

Middle East Notes
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
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This issue of Middle East Notes focuses on the confusion of the invitation by Speaker John Boehner and acceptance by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak to a joint session of Congress two weeks before the Israeli elections, the large number on non-combatants killed by the IDF during the Gaza disaster, support of the two state solution, Israeli terrorism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and other issues.

Commentary: Political posturing on the part of Boehner in the U.S. and Netanyahu in Israel has further distanced Netanyahu and President Obama. U.S. support remains strong for Israel in the White House and Congress as criticism of the prime minister and his Congressional supporters increases. As world media focuses on "Islamaphobia," the dire winter suffering of the children and homeless in Gaza, and the continuing oppression of West Bank Palestinians seem no longer to be "news."

- In The Atlantic, Jeffrey Goldberg writes that Netanyahu has two main tasks, and he's failing at both. The first task of an Israeli prime minister is to protect his/her country from existential threats. The second task is to work very hard to stay on the good side of the president and people of the United States. Success in accomplishing the first task is sometimes predicated on achieving the second task.
- Peter Beinart in Ha'aretz notes that with the scheduled speech to Congress, the reputation for arrogance and duplicity that Netanyahu has long enjoyed among U.S. American elites is seeping out to the public at large. Bibi is going to have to show President Obama a bit more respect.
- In his blog WallWritings, James Wall comments that after consorting with Israeli Ambassador Dermer, Boehner issued his invitation to Netanyahu behind Obama's back and agreed to the AIPAC-friendly date of March 3. With this change, the Netanyahu-Boehner tag team achieves two Netanyahu goals: schmoozing with his AIPAC congressional funders and basking in the politically enhancing glow of all that congressional cheering.
- Gili Cohen in Ha'aretz writes that more than 70 percent of the people killed in incidents examined by B'Tselem during the Gaza attacks were non-combatants: 606 Palestinians were killed, including 93 children under age five, 129 children ages five to 14, and 42 teens, ages 14 to 18. This figure also included 135 women ages 18 to 60, and 37 men over 60 years old. The B'Tselem report also stated that Hamas also broke international law and its obligation to distinguish between military and civilian targets. It noted that Hamas fired on Israeli civilian targets from populated areas of the Gaza Strip, which "undermines the most basic rule of humanitarian law, intended to reduce strikes against civilians as much as possible and to keep them away from combat zones."
- Vincent Fean, UK Consul-General, Jerusalem, 2010-2014 (retired) hopes most Israelis will see recognition of Palestine for what it is: recognition that Palestinians and Israelis have equal rights, and equal need of security for their families, across a shared border, with an agreed end to the Occupation. An acknowledgment that illegal settlement construction, the closure of Gaza, house demolitions, the Wall, etc. have taken Israel away from Europe, and away from international law – a trend which needs to be reversed.
- Linda Gradstein in Ynetnews quotes the pope's representative in Jerusalem warning that "the present conflict is a suicidal situation in which Israel cannot survive," and that this stalemate poses danger to peace.
- Other items/articles of interest

1) The Netanyahu Disaster

Jeffrey Goldberg, The Atlantic, January 27, 2015

Below are excerpts. Read the entire piece by clicking on the link embedded in the headline.

Benjamin Netanyahu believes he has just one job, and that is to stop Iran from getting hold of nuclear weapons. He might argue that this description of his mission as Israel's prime minister is too limiting, though such an argument would not be particularly credible. Israel's very existence, he has argued, consistently, and at times convincingly, is predicated on stopping Iran, a country ruled by a regime that seeks both Israel's annihilation and the means to carry it out. ...

... [U]nfortunately for Netanyahu, it is incumbent upon the junior partner in the Israel-U.S. relationship to maintain an even keel in the relationship. Netanyahu, grappling with a fear that Obama will go wobbly on Iran, could have tried a long time ago to create a discreet, continuous, and respectful dialogue in advance of the conclusion of negotiations, in order to try to shape the president's thinking, and—this is important—to work with Obama on issues that interest the United States (advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, for instance, by taking the initiative once in a blue moon) in order to make the American side understand that his government is interested in giving, not merely in taking.

