

Is Britain plotting with Israel to attack Iran?

Ex-ambassador exposes government cover-up

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Last February Britain's then defense minister Liam Fox attended a dinner in Tel Aviv with a group described as senior Israelis. Alongside him sat Adam Werritty, a lobbyist whose "improper relations" with the minister would lead eight months later to Fox's hurried resignation.

According to several reports in the British media the Israelis in attendance at the dinner were representatives of the Mossad, Israel's spy agency, while Fox and Werritty were accompanied by Matthew Gould, Britain's ambassador to Israel. A former British diplomat has now claimed that the topic of discussion that evening was a secret plot to attack Iran.

The official inquiry castigating the UK's former defence secretary for what has come to be known as a "cash-for-access" scandal appears to have only scratched the surface of what Fox and accomplice Adam Werritty may have been up to when they met for dinner in Tel Aviv.

Little was made of the dinner in the 10-page inquiry report published last month by Gus O'Donnell, the cabinet's top civil servant.

Instead O'Donnell concentrated on other aspects of Werritty's behaviour: the 33-year-old friend of Fox's had presented himself as the minister's official adviser and jetted around the world with him arranging meetings with businessmen.

The former minister's allies, seeking to dismiss the gravity of the case against him, have described Werritty as a harmless dreamer. Following his resignation, Fox himself claimed O'Donnell's report had exonerated him of putting national security at risk.

However, a spate of new concerns raised in the wake of the inquiry challenge both of these assumptions. These include questions about the transparency of the O'Donnell investigation, the extent of Fox and Werritty's ties to Israel and the unexplained role of Gould.

Craig Murray, Britain's former ambassador to Uzbekistan until 2004, when he turned whistle blower on British and US collusion on torture, said senior British government officials were profoundly disturbed by the O'Donnell inquiry, seeing it as a "white wash."

Murray himself accused O'Donnell of being "at the most charitable interpretation, economical with the truth."

Two well-placed contacts alerted Murray to Gould's central – though largely ignored – role in the Fox-Werritty relationship, he said.

Murray has pieced together evidence that Fox, Werritty and Gould met on at least six occasions over the past two years or so, despite the O'Donnell inquiry claiming they had met only twice. Gould is the only ambassador Fox and Werritty are known to have met together.

In an inexplicable break with British diplomatic and governmental protocol, officials were not present at a single one of the six meetings between the three men. No record was taken of any of the discussions.

Murray, who first made public his concerns on his personal blog, said a source familiar with the O'Donnell inquiry told him the parameters of the investigation were designed to divert attention away from the more damaging aspects of Fox and Werritty's behaviour.

Subsequently, the foreign office has refused to respond to questions, including from an MP, about the Tel Aviv dinner. Officials will not say who the Israelis were, what was discussed or even who paid for the evening, though under Whitehall rules all hospitality should be declared.

Also unexplained is why Fox rejected requests by his own staff to attend the dinner, and why Werritty was privy to such a high-level meeting when he had no security clearance.

Nonetheless, O'Donnell appeared inadvertently to confirm that Mossad representatives were present at the dinner during questioning from an MP at a meeting of the House of Commons' Public Administration Committee this week.

Responding to a question about the dinner from opposition MP Paul Flynn, O'Donnell said: "The important point here was that, when the Secretary of State [Fox] had that meeting, he had an official with him—namely, in this case, the ambassador [Gould]. That is very important, and I should stress that I would expect our ambassador in Israel to have contact with Mossad. That will be part of his job."

The real concern among government officials, Murray said, is that Fox, Werritty and Gould were conspiring in a "rogue" foreign policy – opposed to the British government's stated aims – that was authored by Mossad and Israel's neoconservative allies in Washington.

This suspicion was partially confirmed by a report in the Guardian last month, as O'Donnell was carrying out his investigation. It cited unnamed government officials saying they were worried that Fox and Werritty had been pursuing what was termed an "alternative" government policy.

Murray said the Tel Aviv dinner was especially significant. His contact with access to O'Donnell's investigations had told him that the discussion that night focused on ways to ensure Britain assisted in creating favourable diplomatic conditions for an attack on Iran.

