraqi Shiites were loyal to Iran, not Iraq. “The King painted a picture of a monolithic Shia Arab/Iranian threat to Jordan and Israel if they ‘take over’ southern Iraq.” (A few days later, King Abdullah said much the same in an [interview](#) with *The Washington Post*, coining the phrase “Shiite crescent” to describe the menace.)

— On December 4, 2004, the Crown Prince of Bahrain, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, received Hagel, Feinstein, and Chafee. The [conversation](#) also focused on impending elections in Iraq, which the Bahrainis feared might be captured by “radical elements.” Later, Feinstein raised the Israeli-Palestinian issue, urging Bahrain and Gulf governments to “speak out on the need for a two-state solution in Palestine in order to ostracize extremists on both sides and bring the Arab media on board.” Sheikh Salman gently deflected this, suggesting that the United States, “even if politically difficult, must engage in a public discourse that demonstrates that the goal of promoting democracy in the Middle East includes Palestinians as well.” So it wasn’t the Arab ruler who “came back to the issue,” but a peace-process-fixated American senator—an effort artfully foiled by Sheikh Salman.

— A [meeting](#) in Amman with Jordan’s King Abdullah on November 29, 2005 was dominated again by Iran and Iraq. (Attending: Hagel, Senator Tom Carper and Representative Ellen Tauscher.) The monarch, still in his “Shiite crescent” mode, expressed his fear that Iran would establish its dominance over Iraq: “If this influence was not checked, he warned, it could lead to effective Iranian rule of southern Iraq, and to an even more active and dangerous Hizballah in Lebanon.” King Abdullah’s second concern: Syria, where he speculated that too much pressure on the Assad regime could lead to a “possible takeover of the country by the Muslim Brotherhood”—which, “the king warned, would be very negative for both Syria and the region.” Israel and the Palestinians? This figured as the third item on the agenda. In this case, Abdullah didn’t “warn” about anything, but simply highlighted Jordan’s commitment to train and reform Palestinian security forces, Jordan’s interest in more economic cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, and a vague hope that there might be an “increased dynamism” in Israel, as a result of changes in the Labor Party.

— Hagel (and Carper and Tauscher) [met](#) with Saudi King Abdullah, then-Crown Prince Sultan, and Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, in Riyadh on November 30, 2005. Again, the top agenda issues were Iraq followed by Iran. Hagel would later go on the record as opposing the 2007 “surge” in Iraq (“the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam”). But in 2005, when Hagel asked the Saudis about a U.S. troop withdrawal, King Abdullah “urged the U.S. not to withdraw forces or lose focus until Iraq was stabilized,” and the Saudi foreign minister added that “the U.S. should consider increasing troop levels in the short term to ensure the political process concludes successfully.” Only after a lengthy discussion of Iran did they get on to Israel and the Palestinians. Prince Sultan explained the various Saudi peace proposals, and praised Israel’s then-prime minister Ariel Sharon as “a clever and courageous man” who might “move in a direction which serves Israel and the Israeli people.” (This section of the dispatch carried the headline: “Sharon as Peacemaker: Saudis Surprisingly Pragmatic.”) Hagel later would claim that lack of a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “undermines” the Saudi (and other pro-American) governments. But he didn’t hear that from the Saudis, who in their 2005 meeting with him treated the issue as a mid-level priority.

— On December 4, 2005, Hagel (accompanied by the U.S. ambassador to Egypt) [met](#) with Egyptian President Mubarak in Cairo. At the top of the agenda: the threat posed by the prospect of Shiite ascendancy in Iraq. “In Mubarak’s view, the Shi’a were extremely difficult to deal with and given to deception,” and they represented a potential Iranian fifth column in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and other Gulf states. Second: Syria, where he advised the United States to “avoid stating publicly that it sought ‘regime change.’” It was Hagel who raised the Palestinian-Israeli issue, thanking Egypt for supporting the peace process. Mubarak responded by calling Ariel Sharon, “a strong leader, the strongest since Begin,” and he went on to blame Syria’s late leader, Hafez Assad, for failing to reach a peace deal with Yitzhak Rabin. Mubarak then circled back to “the untrustworthiness and duplicity of the regime in Tehran,” with illustrative examples. In this conversation, it was Hagel, not Mubarak, who had “come right back” to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

— On May 31, 2007, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora [received](#) Hagel (as well as Senators Patrick Leahy, Thad Cochran, Ken Salazar, Ben Cardin, and Representative Peter Welch). The prime minister dwelt at length on the U.N. resolution establishing the Hariri tribunal (it “meant the end of an era of impunity for assassins and Lebanon would now never turn back”). He then gave a detailed preview of the army’s plan to crush the terrorist group Fatah al-Islam, holed up in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid near Tripoli. Siniora did urge the United States to persuade Israel to open talks based on the Saudi peace initiative. If the opportunity were missed, “it would give considerable momentum to extremists in the region and all that entailed.”

