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BBC propagandists caught in the act

Thursday, 15 April 2010

Gen. David Petraeus is a busy man. As head of the American Central Command, he's responsible for the U.S. war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the spill-over in Pakistan, and preventing more 9/11 style attacks from Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. He doesn't have time for idle chatter and exchanging pleasantries on the telephone.



Gerald Steinberg

But he did have time recently for a highly publicized phone call to Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, chief of staff of the Israel Defence Forces. Petraeus understood the flood of false reports, broadcast on the BBC and Al Jazeera, and printed in fringe blogs as well as prestigious journals, in which he allegedly blamed Israel for fanning Arab and Muslim anger, thereby endangering American lives. In the fictitious version, Petraeus was quoted as linking jihadi terror to east Jerusalem construction, thereby "stunning" the White House.

For the leaders of the campaign to delegitimize and isolate Israel, and strip away its foundation of support from the United States, the invented Petraeus story was perfectly timed. They exploited friction over Jerusalem that surfaced during U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden's recent trip to Israel and continued during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meetings with President Barack Obama at the White House.

This activity also took place during the annual AIPAC meeting. Another piece of the invented Petraeus briefing had the U.S. military joining the conspiracy theorists and placing itself in opposition to the "powerful... Israeli lobby" by announcing that "America's relationship with Israel is important, but not as important as the lives of America's soldiers."

On the same day, Israel was also a headline story in London, after the British government expelled the Mossad station chief as punishment for forged U.K. passports linked to the Dubai killing of a Palestinian terror leader.

The veteran propagandists at the BBC merged these two stories, triumphantly declaring Israeli isolation, and broadcasting interviews with Mark Perry, the main purveyor of these fictions. (In contrast, the New York Times avoided the propaganda. Its story on Israeli tensions with the British and American governments didn't mention Petraeus.)

The central role of Perry in all of this is important. Perry is a hyperactive self-promoter – a minor journalist who morphed into an "adviser" to former Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat. In his eagerness to star in the media, Perry peddled rumours that fed his bank account, feeding customers willing to believe anything that weakened Israel.

One version of Perry's propaganda was posted on the website of Foreign Policy, a supposedly prestigious and credible publication. Here, Perry wrote that a briefing team sent by Petraeus had warned of "a growing perception among Arab leaders that the U.S. was incapable of standing up to Israel, that CENTCOM's mostly Arab constituency was losing faith in American promises, that Israeli intransigence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was jeopardizing U.S. standing in the region."

The editors neglected to check the facts, or to tell readers that Perry had once been on Arafat's payroll, and then made his living from an NGO (Conflicts Forum) funded by naive European government officials that promote an ideology calling for the legitimization of, and negotiation with, terror groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. However, Foreign Policy's website also features noted Israel-basher and conspiracy theorist Stephen Walt, and intelligent readers filter fact from fiction.

For the BBC, the embarrassment at being caught in the act is painful. For many years, evidence of anti-Israel bias and crude propaganda has been mounting, including the excellent reports on the BBC Watch website. In 2004, BBC officials were forced to accept an internal investigation, led by Malcolm Balen. But his report has been

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stamped "top secret," and many of the journalists responsible for the bias continue to be employed by the public broadcaster.

After the Petraeus affair, the need for a full-blown public investigation of the BBC's bias against Israel will be difficult to dismiss. For BBC's audience, the image as the world's most credible source of information on current events has been further tarnished. Caveat emptor.

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