

How Much Will Trump's Pro-Israel Picks Influence Foreign Policy?

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Here from The New York Times today is an article about Pete Hegseth, who is Trump's pick for defense secretary now. Hegseth was a surprise choice because typically a defense secretary either is a general or a retired general who rises up through the Pentagon in the military bureaucracy and ultimately ends up running the defense department. Or there's somebody that's taken right out of the military industrial complex. That's where Lloyd Austin, the current defense secretary, came from. He was on the board of Raytheon. And it's not so much the ideology of the defense secretary that people care that much about because again, those decisions are made by the President. It's that they oversee the agency with by far the largest budget, almost \$1 trillion a year. And these are members of the Senate who get huge amounts of donations from Raytheon, General Dynamics, Boeing, and who are often in the pocket of these companies. When they leave the Senate, they go to work for them. Their boards get a lot of stock as a reward for good service. And they want to make sure that whoever is running the Pentagon is a hardcore establishment acolyte who does not want to disrupt that very lucrative war machine. And so while Pete Hegseth is somebody who certainly has advocated a lot of wars, including the war on terror and a lot of other very aggressive militarism, there's concern that because it doesn't come out of the military industrial complex, part of the defense department, that he's not really trustworthy as a pick for the Cabinet position, that I think that people in the Senate care most about.

Here's how the New York Times describes him. Quote, "President-elect Donald J. Trump has picked Pete Hegseth, a Fox News host and veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to lead the Pentagon and the 1.3 million active duty men and women of the American military. The choice of Mr. Hegseth, 44, was outside the norm of the traditional defense secretary." And I think this is what people have to understand, that Donald Trump has been running for eight years with a campaign to destroy these norms of how Washington works because they're protective of the bipartisan swamp, everything that is corrupt about the foreign policy blob – if Donald Trump is going to do what he promised to do, he's not going to be able to do it with

picks for the Cabinet that people like John Thune and Mitch McConnell and Tom Cotton love. They're going to want safe, secure picks who are part of the Republican establishment. The New York Times goes on: "But Hegseth was a dedicated supporter of Mr. Trump during his first term. Quote, 'Pete is tough, smart and a true believer in America First', Mr. Trump said in his announcement. 'With Pete at the helm, America's enemies are on notice. Our military will be great again and America will never back down.' But several Pentagon officials questioned Mr. Hegseth lack of experience other than serving in the military and raised concerns about his ability to win Senate confirmation, even with Republicans winning control of the chamber. A Minnesota native, Mr. Hegseth, graduated from Princeton and has a master's degree from Harvard. Here are other things to know about him. He championed service members accused of war crimes. After joining Fox News as a commentator, he repeatedly supported service members accused of war crimes, including Major Mathew L. Golsteyn of the Army Special Forces, First Lieutenant Clint Lorange of the Army and Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher of the Navy SEALs. In Fox appearances and interviews of family members of the accused, Mr. Hegseth portrayed the men as heroes and victims, wrongly prosecuted by stateside bureaucrats who did not understand the complexities of combat. Notably absent from those interviews were the troops who served with the men. Multiple platoon members serving under some of those soldiers directly contradicted Mr. Hegseth's characterisation in court, describing the killings by their leaders as coldblooded, unnecessary and in no way related to the confusion of combat." Some of these people were charged with just recklessly or even deliberately shooting in Iraq and killing civilians, and they were found guilty of that in a court martial by the military. And Pete Hegseth led the way to successfully convince Trump to pardon them, which he did. He also, quote, "served at Guantanamo Bay. He served as a second lieutenant at the prison operation at Guantanamo in 2004 and 2005 with an infantry unit of the New Jersey Army National Guard. He later visited there in 2016 as a member of the media for a part about life at the base in prison on Fox News. He called for the expansion of the detention operation, which has 30 detainees now down from around 600 when he served there. He has also suggested, quote, 'expediting military commissions', the war crimes court where the men accused of plotting a September 11th, 2001 attacks and others are charged."