— On July 20, 2008, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al Sabah, [received](#) Hagel (as well as Senator Barack Obama). The conversation focused Iraq, oil prices, and Aljazeera. Israel and the Palestinians weren’t discussed.

So in none of these meetings was there a preliminary half-hour lecture on Palestine. In most of them, the threat posed by Iran loomed larger than any angst over the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Looking back at these meetings in 2008, Hagel claimed that “the people of the Middle East themselves tell me that this issue has to be dealt with or there will not be a resolution to any other issue in the Middle East.” In none of these meetings did any Arab leader tell Hagel any such thing.

Hagel didn’t just claim to get the linkage message from Arab leaders. “You listen to Jewish leaders, and you listen to Arab leaders.” By “Jewish,” he must have meant Israeli (an elision he has made elsewhere, in his well-known reference to the “Jewish lobby”). Hagel has met many Israelis, and only he and they know what they told him. But on at least one occasion, he heard one of them brusquely dismiss the linkage argument. Hagel (and Senator Biden) met with then-prime minister Ariel Sharon in December 2004, and one of the Americans in the delegation (unnamed in the dispatch) had the temerity to [suggest](#) that “progress towards Israeli-Palestinian peace would have a dramatic impact on ending regional and international terrorism. Sharon quickly stated that Israel should not be held responsible for terrorism, asserting that it was the target of terror even prior to June 1967. It was not correct to believe that terror would disappear if the Israeli-Palestinian dispute were solved. The only thing that Israel was ‘responsible’ for, he maintained, was defending its people.” If “Jewish leaders” told Hagel anything that reinforced his thesis, Ariel Sharon definitely was not among them.

Neither was his successor, Ehud Olmert, who [told](#) Hagel (and several other senators) in May 2007 that Arab fear of Iran had created a situation where, “for the first time, we are not enemy number one.” On that same visit, then-foreign minister Tzipi Livni [told](#) the senatorial delegation that “there was a new understanding in the region that the Iranian threat is an ‘existential’ one and has become more significant than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

Abdullah of Jordan: Linkage Man

In Hagel’s meetings (as revealed in the WikiLeaks sample), there is one exception—one meeting in which an Arab leader said something approximating what Hagel claimed they all told him. In Hagel’s meetings with King Abdullah in 2004 and 2005, he heard little about the Palestinians, and a lot about the “Shiite crescent” and a possible Iranian takeover of southern Iraq. But in a [meeting](#) in Amman in May 2007 with Hagel (plus Leahy, Cochran, Salazar, Cardin, and Welch), the Jordanian monarch did a turnaround. King Abdullah “highlighted his view that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the key issue facing Jordan and the region.” He claimed that “within as little as one and a half years the opportunity for a two-state solution may be lost.” Jordanian then-foreign minister Abdelelah al-Khatib told the visiting senators that “lack of progress on peace was undermining efforts on other issues such as stabilizing Iraq, Lebanon, and isolating Syria and Iran.”

Why did King Abdullah change his tune? Thanks to the U.S. “surge” in Iraq, he’d come to believe that Iran had been checked. In June 2008, Lally Weymouth [interviewed](#) him for *The Washington Post*. “I remember a couple of years ago, you warned against the danger posed by Iran to moderate Arab regimes,” she told him. “Do you view Iran as the number one threat in this region?” King Abdullah: “I think the lack of peace [between Israel and the Palestinians] is the major threat. I don’t see the ability of creating a two-state solution beyond 2008, 2009. I think this is really the last chance. If this fails, I think this is going to be the major threat for the Middle East.” Weymouth: “But aren’t you concerned that Iran is a threat both to your country and to other countries in the region?” Abdullah: “Iran poses issues to certain countries, although I have noticed over the past month or so that the dynamics have changed quite dramatically, and for the first time I think maybe I can say that Iran is less of a threat. But if the peace process doesn’t move forward, then I think that extremism will continue to advance over the moderate stands that a lot of countries take.”

