

Iran, the Speech and the Deal

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In reflecting upon Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent speech before Congress and the issues he raised, I realized one of the reasons we are all feeling so uncomfortable is because no one likes tension. The antics of the relationship between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu feels like when parents fight and quarrel. As we all know, children hate when their parents argue and disagree, especially in front of them.

Support for Israel has been bi-partisan and is the source of the strength of the alliance. It truly is the one issue upon which Democrats and Republicans, who cannot agree about anything, have been able to unite and act on in concert. Each of us must do all we can to restore that trust and the bipartisan spirit of support for Israel.

The whole way in which the invitation and the events leading up to the speech were handled went against the grain of this approach. A number of actors in the drama fell for the traps set for them and played their part as partisans. Unfortunately, while there were some who sought to lower the temperature, there were those on both sides who exploited the fissure, further exacerbating and increasing the tensions.

I offered an alternative that would have solved part of the problem and defused the confrontational nature of the whole affair. It would have been far less contentious if the speech took place in a neutral arena, a place where Democrats and Republicans are welcome. But alas, my suggestion that the Prime Minister give his speech at B'nai Tzedek did not get much traction.

People here and in Israel raised concerns about the timing of the talk and its proximity to the Israeli election. The speech was a gamble domestically because for every vote Netanyahu may have picked up, he also risked alienating those who felt he was exploiting the situation for his own political gain.

Interestingly, it appears that the polls in Israel indicate that it did not have any negligible impact on Netanyahu's standing with the Israeli public. Some say it may have helped him pick up one seat at the most. Israeli voters are both sophisticated and fickle. As someone told a NY Times reporter a number of years ago before a heated Israeli election, responding to why the actual outcome of the election was so different than what the polls had predicted, "Israelis tell the truth to the pollsters, but they lie in the voting booth."

And while speaking about partisanship, it is important to point out that the matter of the seriousness of the threat to Israel and concern over the way the negotiations are being conducted is of concern to all Israel, regardless of party affiliation. The parties on the left no less than those on the right agree that the threat posed by a nuclear Iran is real and grave and that Iran must not be allowed to acquire nuclear capability.

So maybe it wasn't just the Israeli election two weeks away, but another date that was on his mind. The other date which looms very large and which is the primary reason for the timing of the speech, is March

31, three weeks away, the deadline for the current round of talks, a deadline, which the Iranians have cleverly extended a number of times already. With China and Russia having a say in the fate of whether or not Iran will be allowed to have nuclear capability, no wonder Israel has cause for concern and would want to appeal to the United States to better understand the perils of a nuclear Iran.

Like most of you, I wish this all would have played out differently and that the focus would not be on the drama of chemistry between the Prime Minister and our President, and that the invitation would have been truly bi-partisan, as the letter said it was, and that it would have gone through proper channels of protocol.

During this week when we celebrated the holiday of Purim, much was made of the time when another Persian sought to annihilate the Jewish people. But there is another parallel between the Megillat Esther and today as well. Mordechai told Esther that she had to go to the king and speak on behalf of her people to save them from imminent destruction planned by Haman. She explained that she could not go, for to do so would violate protocol as one could only approach the king when summoned or invited. Nevertheless, Mordechai told her that the issue was that urgent and the situation so dire that she had to take the chance of offending the king and even violate protocol if necessary to make her appeal on behalf of her people.

Of all that I have read and heard, one of the most interesting was an article entitled, "President Obama, listen to Netanyahu on Iran." The writer who unequivocally states that he is no fan of Netanyahu says, "The Israeli Prime Minister managed to hit the nail right on the head when he said that Middle Eastern countries are collapsing and that 'terror organizations, mostly backed by Iran, are filling in the vacuum'". The article is significant because the author is Faisal Abbas, a respected Arab journalist who is Editor-in-Chief of Al Arabiya English.

Clearly, Israel's concerns are shared by other American allies in the region. Its aggressive actions in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, not to mention the attacks on Jewish centers in Argentina and against its own citizens, are all signs of a regime willing to act forcefully against those who oppose it. With Hezbollah as its proxy, Assad as an ally, terror its tactic of choice, repression its modus operandi, and gaining hegemony in the region its goal, there is good reason to be worried about Iran's intentions and ambitions.

