

The Senate Should Vote on the Real Iran

The immortal Marx – Groucho not Karl – was in Tehran, Iran on August 23, 2015 when he heard the Foreign Minister of Iran Mohammed Javed Zarif say to British Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond, “Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?” Members of the United States Senate presently discussing the nuclear plan should take note, and vote accordingly.

Hammond was visiting the Iranian capital to reopen the British embassy that had been closed in November 2011 after it had been attacked and ransacked by a mob of protestors throwing stones and gas bombs, and burning documents as the result of financial sanctions being imposed on Iran. In the atmosphere generated by the moderate rhetoric of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif and the enticing propaganda of Iranian public relations, Hammond, in similar fashion to Secretary of State John Kerry, eagerly accepted the view that Iran could be a cooperative state and had the capability to play a more positive role across the region of the Middle East.

The leaders of Britain and the United States have accepted the Iranian assertion that it is willing to open a new chapter in relations with the West. They hold that it is not possible to influence certain aspects of the behavior of Iran, such as violations of human rights, restraints on free speech, violence, abductions, stoning of women and homosexuals, persecution of minorities, assassinations, explosions of the property of critics, their actions in Syria or their financial and logistical support for terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East, unless there is a dialogue with Iran.

Western leaders have the naïve belief that they have identified some of the misunderstandings of the different

positions of Iran and the West. They appear to be ignorant of the countless public commentaries, books, articles, and television programs that have made very clear what the positions and policies of Iran are and have been since the Islamic Republic was established in 1979.

Even Groucho might have been astonished to hear Hammond declare that many people in western countries had an incorrect image of Iran as “a desperately, theocratic, deeply religious society motivated by ideology.” On the contrary, Hammond saw Tehran as a perfectly normal, bustling, dynamic, entrepreneurial, thrusting, middle-income developing city that has enormous potential. Iran for the British leader was not a regimented, disciplined society with a population cowed by authority. He detected a change in the approach, the language, and the rhetoric about the UK. He was impressed that the graves in one of embassy’s compounds had not been desecrated.

The basis of Hammond’s argument, similar to that of the U.S. State Department, is the need to engage with Iran as a major player in the Middle East in order to seek to influence it. In this respect he was at his most fatuous concerning Israel. He knew of the fulminations of the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who bordered on the edge of sanity, but felt that the current Iranian administration would act differently.

That administration, Hammond felt, had a “more nuanced” approach to Israel and should be judged by its actions as much as by its words. He distinguished Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s “revolutionary sloganizing” from what Iran actually does in the conduct of its foreign policy. Indeed, the Supreme Leader had called on the Muslim world to unite and destroy Israel. He proclaimed that it is the “big powers” who have divided the Islamic *Ummah*(community), “pursued their own interests and safeguarded the Zionist regime.”

Indeed, it may be desirable sometimes to distinguish rhetoric for internal political consumption from

the reality of the conduct of foreign policy. Yet, although Iranian actions remain to be seen, their words are unmistakably clear, and words have consequences. A senior Iranian official immediately responded to Hammond. Hussein Sheikholeslam, foreign office advisor to the speaker of the Iranian parliament, declared that Iranian positions "against the usurper Zionist regime have not changed at all: Israel should be annihilated and this is our ultimate slogan."

The Iranian spokesman even admitted that Iran had been pressed during the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 to stop its involvement on Gaza, Syria, and Yemen, but had refused. The Western powers were told that Iran rejected the "existence of any Israeli on this earth." They were also told that Iran had made concessions both in diplomatic gestures and in the nuclear deal, but they did not include agreement that Israel's security will be ensured.

Iran still engages in conspiracy theories. Its intelligence minister, Sayed Mahmoud Alavi, asserted that the intelligence services of the U.S., the Mossad, MI6, and certain regional states were attempting to challenge the security and overthrow the Iranian Republic.

The British Government and the U.S. State Department have perhaps overlooked these intelligence activities. Nor might they know of the recent actions of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in putting commanders within more than 200 Iranian companies that will do business with the West once sanctions on Iran are lifted. Perhaps it will be useful for those U.S. senators still undecided on how to vote on the nuclear deal to know that the IRGC is a direct sponsor of terrorist groups.

First published in