

The United States and Israel

Yes, once again Vice-President Joe Biden, as the Sondheim song, *Send in the Clowns*, might say, made his entrance with his usual flair. This time on April 18, 2016 Biden, speaking to the friendly and appreciative audience of J-Street, the dovish Jewish organization and frequent critic of the policies of Israel, was sharply critical of the government of the State of Israel and its Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on a most inopportune day.

Biden, personifying the traditional U.S. State Department stance of being even-handed in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, uttered perfunctory criticism of Palestinians for the failure of the last round of peace negotiations, but his main target for criticism was Israel. He made his point strongly. The Israeli government, with its steady and systematic expansion of settlements, legalization of outposts, land seizures, was moving Israel in the wrong direction.

Biden spoke of his earlier meeting with Netanyahu and the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, now nearing the 12th year of his 4 year term, and emphasized U.S. determination to push for a two state solution despite “our sometimes overwhelming frustration with the Israeli government.”

In spite of the “overwhelming frustration,” the long-suffering Biden remained committed to Israel’s security, though he ignored the meaningful reality of stalled negotiations on the part of the U.S. over military aid to Israel that helps that security. Curiously, Biden was not frustrated and did have praise for one Israeli, the 30 yearold Stav Shaffir, the youngest female member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, a leftist member of the Labor Party who is outspoken in her criticism of funding for Israeli settlements.

Biden may have been sure of his lines but they were

illustrative of his penchant for making gaffes. He talked of both sides, Israel and Palestinian, taking responsibility for “counterproductive steps,” a few hours after the Palestinian terrorist attack in southern Jerusalem. A bomb exploded at the back of a city bus, on its way during rush hour to Mount Herzl, injuring 21 people, some seriously. The attack followed the 6-month wave of stabbing and other terrorism in Jerusalem and other places. It surprised Israelis because the last series of bus attacks, including the one at bus station in Tel Aviv when 9 people and the suicide bomber were killed, had been in the 2000s.

Biden’s immediate response on learning of the attack was that he did not know if the bus explosion was a “terrorist attack.” Others were more knowledgeable. The official handbook of Fatah, the “moderate” Palestinian organization, posted an announcement from a division of its military wing, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades in the Gaza Strip. The Brigades praised the “good news of victory,” and the fact that “in the occupied city of Jerusalem...dozens of “Zionists” were injured.”

The announcement went on. The bus bombing showed that Palestinians continue to adhere to the option of armed struggle “against the occupation with all possible means.” The Brigades were reinforcing their threat in 2014 to “turn Tel Aviv into a ball of fire.”

Biden’s one agreeable comment was that whatever the legitimate disagreements the Palestinian people have with Israel, there is never justification for terrorism. He went on, no leader, though he did not mention Abbas specifically, should fail to condemn as terrorists those who commit such brutalities.

Not unexpectedly, Riyadh Mansour, the Palestinian representative on April 18, 2016 at the UN refused to denounce terrorism against innocent Israeli civilians, because they are “the occupiers.” What might be expected, but is so far delayed, is that Mr. Biden and the Obama administration should

talk of, call them by name, and denounce the real evil-doers, Islamist terrorists.

Two other events on the same day as Biden's speech, and are relevant to it, are pertinent. One was the destruction by Israel of a deep tunnel built by Hamas in Gaza capable of reaching Kibbutz Holit in Israel. This tunnel was more sophisticated and better constructed than the many tunnels that Israel had found and destroyed in the 2014 fighting in the Gaza Strip.

This time the Al-Qassam Brigades, another of the terrorist wings of Hamas, alarmingly proclaimed that this tunnel is "a drop in the sea of what Hamas is preparing." Searching for the tunnels is therefore a top priority for Israel. If the Obama administration is really concerned to help with Israeli security, the U.S. should participate in the research for developing technology to locate the intended Hamas tunnels and destroy them.

The other simultaneous event as Biden's speech was the resignation of Mehmet Kaplan, the housing minister of Sweden. Kaplan, a 44 year old member of Sweden's Green Party and the former spokesperson of Sweden's Muslim Council had published comments in the past in the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* that "Israelis treat Palestinians in a way that is very like that in which Jews were treated in Germany in the 1930s." The State Department might have commented on this disgraceful anti-Semitic utterance.

It is unfortunate that sharp differences between the U.S. and Israel over an important issue occurred after the meeting on April 17 of the Israeli cabinet in the Golan Heights, the first ever such meeting. Israel claims that the Heights captured from Syria in 1967 and annexed in 1991, is historically Jewish. The UN Security Council and the U.S. consider the annexation illegal, not part of Israel. It may be appropriate, as John Kirby, State Department spokesperson

said, for the final status of the Golan territory to be determined by negotiation between the parties. However, in the meantime the State Department should recognize the danger to Israel of the terrorist groups, including ISIS and Hezbollah on Israel's northern border, and understand that Israel would be imperiled if it left the area.

In view of Joe Biden's speech and the general attitude of the Obama administration, the words of Stephen Sondheim are ever more pertinent. Where are the clowns, send in the clowns. Don't bother they're here.