

“Can I Sell You an Existential Threat?”

Last week, in his State of the Union address, President Obama declared the US was nearing an agreement with Iran over nuclear weapons. Some members of the Senate, from both parties, have been itching to vote now on sanctions against Iran if the final agreement is not to their liking. But threatening future sanctions now would likely result in Iran quitting the negotiations; Obama urged Congress to wait and examine the agreement before making threats.

The more hawkish members remained adamant. A few days later, House Speaker John Boehner announced he had invited Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress about Iran. Arranged secretly with the Israeli ambassador, and without notice to the president, the speech is scheduled for early March, just before Israelis vote to determine if Netanyahu remains in office.

Why is this a big deal? For starters, congressional leaders don't usually run their own foreign policy or disrupt ongoing negotiations. Additionally, by turning to Netanyahu, Boehner is boosting the influence of the Israeli leader who has campaigned repeatedly against any agreements with Iran, and who has urged a military attack to destroy Iran's nuclear research facilities. (Israel, of course, does have nuclear weapons, and its politicians occasionally threaten to use them preemptively. Iran has no such weapons, has denied that it intends to develop them, and has abided by international treaties that limit its nuclear industry to peaceful purposes. Israel, by contrast, has declined even to ratify those treaties.)

For both Israel and the US, there may be more politics than national security at the bottom of these strange goings on. Both nations are military powerhouses, well protected from any potential attacker. And both nations have a history of intervening in the affairs of other countries for varied reasons.

In Israel, one strident variety of Zionist ideology insists Israel should control territory beyond its pre-1967 borders, at least all of the West Bank and Gaza, and in some Zionist minds, additional lands east of the Jordan river and north into Lebanon. Israeli politicians divide between those who give lip service to the idea of a Palestinian state to end the occupation, and those who don't bother.

From its creation in 1948, Israel has projected a powerful myth, that it faces one “existential threat” after another, while in practice, Israel always outguns its opponents, attacks more often than it is attacked, and never loses a war. The theme of endless danger is at the heart of Israeli politics. The country is deeply divided into haves and have-nots, and the balance of electoral power rests with disadvantaged Mizrahi Jews originally from North Africa and the Middle East. Whenever politics threatens to focus on socio-economic inequality,

Netanyahu's Likud party conjures up an “existential threat” requiring national unity, and the voters dutifully re-focus on foreign affairs. Iran has been cast as the “threat” for a while now, and a dramatic speech to the US Congress, while snubbing the US president, is calculated to boost Bibi's vote later in March.

There is politics on Boehner's side too. US policy is currently bogged down in the countries of the Middle East that were disrupted by the Iraq and Afghan wars, but there is also a sordid backstory, rooted in Western colonialism and neo-colonial exploitation of petroleum resources, usually dependent on autocratic governments and policies to tamp down popular movements for reform.

Many members of Congress are beholden to industries that want US policy focused on their access to Middle Eastern resources. Since 9/11 US elites have been able to exploit the US' own myth of existential threat, from “Islamic terrorism.” The military industrial economy also benefits, as it supplies weaponry for campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Meanwhile, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia get massive military assistance -- a heavy expense for tax payers, but welcome revenue for the US vendors of military goods.

As American policy is increasingly caught up in the contradictions of Middle East conflicts, the “out” party claims the “in” party is mismanaging national security. For that reason alone, there would be opposition to Obama's efforts. But something else may be fueling opposition. The next two years of national politics are likely to be a stalemate between parties girding for a presidential race in 2016. Nobody really thinks Iran is a serious threat to US domestic security, so Boehner and company don't mind risking failure of the current negotiations, which may happen anyway, and which they can always blame on Obama.

But fussing about national security and foreign policy can have real political benefits. A glum Boehner sat behind the president at the State of the Union. Obama was laying out a blueprint for popular domestic initiatives, policies Republicans would never enact. The last thing conservatives want in 2016 is an electorate hungry for those initiatives and angry with incumbents for blocking them. Time to change the subject. Already last week, he had hatched this plot to work the country up about Iran, and who better to do it than Bibi, the biggest “existential threat” salesman on the world stage.

—by JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE NEW HAVEN 1/25/2015 Contact us at JVPNH.org

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