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AIPAC Discovers 47 Useful Idiots

BY PHILIP GIRALDI
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March 2015 is a month that should live in infamy. The month started out with the revolting spectacle of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressing a joint session of Congress for the third time, having been invited by the Speaker of the House without the courtesy of seeking any input from the White House or State Department. The *National Review* was quick to declare Bibi “leader of the free world,” surely one of the most ridiculous claims ever made by a

once respectable magazine that has increasingly become a reliable mouthpiece for the Israel Lobby. It was all part of a carefully orchestrated deliberate affront to President Barack Obama, who like it or not, is responsible for the conduct of foreign affairs. It also challenged the White House's role in dealing with visiting heads of state and government as a matter of both protocol and common sense, one of the traditional duties of the Chief Executive.

Netanyahu characteristically lied about the threat posed by Iran and was greeted by fifty rounds of applause for his lucidly expressed insights into why the United States should again be prepared to go to war on Israel's behalf. Five days later 47 Republican United States Senators signed a letter allegedly written by Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas and then sent it to the Iranian government directly, warning that any agreement over that country's nuclear program reached with President Barack Obama will likely be overturned by the Congress. The letter was signed by the entire Republican Party leadership in the Senate and also included presidential contenders Rand Paul, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz.

Were the two events connected? You bet they were as they both had the same objective – to end talks with Iran and commit the United States to a more aggressive confrontation with the Mullahs, as Israel has been demanding.

The invitation and the letter were both unprecedented, far exceeding previous stunts by the ubiquitous GOP “maverick” Senator John McCain cavorting with terrorists in Syria or appearing in Tbilisi or at Maidan Square in Ukraine to instigate either a new war or a change of government. McCain's hubris, as well as that of other peripatetic Congressmen prowling the world looking for an audience, was on display “over there” where he had no real authority and no one would listen to him anyway but the current incarnation of Republican leadership was and is, unfortunately, doing its damage over here.

The visit and letter were together an assault on how American democracy is supposed to work. Retired Major General Paul Eaton summed up the impact of the letter succinctly: “...to directly engage a foreign entity, in this way, undermining the strategy and work of our diplomats and our Commander in Chief, strains the very discipline and structure that our foreign relations depend on to succeed. The breach of discipline is extremely dangerous, because undermining our diplomatic efforts, at this moment, brings us another step closer to a very costly and perilous war with Iran. I think Senator Cotton recognizes this, and he simply does not care.”

The most significant damage is to the separation of powers under the Constitution of the United States. One might argue reasonably that executive authority has increased dramatically in Washington since 9/11 and should be rolled back by the legislature and judiciary. But the GOP is not addressing the issues that it should be confronting like war powers, immigration, state secrecy privilege, illegal spying and death by drone. It is instead seeking to challenge Article 2 of the Constitution, which specifies that the executive is the lead agency in dealing with foreign governments. The House of Representatives can choose to defund presidential programs and the Senate can refuse to “consent” to treaties that the executive has entered into, but the actual work of diplomacy and protecting Americans overseas is the responsibility of the president.

The presidential prerogative was accepted by the Founding Fathers and George Washington, in his first address to Congress made clear that while the legislative branch had responsibility for funding both diplomacy and an army, it was up to the executive branch to carry out policy in both areas. At the time, Thomas Jefferson was Secretary of State. The Supreme Court has since several times upheld that perception, ruling that “foreign policy is the province and responsibility of the executive.”

And then there is the Logan Act, passed in 1799, which specifically declares it illegal for any citizen, including Congressmen, to engage in “any correspondence or intercourse with any foreign government . . . with intent to influence the measures or conduct of any foreign government . . . in relation to any disputes or controversies with the United States.” The last indictment submitted under the Act was in 1803, which means that legal experts might well consider it to be unenforceable due to the judicial doctrine of *desuetude*, or lack of use, but the law is still on the books and one might reasonably argue that both the Netanyahu invitation and the Senate letter to the Iranian government would be considered felonious violations.

Leaving aside the damage that would be done to America’s reputation by repudiating an agreement hammered out not only with Iran but also with five other countries, there is a common thread running through the attempt by the Congress to assert control over some aspects of foreign policy and it is, of course, Israel. And there is also a back story. The Netanyahu visit was planned by the Israeli Ambassador in Washington Ron Dermer in collusion with Speaker of the House John Boehner. It was clearly intended to embarrass President Obama while also motivating the Congress and media to do everything possible to derail a possible agreement with Iran, which Netanyahu has been warning about since 1993. Netanyahu was also banking on his speech to shore up his credentials as a tough-talking guarantor of Israeli national security to include having Washington in his pocket. He hoped to benefit in the impending national elections, which are taking place today.