Israel is widely believed to favor a military strike on Iran, in an attempt to set back its nuclear program. Israel claims Tehran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon under cover of a civilian nuclear energy project.

Israel has its own large but undeclared nuclear arsenal and is known to be fearful of losing its nuclear monopoly in the region.

Britain, like many in the international community, including the US government, officially favors imposing sanctions on Iran to halt its nuclear ambitions.

The episode of the Tel Aviv dinner, Murray said, raises “vital concerns about a secret agenda for war at the core of government, comparable to [former British prime minister Tony] Blair’s determination to drive through a war on Iraq.”

The Guardian revealed this month that the defense ministry under Fox had drawn up detailed plans for British assistance in the event of a US military strike on Iran, including allowing the Americans to use Diego Garcia, a British territory in the Indian ocean, as a base from which to launch an attack.

The O’Donnell inquiry has done little to allay many officials’ concerns about the series of strange meetings involving Fox, Werritty and Gould.

David Cameron, the British prime minister, has so far refused opposition demands to hold a full public inquiry into Fox and Werritty’s relationship. And the three men at the centre of the saga have refused to discuss the nature of their ties.

This month revelations surfaced that Werritty had had dealings with other government ministers.

“It is deeply inadequate of the prime minister to continue to refuse to probe this issue further,” said shadow defense spokesman Kevan Jones, in response to the new information.

The British media have cautiously raised the issue of apparent Israeli links to Fox and Werritty.

The Daily Telegraph reported that the pair secretly met the head of the Mossad – possibly at the Tel Aviv dinner, though the paper has not specified where or when the meeting took place.

Last month the Independent on Sunday claimed that Werritty had close ties to the Mossad as well as to “US-backed neocons” plotting to overthrow the Iranian regime. The Mossad were reported to have assumed Werritty was Fox’s “chief of staff.”

In addition, the O’Donnell report revealed that Werritty’s many trips overseas alongside Fox had been funded by at least six donors, three of whom were leading members of the pro-Israel lobby in Britain.

The donations were made to two organisations, Atlantic Bridge and Pargav, that Werritty helped to establish. Werritty apparently used the organizations as a way to gain access to Conservative government ministers, including three in the defense ministry.

The advisory board of Atlantic Bridge, which Werritty founded with Fox, included William Hague, the current foreign minister, Michael Gove, the education minister, and George

Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Despite Werritty's apparently well-established connections to the ruling Conservative party, the media coverage has implied at most that he was a lone "rogue operator," hoping to use his contacts with Fox and other ministers to manipulate British government policy.

Murray, however, raises the more troubling question of whether Werritty was actually given access, through Fox and Gould, to the heart of the British government. Were all three secretly trying to pursue a policy on Iran favored by Israel and its ideological allies in the US?

The answer, according to Murray, may lie in a series of meetings between the three that have slowly come to light since O'Donnell published his findings.

According to the 2,700-word report, Werritty joined Fox on 18 of his official trips overseas, and the pair met another 22 times at the defense ministry, with almost none of their discussions recorded by officials. The Guardian has also reported that Fox's staff repeatedly warned him off his relationship with Werritty but were overruled.

Despite the serious concerns raised about Werritty by defense ministry staff, Gould, one of the country's most senior diplomats, appears nonetheless to have cultivated a close relationship with Werritty as well as Fox.

According to Murray's sources, Gould and Werritty "had been meeting and communicating for years." The foreign office has refused to answer questions about whether the two had any contacts.

When Murray sent an email request late at night this week for "all communications" between Gould and Werritty, he received a response from the foreign office in less than 90 minutes stating that providing an answer was "likely to exceed the cost limit".

As well as noting that the answer should have been straightforward unless Gould and Werritty had had a protracted correspondence, Murray wrote on his blog: "The Freedom of Information team in the FCO is not a 24 hour unit. Plainly not only are they hiding the Gould/Werritty correspondence, they are primed and on alert for this cover-up operation."

O'Donnell's report mentions a second meeting between the three men, in September 2010. On that occasion, Gould met Fox in what a foreign office spokesman has described as a "pre-posting briefing call" - a sort of high-level induction for ambassadors to acquaint themselves with their new posting.