Instead, Netanyahu chose to make a desperate-seeming end-run around the president and attempted to appeal directly to Congress to oppose a decision Obama has not yet made. In a plan concocted by Ron Dermer, who serves as Netanyahu's ambassador to the U.S., the speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, invited Netanyahu to address Congress on the dangers of a nuclear deal and the need for tougher sanctions, without first informing the White House.

A sitting president cannot be written off by a small, dependent ally, without terrible consequences.

The flaws in this approach are many. Obama administration officials have already felt disrespected by Netanyahu (recall his condescending, and public, Oval Office lecture to the president), and so this latest violation of protocol set their teeth on edge. Another flaw: The Obama administration is trying to create conditions so that if the negotiations do collapse, it will be the Iranians who get the blame, not the Americans. Legislating new sanctions—even delayed, triggered sanctions—would give the Iranians the excuse to quit negotiations and blame the U.S. Such a situation would not help Obama maintain the strong international sanctions regime that has stayed in place through the past year of talks. (Actually passing legislation now also seems superfluous; only the most obtuse Iranian leader would fail to realize that a failure in the negotiations process would lead to more sanctions.)

An even more obvious flaw: John Boehner is not the commander-in-chief, and does not make U.S. foreign policy. Netanyahu might find Boehner's approach to Iran more politically and emotionally satisfying than Obama's, but this is irrelevant. Yes, Congress can pass new sanctions against Iran, but it is the executive branch that drives U.S. Iran policy. Barack Obama will be president for two more years, and it makes absolutely no sense for an Israeli leader to side so ostentatiously with a sitting American president's domestic political opposition. ...

2) Why the Iran speech to Congress is Netanyahu's biggest blunder yet

Peter Beinart, Ha'aretz, January 28, 2015

Below are excerpts. Read the entire piece by clicking on the link embedded in the headline.

How big a blunder did Benjamin Netanyahu commit by arranging to slam Barack Obama's Iran policy in a speech to Congress without informing the White House first? Listen to the recent exchange between Fox News anchors Chris Wallace and Shepard Smith. Iran "is an existential threat," declared Wallace. "Whatever Netanyahu wants to think and say about that is fine. But for him to come here to ignore the president, to not even let him know he was coming, and to sneak in to come talk before Congress with the president's opponents to criticize the president's policy, that's a different thing." Smith was even harsher: "It just seems like they think we don't pay any attention and we're just a bunch of complete morons, the United States citizens, like we wouldn't pick up on what's happening here." ...

3) Barack to Bibi: Stop "meddling" in our politics

James Wall, WallWritings, January 24, 2015

Below are excerpts. Read the entire piece by clicking on the link embedded in the headline.

On Monday morning, January 12, U.S. President Barack Obama spoke by telephone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. An unidentified senior American official said that Obama warned Netanyahu "not to meddle in the battle" Obama was "waging against Congress over the sanctions legislation."

Ha'aretz reported the firmness with which Obama addressed Netanyahu: "Obama stressed to Netanyahu that he is seeking to reach an agreement with Iran that will prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons and assure the international community in a verifiable fashion that Iran's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only ..."

One week later, after secret meetings with Ron Dermer, Israel's Ambassador to the United States, U.S. House Speaker John Boehner invited Israel's Prime Minister to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress on February 11. It is unprecedented for a House speaker to invite a foreign leader to speak to the Congress without prior consultation and agreement with the President of the United States.

Obama is aware that new sanctions legislation would probably sabotage negotiations between Obama, Iran and five other countries. For this reason, Obama has promised to veto any new sanctions legislation.

Nevertheless, the Speaker readily agreed when Netanyahu asked Boehner to shift the invitation to speak to the Congress from February 11 to March 3, only two weeks before Israel's March 15 elections where Netanyahu faces strong opposition. ...

4) IDF broke international law in dozens of Gaza war strikes, Israeli rights group says

Gili Cohen, Ha'aretz, January 29, 2015

Below are excerpts. Read the entire piece by clicking on the link embedded in the headline.

The Israel Defense Forces broke international law at least in some of the dozens of strikes it made against homes during the fighting in Gaza last summer, according to a report released this week by the human rights group B'Tselem. The group came to its conclusions based on its examination of 70 incidents in which more than three people were killed in homes as a result of IDF strikes. More than 70 percent of the people killed in 70 incidents examined by B'Tselem were non-combatants, according to the report ...

