

When is a Boycott of Israel not a Boycott?

There has been much talk lately about whether “no-go zones” exist in areas that are totally occupied or dominated by Muslim inhabitants in France and Britain. While these zones are not officially forbidden to non-Muslims, they, like the *zones urbaines sensibles* (ZUS) in France, are usually regarded as unwise or dangerous for non-residents or foreigners to enter. To try to make the matter clear, British Prime Minister David Cameron, on hearing people say there are cities in Britain where non-Muslims simply don't go in, said he “choked on his porridge.”

In the United States few people had thought that some form of a new no-go zone, a specific area in which the personal appearance of a duly-elected foreign political leader and his opportunity to discuss serious issues is being questioned, might be located in Washington, D.C. In an unwarranted display of churlish and disrespectful behavior, the Obama administration and some Democratic members of Congress have sought to make the U.S. capital a “no-go zone” for Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A minor problem, allegedly one of violation of diplomatic protocol, has become inflamed, a storm in a teapot, as a result of partisan differences over the issue of a nuclear Iran.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest and prominent Democrats have admonished House Speaker John Boehner for breaking with protocol by inviting Prime Minister Netanyahu to speak before a joint session of Congress without informing President Barack Obama of his intention to do so. Earnest, who claims that he is usually well-informed, complained that the White House had not heard directly from Israeli authorities about the planned trip to Washington.

In any case, the Obama administration appears confused on two aspects of U.S. political policy as well as about diplomatic protocol. There is no evidence in the U.S. Constitution that the president, even though responsible for foreign policy, must approve all individuals invited by the Speaker of the House to speak before Congress. Also, the administration argues that it is a long-standing practice for the U.S. president not to meet with heads of state or candidates in close proximity to their elections to avoid the appearance of influencing foreign voting.

Yet this "practice" is honored in the breach. Among other instances, there is photographic evidence of a meeting between Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in June 2009, only three months before the German elections, which in fact her party won. In an earlier administration, President Bill Clinton hosted the then Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres only a month before the 1996 election, which Peres lost.

The White House is also conveniently forgetful about its own lapses in direct communication with foreign leaders. Obama has told us he has a pen and a phone. Yet he forgot to use the phone or did not know the correct number to make what would have been a highly meaningful personal call to President Francois Hollande on January 11, 2015. In unexpectedly discourteous behavior, one that can be interpreted as a breach of diplomatic protocol, Obama did not call Hollande to say he was not going to attend the unity march in Paris to honor the 17 victims of Islamist terrorists. At the march, attended by more than 40 foreign leaders, representatives of all political parties and sectors of society, Obama was conspicuously absent.

President Obama however used the pen to bypass Congressional opposition or criticism of his policies. By now the pen may have run out of ink since he has issued 195 presidential executive orders, all of which are exempt from action by Congress. Those orders have been imposed on both domestic and

international policies, on economic sanctions, and on the classification of national secrets.

Obama has also issued 198 presidential memoranda which have the same force of law as executive orders and which also do not require Congressional approval. The memoranda have been issued on subjects such as gun control, immigration, and on oil and gas exploration.

Netanyahu has been invited to address, on March 3, 2015, both houses of the U.S. Congress for the third time, the first foreign leader to do since Winston Churchill. The appearance is an opportunity to discuss publically the threat of Islamist (a term seemingly not in the vocabulary of the Obama administration) terrorism, and Iran's nuclear ambitions to produce a bomb. Much more important than the alleged petty violation of diplomatic protocol is the issue of political substance, the threat to the world of Islamist terrorism, now exhibited in so many countries, and the stated intentions of Iran to annihilate the State of Israel.

Netanyahu's speech will no doubt make the case for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The essential question is whether the current negotiations between Obama and the Iranians are likely to lead to a desirable outcome. The Israeli fear is the conclusion of a bad deal with too many concessions by the U.S. and Western countries, one that would endanger the security of the U.S. as well as of Israel and Saudi Arabia, and other friendly Middle East countries. Some analysts believe that the proposed plan places insufficient restrictions on the number of centrifuges available to Iran to enrich uranium.

There are understandable differences of opinion between the American and Israel leaders on the issue of Islamist terrorism. It is wholly appropriate and desirable that they should be heard in the U.S. Congress. It is therefore painful that some honorable Democratic members of Congress should be

so misguided as to declare that they will not attend the Israeli leader's address. John Lewis (Georgia), a hero of the civil rights movement, G.K. Butterfield (North Carolina), chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, and Eric Blumenauer (Oregon) are among those who are engaging in what is tantamount to a boycott of Israel. According to preliminary reports, Vice President Joe Biden is expecting to be suffering from a serious unnamed disease on March 3 and therefore may not attend the Congressional event.

Those who are engaging in this boycott of a speech by an allied leader should explain why free speech in Congress undermines diplomatic negotiations on Iran's nuclear ambitions. It is difficult to take seriously the argument of some Democrats that the invitation to Netanyahu was an affront to the president and the State Department. They, and much of the mainstream media, have escalated a relatively trivial issue into a partisan storm. The issue is not one of sensitivity over protocol but of having enough information to make correct crucial strategic decisions on the Middle East. Serious legislators should show their concern about those decisions by listening to a leader vitally concerned with them. They should refrain from participating in a boycott, even if they do not use that word to describe their behavior.

Democratic members of Congress have previously engaged in this practice of boycott. On February 1, 1996 a number of them boycotted the speech by French President Jacques Chirac when he spoke of the ending of French nuclear testing.

Once again, Congressional legislators are faced with a disputed issue of nuclear testing.

One expects ungraciousness and hostility from the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu. He cancelled his participation in a security conference in Munich because of the presence of an Israeli delegation. One does not expect

similar ungraciousness on the part of Nancy Pelosi, who hopes the speech of the Israeli prime minister will not take place. Everyone appreciates that members of Congress are busy individuals who have to attend many events, but one hopes that on March 3 they will not be comatose by boycotting discussion of the danger of the Islamic threat to the Western world.

First published in the