

Iran is a Real Threat

On January 16, 2015 President Barack Obama condoned a gross breach of diplomatic protocol. He allowed visiting British Prime Minister David Cameron to appeal directly to a number of U.S. Senators to reconsider their support for a bill imposing new tough sanctions on Iran.

Cameron explained he was not instructing the senators but simply informing them, presumably of what they might otherwise not have known, that the UK believed that stronger sanctions or threat of sanctions would not be helpful in bringing negotiations on nuclear issues with Iran to a successful conclusion. Perhaps at breakfast that morning Cameron was reading Psalm 105 which directed him to “bind his princes at his pleasure and teach the senators wisdom.”

The White House compounded this undiplomatic behavior by sanctimonious comments about the intended visit to the U.S. of another prime minister. An unnamed “senior American official” and also Josh Earnest, the White House spokesperson, called the invitation by House Speaker John Boehner to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address the U.S. Congress on the subject of Iran, a “departure from protocol.”

Conveniently putting out of their minds the partisan nature of Cameron’s behavior, these officials spoke of Boehner’s invitation, made without consulting the White House, as an unwelcome injection of partisan politics into U.S. foreign policy. The unnamed senior official, perhaps Valerie Jarrett, Senior Adviser to the President and incidentally who was born in Shiraz, Iran, is quoted in Haaretz, the Israeli paper, on January 10, 2015 as having said that Netanyahu will “pay a price.”

The breach of manners by White House officials towards the leader of the only democracy in the Middle East and the only

real ally of the U.S. in the region raises a number of questions, about the nature of democracy and of U.S. foreign policy. It may be true that Netanyahu's appearance in Washington may help him to gain support in the Israeli parliamentary elections to be held on March 17, 2015. But that has little to do with the appropriateness of an address to Congress by a concerned Middle East political leader on the subject of Iran, a country that has threatened Israel with extinction.

In one of his essays E.M. Forster, the eminent 20th century British novelist, awarded two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety, and two because it permits criticism. The Obama administration, through its strong harsh comments on the invitation to Netanyahu, was trying to preclude rather than admit variety of opinion. Two conclusions can be drawn from this attempt to disparage criticism. Constitutionally, the administration is irresponsible in its imperious attitude towards Congress, slighting, even insulting, the legislative branch, an equal partner in the governing of the country. On the sanctions issue Obama has pledged, even before the bill to maintain or increase sanctions has been fully written, to veto it. Politically, the administration's ungraciousness towards Netanyahu implies that it feels it has a weak case domestically, if not internationally, concerning its policy on sanctions on Iran.

There is an immediate problem for the U.S. For some years a guiding principle, though one disregarded from time to time in practice, of American foreign policy is that "we do not negotiate with terrorists." It is a truth universally acknowledged that Iran is the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world. It provides large amounts of weapons, funds, intelligence, and logistical support for terrorists. Since 1984 Iran has been on the State Department's terrorist list, and the elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, which is the regime's main unit for supporting terrorists abroad, is

on the list of Specially Designated Nations involved in terrorism.

Among its other activities, Iran has supported Hamas, Hizb'allah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Syrian regime of President Assad, the Houthi separatist rebels in Northern Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq. In direct violation of UN Security Council Resolutions, Iran has transferred large funds to Hizb'allah and has trained thousands of its fighters in Iran. Since 1991, Iran has been helping al-Qaeda in its operations, including enabling it to move funds and fighters to South Asia and Syria. In December 2011 a U.S. District Court judge, George B. Daniels, ruled that Iran directly supported al-Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks on the US.

The key issue now is Iran's research on nuclear research and development, and its refusal to abide by the international regulations controlling nuclear proliferation. Since 2002 when the existence of Iran's nuclear program became public the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been unable to determine in any definite manner whether Tehran's nuclear activities are intended for peaceful purposes or for the production of nuclear weapons. The UN Security Council adopted a number of resolutions requiring that Iran stop enriching uranium to the level at which it can be used to make nuclear bombs. When Iran did not comply, sanctions were imposed to get Iran to accede to these resolutions.

An interim agreement was reached in November 2013 between Iran one hand and the EU and P5+1 (U.S., UK, France, China, Russia, plus Germany). Iran agreed, for a six-month period, to limit its uranium enrichment to the level appropriate for domestic nuclear power rather than the level used for developing bombs. In return, Iran was given "limited, temporary, targeted and reversible relief;" sanctions were suspended on a number of items, primarily on petrochemical exports and imports for the automobile sector.

However, other sanctions, on oil, banking, and financial sectors, remain in place. As a result, Iran's oil exports in 2013 fell to 700,000 barrels a day compared with 2.2 million bpd in 2011. This led to a fall in the value of Iran's currency, the rial, and in a substantial rise in inflation. In 2015 its oil exports are 1 million bpd.

The negotiations are highly technical but the issues boil down to the fundamental problem of the magnitude of Iran's uranium enrichment capacity and whether sanctions will be effective in preventing further growth. Will Iran allow the on-the-ground inspections and the limits on its program that have been proposed? Iran's present position is that those limits are intrusive.

Experts differ on the time – some say three months – that it will take for Iran to have enough fissile material to make a nuclear weapon. This depends on the amount of 60% enriched uranium it is able to produce. Iran demanded it be allowed to keep all of its 19,000 centrifuges, but western negotiators want 4,500 at the most. Even that number depends on whether Iran is willing to reduce its existing stockpile of enriched uranium.

The present reality, as expressed by Yukiya Amano, the director general of the International Atomic Agency, is that Iran is still denying access to a sensitive complex, the Parchin military site, that is said to be a site of nuclear activities. He asserted that Iran has not complied with its obligations to be more cooperative and provide information on the possible military dimensions of the nuclear program.

The negotiations continue with new deadlines. The dispute between the U.S. and Israel, rests on the question of sanctions. The U.S. Administration argument is that maintaining or increasing sanctions will gravely undermine the effort to reach a nuclear agreement. Iran argues that sanctions have to be lifted as a sign of good faith.

But Iran's argument is fallacious. Sanctions should be lifted only if Iran concedes to a comprehensive nuclear agreement and a process is in place that ensures that no bomb will be made.

The imposition of sanctions, or the threat of them, has made Iran more responsive, especially at this time when oil prices have dropped. They have brought Iran to the negotiating table. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, as well as Israel, understand the value of the sanctions that have succeeded in harming Iran's economy, in slowing its nuclear program, and making it more difficult for Iran to obtain access to foreign technology. This lack of access has been particularly effective in preventing Iran from acquiring the components for a heavy water reactor that can be used to produce a bomb.

The maintenance of sanctions is vital. The Obama administration certainly has expressed its view that the imposition of sanctions on Russia has limited Putin's actions in Ukraine. While making the case for sanctions on Iran, Senator Bob Menendez was unusually strong in accusing the White House of using talking points "straight out of Tehran." President Obama is not a lackey of the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Housseini Khamenei but he should not make concessions to the Iranian regime before it is unambiguous that Iran will not continue its pursuit of a nuclear bomb. Whether a negotiated solution with Iran is possible remains to be seen, and international diplomacy may achieve this, but it is more certain that the maintenance of tough sanctions on Iran will strengthen the hand of U.S. negotiators.

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