In these 70 strikes, 606 Palestinians were killed, B'Tselem says, including 93 children under age 5, 129 children ages 5 to 14, and 42 teens, ages 14 to 18. This figure also included 135 women ages 18 to 60, and 37 men over 60 years old. "B'Tselem has not yet reached a determination regarding participation in the fighting by each of those killed, however it can already be determined that more than 70 percent were non-combatants," the report stated with regard to the incidents it examined. ...

5) Israel/Palestine – Does recognising both states make a difference?

Vincent Fean, UK Consul-General, Jerusalem, 2010-2014 (retired), Caabu (Council for British and Arab Understanding), January 22, 2015

Below are excerpts. Read the entire piece by clicking on the link embedded in the headline.

... The outcome for Palestine should be a democratic, demilitarised state spanning Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem where the Palestinian people control their own destiny, fulfil their potential and take their rightful place in the family of nations. That means economic development, rebuilding Gaza, strong Palestinian institutions throughout their country and, yes, strong security and economic cooperation with Israel, on an equitable basis. It does not mean an ongoing Israeli Defence Force presence, which only prolongs the Occupation. It means the full, phased withdrawal of the IDF from Palestinian soil, as President Obama made clear in a speech in May 2011. With Palestinian rights come responsibilities – rigorous implementation of the rule of law throughout the state, non-violence, zero tolerance of incitement to violence, and fair, free elections, with an advance commitment from the world community this time to respect the verdict of the Palestinian people. Today, all Palestinian elected politicians are time-expired. Palestinian politics is broken; it is for Palestinians to make it good again. We should encourage them by every available means.

Of Israel, the world should ask for acceptance of the inevitability, the necessity of the two state solution on a basis of equity, respecting international law. The best guarantee of Israeli wellbeing and international repute is the wellbeing of their Palestinian neighbour, free to work the land which is theirs, doing unto others as they would be done by. The vicious circle of deterrence, retaliation, violence and repression has to be broken, by mutual agreement. The alternatives are worse for all of us, including for Israel. The status quo, which I have just described, means chronic violence across borders and the inexorable decline in Israel's international standing. The one state outcome, towards which we are drifting fast, internalises the inevitable violence inside that one state, with no way out. ...

6) Palestinian Christians call for peaceful solution to conflict

Linda Gradstein, Ynetnews, January 30, 2015

Below are excerpts. Read the entire piece by clicking on the link embedded in the headline.

Palestinian Christians warn that the current situation of no-war and no-peace with Israel is not sustainable in the long term, and say they want to see a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which have been frozen for more than a year.

Most Palestinians say they support non-violent resistance to achieve an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, and some also encouraged the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement which aims to make Israel pay an economic toll for its continued control over the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

“The present conflict is a suicidal situation in which Israel cannot survive,” said Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch emeritus and first Palestinian to serve as the Pope's representative in the Holy Land.

“Israel cannot survive surrounded by enemies. BDS is a way of pressuring Israel to make peace. Israel needs a true friend who can pressure it to make peace.” ...

Other articles of interest:

- [Netanyahu is talking to leading Democrats to little effect so far](#), Carl Hulse, Jeremy Petersen. New York Times, January 29, 2015
- [Playing politics on Iran](#), New York Times editorial board, January 23, 2015
- [How will Obama punish Netanyahu?](#) The Daily Beast, January 26, 2015
- [Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin, January 23, 2015](#)
- [The State of Two States, Israel Policy Forum, Week of January 18](#)
- [The State of Two States, Israel Policy Forum, Week of January 25](#)
- [The dirty little secret behind the "Global Terrorism Index" \(GTI\)](#), Karin Brothers, Global Research, December 6, 2014
- [Europe determined to prevent Israeli settlement policy](#), Uri Savir, Al Monitor, January 25, 2015
- ["No safe place": Report on effect on Gaza of Operation Protective Edge](#), Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, January 20, 2015
- [Why the election in Israel will change nothing](#), Zeev Stemhell, Ha'aretz, January 30, 2015