So Jordan’s King Abdullah became the linkage lead man, and it’s not difficult to see why. Jordan is the Arab state that sits astride the West Bank, that has a Palestinian majority, and that shares the longest border with Israel. Were things to go very wrong between Israelis and Palestinians on the West Bank, Jordan would be the first to feel it. So it is Jordan’s national interest to elevate Israeli-Palestinian peace to preeminence. In particular circumstances, such as the Iraq war, it will strike other chords. But its default position is to declare, always with urgency, that the sky is about to fall on Israelis and Palestinians, that the world must act now to prevent that, and that a Palestinian state will help solve every problem, everywhere. In that respect, Jordan is unique in the Arab world.

And King Abdullah of Jordan seems to have been the only Arab leader whose message strictly conformed to Hagel's *idée fixe* about linkage. This would become significant in July 2008, when candidate Barack Obama set off for the Middle East, accompanied by Hagel (and Senator Jack Reed). This visit has been [described](#) as "an intense bonding experience" between Hagel and Obama, in which they "dived deeply into policy discussions—'wonkfests,' as one former aide called them." The swing included a stop in Amman. (King Abdullah returned from Aspen to be there, and at the end of the visit, he personally drove Obama to the airport like the regular guy he is.) We don't have a leaked record of the king's meeting with the delegation. But the press [statement](#) issued by the royal palace reported that the king stressed to Obama "that ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and achieving a just settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict tops the priorities of the people of the Middle East." The king's view of how linkage actually operated came through in Obama's own [account](#), in a press interview:

I think King, King Abdullah is as savvy an analyst of the region and player in the region as, as there is, one of the points that he made and I think a lot of people made, is that we've got to have an overarching strategy recognizing that all these issues are connected. If we can solve the Israeli-Palestinian process, then that will make it easier for Arab states and the Gulf states to support us when it comes to issues like Iraq and Afghanistan.

It will also weaken Iran, which has been using Hamas and Hezbollah as a way to stir up mischief in the region. If we've gotten an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, maybe at the same time peeling Syria out of the Iranian orbit, that makes it easier to isolate Iran so that they have a tougher time developing a nuclear weapon.

So Obama, under the combined influence of Hagel and Abdullah, became a convert to linkage. It was this notion that propelled the Obama administration, from its very first day, into a flurry of efforts to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The very urgency with which this campaign was launched may have been its undoing, producing the "[self-inflicted wound](#)" of the U.S. demand for an Israeli settlement freeze. Hagel wasn't implicated in that decision. The linkage mindset was.

A Dangerous Notion

It could do still more damage. Linkage-think can lead to panicked overreaction whenever Israelis and Arabs do exchange blows, as they occasionally do. In the summer of 2006, when Israel and Hezbollah fought another round (not their first and probably not their last), Hagel had just such a [seizure](#):

I think it is so serious now, I think we are at the most dangerous time maybe we have seen ever in the Middle East with all the combustible elements... The president needs to get seriously engaged now. If we do not do that now at this moment, and I mean this moment, then the possibility of this escalating into a Middle East catastrophe, which would drag in all nations of the world, if for no other reason than just the energy dynamic here. The ramifications, the significance of all of this is astounding once you start to chart it out.

"The most dangerous time ever," "catastrophe," "drag in all nations of the world," "astounding"—there is not a sentence here (even an incomplete one) that isn't a model of apocalyptic hyperbole, more evocative of an end-time preacher than a U.S. senator. Linkage, like any domino theory, inflates events way out of their true proportion. Israel's mini-wars aren't preludes to Armageddon, and one would hate for a U.S. secretary of defense to think they were.

And linkage mania is a standing temptation to an open-ended intervention of the kind Hagel is supposed to abhor. Hagel signed his name (with other "realists") to a 2009 [paper](#) warning the new President Obama that the "last chance" for a two-state solution could be lost in "six to twelve months." The paper proposed deployment of a U.N.-mandated, U.S.-led NATO force (plus Egyptians and Jordanians) to the West Bank for five to fifteen years, to assume security responsibilities. The United States has always been steadfast in resisting proposals to put U.S. troops between Israelis and Palestinians, for fear of not ever being able to extricate them. A 2010 NATO-published [planning paper](#) concluded that "NATO's mission in Palestine would have slim chances of success, and a high probability of failure.... It seems irresponsible to hasten NATO into a mission that has all the ingredients to turn into a quagmire that equals the Alliance's involvement in Afghanistan." Hagel would consider taking that plunge.

Of course, if you believe that the future of America and all humankind hinges on urgent creation of a Palestinian state, you might favor such a risky intervention. But does it? That would be a great question to pose to Chuck Hagel when he comes up for confirmation.

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