Now, here's the kind of thing that Hegseth has been saying that I think makes some people who were looking for a different kind of foreign policy, a little bit uncomfortable – which is like so many of these choices, like pretty much everyone, including Matt Gaetz and Tulsi Gabbard, the two a little bit of a lesser extent, but pretty much the rest of the foreign policy choices, John Ratcliffe and Mike Huckabee and Marco Rubio, Elise Stefanik – these are people who all went to Israel who all pledged undying loyalty to Israel, who adopted the most extremist views even within Israel. That Israel deserves to annex the West Bank, to take over Gaza, to expand their territory, that anything Israel wants is what we should give them. That is a view very common among every single Trump official. It's almost like pledging loyalty to Israel is a price of admission just for being considered for a position. Here's part of what Pete Hegseth said when visiting with a lot of the most extremist Israeli religious figures in Jerusalem in 2018.

Pete Hegseth: And today, Jennifer and I and others got a chance to go see the Western Wall, the Temple Mount, the Western Wall tunnels, and so much of the old city. And as you stand there, you can't help but behold the miracle before you. And it got me thinking about another miracle that I hope all of you don't see too far away. Because 1917 was a miracle. 1948 was a miracle. 1967 was a miracle. 2017, the declaration of Jerusalem as the capital was a miracle. And there's no reason why the miracle of the re-establishment of the temple on the Temple Mount is not possible.

GG: I mean, talking there about the Temple Mount is something that even conservative Israelis never believed in. A lot of this is very religiously oriented. The fact that Trump appointed a non-Jew to become the ambassador, the U.S. ambassador, to Israel is kind of amazing until you realise that Mike Huckabee is very representative of the evangelical wing of the Republican Party who really does believe that full scale, unlimited support to Israel is a religious duty. They believe that God wants Israel to be united and strengthened and at the risk of simplifying religious doctrine, that is when there will be a return of the Messiah and there will be a rapture and he will send to hell those who don't believe in him and reward those who do. And that's why even more than Jewish Zionists in the United States, the evangelical wing, the Republican Party has in many ways become among the most extremist supporters of Israel. And Mike Huckabee is very representative of that. He was appointed to be Trump's ambassador to Israel. And here's what he said when he made a visit in 2017 and said things that even for that time were taboo among most Israeli government officials.

Mike Huckabee: My feelings personally, and I'm speaking only as a person, I think Israel would only be acting on the property it already owns. I think Israel has a title deed to Judea and Samaria. There are certain words I refuse to use. There is no such thing as a West Bank. It's Judea and Samaria. There's no such thing as a settlement. Their communities, their neighborhoods, their cities. There's no such thing as an occupation.

GG: Now, the position of United States government under Ronald Reagan, George Bush 41, going back even further to Nixon through the Clinton administration, the Bush administration, the Bush 43 administration, Obama administration, has been consistent with the entire world that the West Bank does not belong to Israel, that the state of Israel is what it was with its 1967 borders, and that the annexation of the West Bank would be illegal, just like military occupation by Israel is now. And Mike Huckabee is there saying, "I don't recognise the West Bank. This is all part of Israel. This all belongs to Israel." Because he wants to unite all of greater Israel into one country because that's what he believes is necessary. This is real extremism. But again, I think the big question is: will it really matter? The reality is that the Israelis have already effectively occupied or annexed the West Bank. They run it. They rule it. They rule over the millions of Arabs who don't have any political rights there. They are already occupying Gaza, have destroyed it, are now rebuilding it with the intention to occupy that as well. So they're going to rule over the Arab Israeli citizens in their country, plus the Arabs in the West Bank, plus the Arabs in Gaza. And everyone, including Israel, recognises that that will be classic apartheid because the Arab people in that region, from the river to the sea, Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, will outnumber Israeli citizens,

Jewish Israeli citizens. But obviously Israel will never allow Israel to be anything other than a Jewish state. But the only way to maintain that is by allowing the Jewish minority to rule over what will be the Arab majority. Effectively, that's what's happening now. On some level, it will be better if this kind of lie or illusion of the two-state solution is explicitly renounced, because that is the lie that enables Western liberals to tell themselves that it's justified to support Israel - "oh I'm doing this, but I believe in a two state solution." If Israel were to formally annexe the West Bank, there could be no two-state solution. No two-state solution without a West Bank. And the reality of Israeli treatment of Gaza and the West Bank would become more manifest. No one could deny it any longer.

Now by the way, for all this talk about how the Trump administration will allow Israel to do whatever it wants, the Biden administration has obviously armed and paid for and diplomatically protected Israel's destruction of Gaza with no limits as well. So while this is not my policy, I find this very disturbing. I don't see it as any different than what the United States are currently doing. If anything, it is just a little more honest. And we'll see whether or not Trump is more eager to do something to stop the war than Biden and Blinken were.

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