But Netanyahu may have received more blowback than benefits from his maneuvering with the U.S. Congress. His formulaic speech was heavily criticized even by Israel’s friends, damaging Tel Aviv’s relationship with the Democratic Party and possibly even dooming his chance for reelection due to the adverse reaction to the visit among Israelis.

And the letter to Iran’s appearance five days after the speech certainly hints at collusion and possibly more than that. It suggests that nearly half of the United States Senate, having received its marching orders from Netanyahu, was prepared to go forth and tighten the screws on Iran. The letter states, inaccurately, “that anything not approved by Congress is a mere executive agreement [that] the next president could revoke...with the stroke of a pen and future Congresses could modify...” It advises that “any unilateral executive agreement is one the [the Iranians] accept at their own peril.”

The letter, which undercuts the authority of the American president before an international audience, is undeniably a threat intended to derail negotiations. It was responded to by Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif, who called the letter a “propaganda ploy” observing that “it is very interesting that while negotiations are still in progress and while no agreement has been reached, some political pressure groups are so afraid even of the prospect of an agreement that they resort

to unconventional methods, unprecedented in diplomatic history...If the current negotiation with P5+1 results in a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it will not be a bilateral agreement between Iran and the US, but rather one that will be concluded with the participation of five other countries, including all permanent members of the Security Council, and will also be endorsed by a Security Council resolution.” He added that the “letter in fact undermines the credibility of thousands of such mere executive agreements that have been or will be entered into by the US with various other governments” and concluded that revoking an agreement would be a “blatant violation of international law.”

The letter’s alleged author, 37 year old freshman Senator Cotton, had been in office all of 62 days when the document was sent directly to the government in Tehran on March 8th. He had started circulating the draft for signatures the day after Netanyahu spoke, suggesting that it was already prepared and not a spontaneous act. An Army veteran with combat tours, Cotton is a hardliner chickenhawk though minus the chicken, which makes him a valuable commodity in the exclusive armchair warrior club that some call the Republican Party. But even that fraternity has sometimes found him too extreme. In 2014 he told voters that ISIS was working with Mexican drug cartels to stage attacks in Arkansas and while a Congressman he sought to imprison the entire families of those suspected of violating Iran sanctions, to include the grandchildren of the convicted.

Cotton is inevitably very fond of Israel. Whether it is genuine, opportunistic or just a *quid pro quo* is difficult to say. In January he tried to strengthen sanctions against Iran and he stated his belief that the talks over the nuclear program should be abandoned. It has been observed that most of the defenders of his letter are also leading components of the Israel Lobby, but there is more to it than that. In his Senatorial campaign last year Cotton received \$960,250 from Bill Kristol’s Emergency Committee for Israel plus \$165,000 from Paul Singer’s Elliott Management hedge fund. Both Kristol and Singer have been active in opposing Iran talks and it should be noted also that neither lives in Arkansas.

There have also been suggestions that Cotton did not in fact write the letter. Former American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) staffer M.J. Rosenberg believes that it was produced by that organization, which appears probable as 46 Senators would have been unlikely to sign on to a letter produced by a new and untested Senator otherwise. Some others look to Kristol, who regards Cotton as a protégé much as he once nurtured the unforgettable Sarah Palin. Rosenberg explains “nothing happens on Capitol Hill related to Israel unless and until Howard Kohr (AIPAC chief) wants it to happen. Nothing.”

More than 165,000 Americans have signed a petition calling Cotton’s letter treasonous. Behind that outrage we have a speech, a letter and the usual banal tale of corruption, opportunism and money. And it is all starts with Israel, a foreign country that has somehow inserted itself into the American political DNA. Interestingly, the Cotton letter hit the news cycle on the very day that Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman were in the news in Israel. Netanyahu announced that there would be “no withdrawals” from the Israeli occupied West Bank and no “concessions” to the Palestinians. Even the generally supine *New York Times* had to opine that it cast doubts about “his declared commitment to the two-state solution.”

Lieberman meanwhile called for the beheading of Israel's Arab citizens who "oppose us." So much for the billions of dollars given to Israel and the irreparable damage to American interests. All successive administrations in Washington have succeeded in doing is empowering racist fanatics like Lieberman while the American people have gained nothing. And as often happens when the Palestinians are on the business end of the Israeli boot the Netanyahu and Lieberman comments were hardly noticed in the U.S. mainstream media, conveniently overshadowed by the bigger story of Iran and the Senator Cotton letter.