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Israel's Strategy: Divide and Rule

By Justin Raimondo

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While the Israel lobby is blanketing the US media with propaganda to the effect that Iran cannot be trusted to adhere to the terms of any agreement limiting its nuclear research and development, back in Tel Aviv Bibi and his government know better. *Ha'aretz* has the story:

"Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at a recent meeting of the security cabinet that if a comprehensive nuclear agreement between Iran and the six world powers is indeed signed by the June 30 deadline, the greatest concern is that Tehran will fully implement it without violations, two senior Israeli officials said."

The problem for the Israelis isn't that the Iranians can't be trusted to keep the agreement. Quite the opposite:

"According to the two senior officials, Netanyahu said during the meeting that he feared that the 'Iranians will keep to every letter in the agreement if indeed one is signed at the end of June.'

"One official said: 'Netanyahu said at the meeting that it would be impossible to catch the Iranians cheating simply because they will not break the agreement.'"

Hey, wait a minute – so what about the much touted Second Holocaust that's supposed to happen if our Secret Muslim of a President succeeds in getting the agreement past a hostile Congress?

What about all the kvetching and gnashing of teeth over the “existential threat” supposedly looming over Israel?

Bibi has been telling us Iran is on the threshold of building a nuclear arsenal capable of destroying Israel for the past decade: in five years, in three years, in a few months – the Existential Threat is forever on the verge, about to emerge. Yet it never happened, perhaps because Tehran has no intention of provoking the international community in such a manner. However, Bibi does have a point: given its present resources, Iran could in fact produce enough fissile material for a bomb in a few months, six at the most – although measures of so-called “breakout time” are highly problematic.

Be that as it may, the fact is that, as things now stand, Iran could go nuclear in a year or less – unless Tehran reaches some sort of agreement with the P5+1. So why is Bibi working so furiously to nix it?

Because it’s not about nukes. The Iranians know that if they go down that road the West will strike, and, aside from that, their Supreme Leader has issued a fatwa condemning nuclear weapons per se. The whole issue has been phony from the very beginning, even phonier than the “weapons of mass destruction” accusations hurled at Iraq. The real issue is Iran’s very existence – its size, its resources, its position as the epicenter of Shi’ite power in the region.

Confronted with Muslim neighbors united in their hostility to the Jewish state, Tel Aviv’s strategy has always been “divide and conquer.” And the logical dividing point is the historic split between the Sunnis and the Shi’ites. While the Israelis initially played off groups like Hamas against the relatively secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – tolerating if not nurturing the former to provide a counterweight to Yasser Arafat – the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world provided them with new opportunities.

Once secular resistance to Israeli regional dominance was out of the way – with the PLO domesticated, Saddam Hussein eliminated, and Syria’s Ba’athist regime up against the wall – the Israelis pivoted to a tacit alliance with the Saudis and the Gulf states against their main enemy: Tehran. This is the meaning of their tactical support to Syria’s “moderate” Islamist rebels, backed by the Saudis and the Gulf emirates: in their lobbying efforts, Israel’s amen corner in the US has gone to bat for the “fund the rebels” campaign. And when Al Qaeda established an outpost contiguous to Israel it highlighted how easily the two get along: instead of battling attacks across the border, Israeli sightseers travel there to watch the rebels fight the Syrian army.

But the real battleground is here in the United States, where Congress has long been “Israeli-occupied territory,” in Pat Buchanan’s felicitous phrase. Netanyahu’s speech before Congress was just the opening shot: Israeli lobbying efforts are focused on garnering a veto-proof majority for the “Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act,” which effectively scuttles the deal under cover of “congressional review.” The Corker legislation, which has some support among Democrats, not only forbids the lifting of sanctions for 60 days but also gives the Senate and House foreign relations committees de facto veto power over the pact. At least 50 amendments are now up for consideration, and the bill is scheduled to come before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this Tuesday.

The politics of this issue are fascinating: 61% of the American people support a deal with Iran: that poll puts GOP support at about the same level, although another survey says 31% are for it, 30% oppose it, and the rest are unsure. But the Republicans running for President – all of whom have jumped on the Corker bandwagon – don't care about those numbers. All they care about is that the big donors are unalterably opposed: so if you're wondering why GOP presidential wannabes are ignoring the split in their party over this issue, then all you have to do is follow the money.

On the Democratic side support among voters for the emerging deal is overwhelming, and yet you see Senate Democratic leader-to-be Chuck Schumer coming out against it. Schumer has long been a mainstay of the Israel lobby and his support for Corker signals to Democrats that opposing the White House in this is now acceptable. The Schumer ploy underscores the Democrats' dilemma, which pits the base against the leadership. As Greg Rosenbaum, chairman of the National Jewish Democratic Council, puts it:

“The Republican Party, led by a Republican Jewish coalition, has decided the only way they can get American Jewish voters is to make Israel a partisan issue. And by making Israel a political issue, they undermine the bipartisan rationale for support of the Israel-U.S. relationship.”

Rosenbaum's problem, however, is that Netanyahu has made Israel a partisan issue by openly aligning with the GOP. Bibi's speech to Congress, arranged behind the President's back, is only the latest chapter in this ongoing story: the Israeli Prime Minister made no secret of his support for Mitt Romney in 2012. Both Mitch McConnell and John Boehner made trips to Israel as the recent Lausanne negotiations were concluding – presumably to receive their marching orders.

It's an extraordinary sight: the leaders of one of the two major parties openly aligning themselves with a foreign government in order to undermine the foreign policy of a sitting US President.

The Israeli strategy – divide and rule – has worked like a charm both in the Middle East and here in the US. Pitting Sunnis against Shi'ites and Republicans against Democrats, Tel Aviv is breaking out of the geographical encirclement it suffered for so long and is well on its way to establishing the old Zionist dream of a “Greater Israel.” With Hillary Clinton – always more pro-Israel than President Obama – poised to clinch the Democratic nomination, and given the Israeli lock on the GOP, the prospects for peace with Iran get dimmer as the days go by.

The irony is that the American people support the Iran deal, but they don't count. The Israelis are concentrating their fire on those who do count – the political class, resident in Washington, D.C. and New York. And that's the third prong of Tel Aviv's divide-and-rule strategy: the vast gulf between the politicians and the people who theoretically elect them.