Werritty was also present, according to O'Donnell, "as an individual with some experience in...the security situation in the Middle East." His participation at the meeting was "not appropriate," O'Donnell concluded.

However, Murray said such briefings would never be conducted at ministerial level, and certainly not by the defense minister himself.

He added that a senior official in the defense ministry had alerted him to two other peculiar aspects of the meeting: no officials were present to take notes, as would be expected; and

their conversation took place in the ministry's dining room, not in Fox's office.

"As someone who worked for many years as a diplomat, I know how these things should work," Murray said. "So much of this affair simply smells wrong."

Murray's queries to the foreign office about this meeting have gone unanswered but have revealed other unexpected details not included in the O'Donnell report.

In a statement in late October, after the report's publication, a foreign office spokesman said Gould had met Fox and Werritty earlier than previously known – before Gould was appointed ambassador to Israel and when Fox was in opposition as shadow defense minister.

The foreign office has refused to answer questions about this meeting too – including when it occurred and why – or to respond to a parliamentary question on the matter tabled by MP Jeremy Corbyn. All that is known is that it must have taken place before May 2010, when Fox was appointed defense minister.

In replying to Corbyn's questions, William Hague, the foreign minister, acknowledged yet another meeting between Fox, Werritty and Gould – at a private social engagement in the summer of 2010.

Again, the foreign office has refused to answer further questions, including one from Corbyn about who else attended the social engagement.

The trio were also together shortly before the Tel Aviv dinner, when Fox made a speech at the hawkish Herzliya security conference in a session on the strategic threat posed by Iran.

And a sixth meeting has come to light. Fox and Gould were photographed together at a "We believe in Israel" conference in London in May 2011. Werritty was again present.

"That furtive meeting between Fox, Werritty and Gould in the MOD dining room [in September 2010], deliberately held away from Fox's office where it should have taken place, and away from the MOD officials who should have been there, now looks less like briefing and more like plotting," Murray wrote on his blog about the Ministry of Defense meeting.

Murray said he believed more meetings will surface. During questioning at the Commons' Public Administration Committee this week, O'Donnell made two references to "meetings" between Gould and Fox before the general election and Fox's appointment to the post of defence secretary.

Until now, only one such meeting had been admitted by the foreign office.

Murray noted: "A senior British diplomat cannot just hold a series of meetings with the opposition shadow Defence Secretary and a paid Zionist lobbyist. What on earth was happening?"

Both Werritty and Gould are considered to have an expertise on Iran.

Gould was the deputy head of mission at the British embassy in Iran from 2003 to 2005, a role in which he was responsible for coordinating on US policy towards Iran. Next he was moved to the British embassy in Washington at a time when the neoconservatives still held sway in the White House.

Werritty, meanwhile, has travelled frequently to Iran where he has teamed up with opposition groups seeking the overthrow of the Iranian regime. On his return from one trip to Iran he was called in by Britain's MI6 foreign intelligence service for a debriefing, according to the Independent on Sunday.

Werritty also arranged for Fox to travel with him to Iran in summer 2007, when Fox was shadow defense minister. And he organised a meeting in May 2009 at the British parliament between Fox and an Iranian lobbyist with links to the current regime in Tehran.

The murky dealings between Fox, Werritty and Gould, and the government's refusal to clarify what took place between them, is evidence, said Murray, that a serious matter is being hidden. His fear, and that of his contacts inside the senior civil service, is that "a neo-con cell of senior [British] ministers and officials" were secretly setting policy in coordination with Israel and the US.

Gould's unexamined role is of particular concern, as he is still in place in his post in Israel.

Murray has noted that, in appointing Gould, a British Jew, to the ambassadorship in Israel in September last year, the foreign office broke with long-standing policy. No Jewish diplomat has held the post before because of concerns that it might lead to a conflict of interest, or at the very least create the impression of dual loyalty. Similar restrictions have been in place to avoid Catholics holding the post of ambassador to the Vatican.

Given these traditional concerns, Gould was a strange choice. He is a self-declared Zionist who has cultivated an image that led the Forward, the most prominent Jewish newspaper in the US, to describe him recently as "not just an ambassador who's Jewish, but a Jewish ambassador."

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