

DENNIS ROSS' RED PHONE

Ha'aretz reported today that, as part of an ongoing unpaid consulting gig with the Administration, Dennis Ross has a secure phone that allows him to discuss classified issues with the White House.

Apparently, a short while after Ross left his position in the Obama administration, the White House made an unusual request to install a secure phone line in Ross' office at the Washington Institute. The secure line is known in Israel as a "red phone", which could be used to discuss confidential information without the risk of wiretapping.

[snip]

During his visit to Israel last week, Ross met secretly with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as well as with his advisor Yitzhak Molcho. American officials estimated that Ross' talks with Netanyahu are on behalf of President Obama, and part of a channel of communication that bypasses the government.

Here's what State Department spokeswoman had to say about the arrangement on Friday.

QUESTION: And one more. Are you aware of discussions that former advisor to President Obama, Dennis Ross, is having in Israel with Prime Minister Netanyahu and his advisor Yitzhak Molcho on possible ways out of this – the current stalemate?

MS. NULAND: I've heard about this, but I can't speak to the mission. You know Dennis Ross is now a private citizen,

but he also has an association with the White House as an unpaid advisor. So I'm going to send you to the White House in terms of how this might –

QUESTION: There's been allegations –

MS. NULAND: Yeah.

QUESTION: – that there's been – some people are claiming – the claim has been made that Mr. Ross, in coordination with the White House, is bypassing the State Department in these separate – could you comment on that?

MS. NULAND: Well, start with the fact that the White House and the State Department are in lockstep on these policies, and have been from the beginning. And Dennis Ross has been an advisor in this process. He's now an unpaid advisor. So we don't see it that way, but I'm going to send you to the White House with regard to his specific mission. [my emphasis]

Now, I'm actually more alarmed by the way Nuland kept repeating that Ross was unpaid than by claims that he's being used by the White House as a side-channel for negotiations, though both concern me. Having Ross conduct negotiations as a private citizen seems designed to sidestep oversight and/or the involvement of career professionals who might advocate sane positions.

I'm particularly interested in the story given the Adam Werritty scandal in the UK, in which the Defense Secretary Liam Fox resigned after it was shown he had given Werritty undue access, including meetings in Israel, deemed private, attended by the British Ambassador to Israel, Matthew Gould, and Mossad.

The official story behind that scandal admits some unofficial meetings in Israel.

The fog seems to extend even to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Gus O'Donnell,

whose report into the affair, which sealed Dr Fox's fate, identified just the two meetings between the former minister, Mr Werritty and Mr Gould.

The three men met in Tel Aviv at "a private dinner with senior Israelis" and, before Mr Gould took up the ambassador's post in Tel Aviv, for "a general discussion of international defence and security matters". Sir Gus observed that Mr Werritty was invited "as an individual with some experience in these matters".

But Craig Murray, who has been investigating the issue for months, has sources that say this back-channel negotiation was all about planning a war on Iran.

This is the story I was given.

Matthew Gould was Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy in Iran, a country which Werritty frequently visited, and where Werritty claimed to have British government support for plots against Ahmadinejad. Gould worked at the British Embassy in Washington; the Fox-Werritty Atlantic Bridge fake charity was active in building links between British and American neo-conservatives and particularly ultra-zionists. Gould's responsibilities at the Embassy included co-ordination on US policy towards Iran. The first meeting of all three, which the FCO refuses to date, probably stems from this period.

According to my source, there is a long history of contact between Gould and Werritty. The FCO refuse to give any information on Gould-Werritty meetings or communications except those meetings where Fox was present – and those have only been admitted gradually, one by one. We may not have them all even yet.

My source says that co-ordinating with Israel and the US on diplomatic preparation for an attack on Iran was the subject of all these meetings. That absolutely fits with the jobs Gould held at the relevant times. The FCO refuses to say what was discussed. My source says that, most crucially, Iran was discussed at the Tel Aviv dinner, and the others present represented Mossad. The FCO again refuses to say who was present or what was discussed.

On Wednesday 2 November it was revealed in the press that under Fox the MOD had prepared secret and detailed contingency plans for British participation in an attack on Iran.

I don't know that these multiple back channel negotiations with Israel are related—for all I know Ross may be trying to counteract the British line. But it does seem like a whole bunch of very pro-Israel private citizens have been conducting negotiations for the US and UK of late.

Update: The Administration denies Ross has a red phone, at least at WINEP.

Ambassador Ross has extensive experience in the Middle East and is serving as an unpaid advisor on Middle East issues.

This is not uncommon. The State Department has relied on senior experts in the past.

There's no "secure phone" at WINEP.

Note that this denial suggests Ross is working through State, which contradicts what Nuland said the other day. So I'll file this under non-denial denial.