Israel has every right to be worried about an agreement that will apparently leave the reactor in Arak operational, the enrichment facility in Natanz working, and tens of thousands of centrifuges spinning, with a short break out time to develop a bomb, especially with a regime which has a track record of deceiving inspectors and who cannot be trusted to uphold agreements.

Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously said, we know what we know, and we know what we don't know, but we don't know what we don't know. When referring to the secretive, clandestine nature of totalitarian Iran, where even the International Atomic Agency expresses frustration that deception is taking place even while the negotiations are going on, this is especially true.

Dennis Ross, an early supporter of Obama's candidacy and former Middle East negotiator for the Obama and other administrations, writes of the concern expressed by Mr. Netanyahu that the break-out time for producing weapons-grade uranium of a year will inevitably be too short, that inspections of the Iranian program will be too limited, and the lack of actions to be taken if there are violations. Ross cites as one of the most disconcerting features, "that Iran will be treated like Japan or the Netherlands after the

agreement expires in 10-15 years, permitting it to build tens of thousands of centrifuges and enabling it to produce a weapon at a time of its choosing.”

While some said that Netanyahu did not offer any alternatives, Ross said that the Prime Minister both offered a number of alternatives and pointed out why this deal is not in the best interests of the United States, the region, or the world. “While the Obama administration is unlikely to accept his argument that it should simply negotiate better and harder, it should not dismiss the concerns he raises about the emerging deal. Indeed, the administration argument that there is no better alternative than the deal it is negotiating begs the question of whether the prospective agreement is acceptable.”

The concerns raised by the Prime Minister about Israel’s security are legitimate, having to do with the nature of the inspections and the difficulty to trust Iran, the lack of any specific actions linked to violations, the short break out time, and retaining the ability to continue to develop missiles whose only purpose is to carry weapons of destruction. All are legitimate questions to raise at this time.

Let us not lose sight of perhaps the most important point of all raised by the Prime Minister: Is it unreasonable to expect that Iran stop calling for the destruction of Israel if sanctions are to be lifted and it be allowed to proceed with a nuclear program?! Their threats of annihilation need to be treated as more than just empty rhetoric, especially since their financing of terror operations against Israel are consistent with the grave verbal threats they issue. They have not taken any steps or shown any movement away from their expressed intent to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. They have not taken any measures, symbolic or real to earn our trust or to show that they will pursue a different, conciliatory path.

The alternative to rejecting the deal need not be war as some have said. It is to negotiate a better deal. It is to not lift the sanctions, but to maintain them and tighten them so that it will be in Iran’s best interests to give up its desire to acquire a nuclear weapon.

While there are those who object to mention of the Holocaust as dredging up the past, we Jews know the importance of remembering history and of learning from it. Considering what tyrants have done to us throughout the ages, we have every right to remind the world of what has happened before. That is why we have a Sabbath called Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath of Remembrance, and why we will soon celebrate the holiday of Pesah which also emphasizes the importance of historical memory.

Another important time to remember is May of 1967. The leader of Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser, called for the destruction of the state of Israel, and rallied millions of Arabs with his demagogic chants to push the Jews into the sea. When he demanded that the UN peace keeping force in the Sinai be removed so he could attack Israel, the UN complied immediately. As Israel’s Foreign Minister Abba Eban asked, “What good is it to have an umbrella if the moment there is a threat of rain it is removed?” So Israel is justified in feeling it cannot rely on international guarantees to ensure its security and survival.

It is difficult to see how giving so many concessions to Iran with so few safeguards, coupled with skepticism over the ability to detect violations, will ensure peace or stability.

We Jews ascribe to the vision of the prophet Isaiah who dreamed of a day when war and bloodshed would cease. He envisioned a time when all will realize we have not come into being to hate or to destroy, and when all shall lie down and no one shall terrify another. Isaiah looked forward to the time when nation will not threaten nation, and mankind will not again know war.

We pray that the appropriate measures will be taken to ensure that the prophet's call will come to pass, and that all will realize leaving Iran with the ability to obtain nuclear weapons will not bring to fruition the prophet's dream that love and justice will flow like a mighty stream and peace will fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

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