

DOVISH ON PALESTINE, HAWKISH ON IRAN

By Steven M. Cohen Haaretz 04.03.2012

In the early 1990s, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin sought discreet talks with the North Koreans at a time when they were helping Iran acquire long-range missiles capable of hitting Tel Aviv. Caught “red-handed” by Washington, he was compelled to break off the contacts.

Indeed, from the late 1980s until his death in 1995, Rabin was so deeply alarmed by the looming Iranian threat that he said it propelled him to come to terms with the Palestinians. Rabin the warrior-dove signed the peace treaty with Jordan, forged the Oslo Accords with the PLO, and was shot down just minutes after I watched him sing the Song of Peace, the unofficial anthem of Israel’s peace movement. But, while Rabin was Israel’s most effective dove on Palestinians, he was the an unquestioned hawk on Iran.

Two decades later, Israel is contending with the Iranian arms build-up that so worried Rabin. Today, all that stands between Iran and nuclear capability are some technical steps - all of which may soon be within its capability - and that of its ever-present North Korean advisors.

“Existential threat” or not, Israel’s leaders of all stripes take Iranian nuclearization very seriously. Despite setbacks, Iran is approaching the moment when it will be able to build a nuclear device and to deliver it. As critically, an Iranian leadership capable of sending one million soldier-citizens to die fighting Iraq is psychologically capable of, God forbid, incinerating a million citizens of Tel Aviv.

Israel has twice destroyed menacing nuclear facilities. No doubt, Israel faces formidable obstacles in waging an air attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. But with twenty years of preparation, one must believe that Israel has developed ways of striking other than “simply” bombing from the air.

The likely consequences of a military assault on Iran are horrific. Aside from Iran’s own capabilities to attack soft targets around the globe, Hezbollah and Hamas along with Iran and Syria are said to possess 200,000 missiles capable of hitting apartment buildings, office towers, oil refineries, electrical power stations, and hospitals. For Israel’s leaders though, far worse is a nuclear-armed Iran controlled by leaders with the announced intention of destroying the Jewish State.

The only way to dissuade Israel from assaulting Iranian nuclear facilities on its own is for Iran to definitively halt its drive to develop nuclear weapons, or for the US to credibly guarantee that it will act in time to destroy the relevant facilities.

In this grim situation, how are pro-Israel American Jews to conduct themselves? One might think that they'd work to shore up American readiness to act militarily if diplomacy and sanctions fail - or at least promote the appearance of a public prepared to pay the price of thwarting Iran's drive to produce nuclear weaponry.

But, sadly and incongruously, two leading organizations of the pro-Israel left (full disclosure: my political home since my college days in the late 1960s) have taken an opposite tack. Both American Friends of Peace Now (I'm a sometime small donor) and J Street (I'm on the national advisory board) have endorsed a congressional letter sponsored by Reps. Keith Ellison (D-MN) and Walter Jones (R-NC). The letter advises President Obama "that robust, sustained diplomacy is the best option to resolve our serious concerns about Iran's nuclear program, and to prevent a costly war that would be devastating for the United States and our allies." The letter has to be seen as blunting the very threat of military force essential to making diplomacy work.

Indeed, J Street's endorsement strikes a similar note: "As the drumbeat for war with Iran grows louder veteran diplomats are straining to be heard, urging ... a robust, new diplomatic initiative. Thankfully, some elected officials are listening, anxious to avoid yet another Middle East war ... seeking their colleagues' signatures on a thoughtful letter ... that supports both sanctions and pressure on Iran as well as a robust diplomatic initiative."

What mortal fears or political calculations would drive anyone to urge diplomacy and caution upon President Obama, who is not given to military adventurism? What purpose does it serve to diminish the perception that the American public (and especially pro-Israel Jews) will support military means to derail Iran's drive to nuclear capability?

For the pro-Israel left in the US, another consideration argues against endorsing the Ellison-Jones letter. If Israelis are to risk withdrawing from the West Bank, if they are to accept an independent Palestinian state, they need to believe that Israel retains a free hand to retaliate if some (or many) militants manage to pursue armed struggle even after statehood. How can Israelis count

on those segments of American Jewry that undermine the tools to pressure Iran? How can they forget that these same advocates of a Palestinian state sided with critics of Cast Lead, the military operation necessitated by rocket attacks following Ariel Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza?

The pursuit of a Palestinian state, the cessation of settlements, and withdrawal from much of the West Bank has been the defining position of the pro-Israel left. The Two-State Solution is seen as the best guarantor of Israel's security. With this view, what would prompt anyone on the pro-Israel left to saying anything about Iran – other than to lend weight to the threat of US military action rather than subvert it?

A pro-Israel left that consistently opposes using force in defending Israel's security diminishes its credibility with moderate and leftist Israelis. It fuels the perception that the American Jewish left is under-concerned with Israel's security needs, downplays Israel's vulnerability, or cares more about certain universalist principles than about the safety of our fellow Jews. If this pro-Israel left were actually to succeed in marshaling many American Jews to the pacific position on Iran, it's hard to see how or why even long-term Israeli supporters of a Palestinian state can effectively press for withdrawal from the West Bank.

Twenty years ago, Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister who concluded peace agreements with an Arab country and the Palestinian people, linked countering the Iranian threat with resolving the Palestinian issue. Today, some of his ideological heirs and admirers outside of Israel fail to see the persisting connection between dovishness on Palestine with hawkishness on Iran. For Rabin, defending against threat from Iran meant diminishing the threat from Palestine. Today, advancing toward peace with the Palestinians means preparing for the potential of a horrific war of necessity with Iran.

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