

# Netanyahu Should be Shown Respect by the White House

In a scarcely veiled and undiplomatic allusion to the “Jewish lobby,” President Barack Obama speaking on January 15, 2015 about the views of politicians who disagreed with him on the issue of sanctions against Iran, said he “understood the pressures that senators face from donors and others.”

Equally offensive was his urging, in Olympian and disdainful terms, that members of Congress take the “long view rather than a move for short term gain.” He showed he is determined to “play offense.”

The President has not explained why it is disrespectful to him to have an open discussion in a Congressional meeting of both Houses on his policy on Iran’s nuclear program or sanctions imposed on Iran, or why comments in that setting by a foreign leader are automatically distasteful and undiplomatic.

The issue of Iran, difficult and controversial, is not above partisanship as the White House proclaims but is a crucial political one that must be debated. Indeed, Obama has shown his own partisanship by already announcing he will veto any additional sanctions proposed by Congress on Iran.

There may be case, as the Obama Administration suggests, that increasing sanctions on Iran would undermine the efforts being made to reach the goal of reducing Iran’s nuclear capacity. But a better case can be made for the opposite point of view that despite the present sanctions Iran is not willing to limit its nuclear activities.

In fact, Iran, while negotiations have been going on, has continued its nuclear program including nuclear enrichment, development of the Arak plutonium program, and activity to build its ballistic missiles capability.

To disagree with the President is not a personal insult nor is it putting politics ahead of what may be the national interest. It is no secret, though he has not admitted it, that Obama during his presidency has constantly expressed his views on Israeli affairs.

The White House has continually been critical of, even condemned, Israeli plans to build new housing settlements. Whether justified or not, the usual Administration formula is that such Israeli actions are illegitimate, counterproductive, and likely to cause more tension in the area.

Obama pays little heed to the Israeli view that the West Bank is disputed territory, and that the question of settlements is an issue to be resolved in peace negotiations. Nor is it evident that the White House genuinely considers Iran's nuclear ambitions a clear and present danger to the existence of Israel.

According to the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama has said, "Israel does not know what its best interest are." Now, the President believes he knows the answer by overlooking, even implicitly encouraging, American efforts seeking to influence the Israeli Knesset parliamentary election to be held on March 17, 2015 and end the political power of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Everyone understands that Netanyahu is not Obama's favorite person. White House officials have been undiplomatic and have disavowed accepted international protocol by referring to Netanyahu in disparaging remarks such as "chicken shit," myopic, pompous, and acts as if he had "aspergers."

The last affront is particularly disturbing since it is an insult to those suffering from Asperger Syndrome, a disorder on the autism spectrum.

The US President, in his State of the Union address in January 2015, said he had no more campaigns to run. He was speaking of

US Presidential elections, but it is also true he is not a candidate for the Israeli Knesset or is directly involved in the election campaign.

Nevertheless, Obama's participation, though indirect, in the forthcoming Israel election is worthy of comment. He is clearly angered by the fact that Netanyahu accepted the invitation by House Speaker John A. Boehner to address a joint session of Congress in March, an invitation that was made without informing Obama.

The White House used hyperbolic terminology in calling this "an unprecedented breach of protocol." In addition, the White House was annoyed that the suggestion for the invitation first was made by Ron Dermer, the American born Israeli Ambassador to the US.

Various commentators, supportive of the Administration position on sanctions for Iran, have objected to the direct role played by Dermer and particularly to the fact that his career has largely been as a political operative, not as a diplomat.

It is weird that some in the White House, many among Congressional Democrats, and some in the diplomatic field, all experienced political operatives, have decried the political tactics shown by the Israeli Ambassador.

The charge against the Israeli Ambassador is not only weird but also hypocritical since a group of Democrats, political operatives if not official US Ambassadors, has gone to Israel to be politically active.

The group is using the umbrella of V15 (Victory 15), the campaign of Peace Network Foundation, in partnership with OneVoice.

V15, funded by Americans, is a pressure group whose real purpose, if not motto, is currently "Anything but Bibi." It is

not a direct arm of, or formally connected with, the Obama Administration.

But it is not coincidental that a group of five Americans linked to Obama is helping in the campaign to drive the Likud party, led by Netanyahu, from power at the Knesset election on March 17, 2015. It is explicitly helping the electoral campaigns of Likud's rivals, Meretz and the Zionist Union.

The leader of the Americans in the V15 campaign is Jeremy Bird a 36 year-old skilled political operative and grassroots organizer. He was the National Field Director for Obama in the 2012 presidential election, and the deputy director of Organizing for America.

Sometimes called the Obama campaign's "secret weapon," Bird built a nationwide staff and volunteer organizations for the campaign. His declared tactic is "one part data, and one part emotional connection." Most recently he is the co-founder of 270 Strategies, an organization that provides help for grassroots electoral campaigns.

Bird has begun advising V15 on its Tel Aviv campaign, with the intent to recruit thousands of volunteers to go door to door canvassing for anti-Netanyahu parties. V15's collaborator OneVoice is a group that describes itself as an international grassroots movement that amplifies the voice of mainstream Israelis and Palestinians.

OneVoice claims to have 600,000 Palestinian, Israeli, and international signatories. Its president is Daniel Lubetsky, son of a Holocaust survivor, who was born in Mexico City in 1968, and now a wealthy businessman based in the US.

He apparently has funded the activity of Israeli peace groups, and is actually the founder of one of them, PeaceWorks.

V15 and OneVoice are active in the attempt to defeat Netanyahu. Bird is reported to have tweeted, "What do you

think Sheldon Adelson promised the GOP in exchange for this insane Bibi House visit.”

This tweet is ludicrous in light of the fact that he and his group are receiving foreign funds in large amounts to engage in a political campaign, thereby breaking Israeli law.

The Bird group may be legally irresponsible. Certainly, this American campaign whether directly encouraged by the White House or only discreetly condoned, to oppose Netanyahu is politically irresponsible and disrespectful to the leader of an allied democratic country.

That lack of respect is in sharp contrast with the respect shown by President Obama and his 30 member delegation to the late King of Saudi Arabia in January 2015.

Netanyahu has his faults but he is not leader of a country that inflicts 1,000 lashes on a journalist for critical remarks on religion, or allows a woman accused of murder to be beheaded with a sword after being dragged through the streets of Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

The Administration’s criticism and lack of respect for an allied leader may prove to be politically shortsighted and counterproductive. According to public opinion polls, potential Israeli voters seem to have rallied around Netanyahu.

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