

Preventing the Islamic Republic of Iran from Obtaining a Nuclear Weapon

Temple B'nai Shalom

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My dear friends,

We face enormous threats from the Islamic Republic of Iran and from the radical jihadist Islam ideology that motivates the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

We do not face a threat from the religion of Islam itself. Rather, radical and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam are motivating acts of mayhem and other terrorist violence that threaten us.

Alice and I wanted to learn more about these threats, particularly the threat from Iran as it moves toward acquiring a nuclear bomb and the capability of launching it against Israel and even against Europe and the United States. This was one reason we attended the three-day AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington last week. We came to learn about that threat in particular, but we learned so much more than we had expected. We loved it, and immediately registered to return again next March. I hope some of you will join us there.

AIPAC is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. It has a single purpose: to strengthen the relationship between America and Israel. AIPAC describes its purpose in the following mission statement: AIPAC's mission is to strengthen, protect and promote the U.S.-Israel relationship in ways that enhance the security of Israel and the United States.

The speakers at the AIPAC policy conference included Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and New Jersey Senator Robert Menendez. They both warned us, persuasively, that the terms of an agreement with Iran to limit its ability to acquire a nuclear weapon, so far as those terms have been disclosed, make the emerging agreement a bad deal. It is an agreement to which the United States should not agree.

What they told us, and what Prime Minister Netanyahu spelled out the next day when he addressed the Congress, had already been stated by other experts. By attending the AIPAC conference, however, Alice and I gained a greater understanding of the issues.

Those issues had been summarized already in an editorial in the Washington Post last month entitled "The emerging Iran nuclear deal raises major concerns."

The editorial stated that the problems with the agreement as it has been described so far can be summed up in three main points:

- First, negotiations began with the goal of eliminating Iran's potential to produce nuclear weapons. But those negotiations have now deteriorated into a plan to tolerate that capability and to restrict it only temporarily.
- Second, during the negotiations the Obama administration has declined to counter Iran's increasingly aggressive efforts to extend its influence and spread terror across the Middle East. Iran supports Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza, and the Palestinian Jihad movement in the disputed territories in Israel. Worse, our government seems ready to concede Tehran a place as a regional power at the expense of Israel and other U.S. allies.
- Finally, the Obama administration is signaling that it will seek to implement any deal it strikes with Iran without a vote by either chamber. This includes a willingness to suspend unilaterally sanctions that were originally imposed by Congress. Instead, an accord that would have far-reaching implications for nuclear proliferation and U.S. national security would be imposed by the president, acting on his own, even though he has less than two years left in his term.

The negotiations with Iran began as a multilateral effort. It was headed by the European Union and backed by six U.N. Security Council resolutions. These all shared one stated purpose: "to deny Iran the capability to develop a military nuclear option."

That purpose has now been seriously diluted, or even abandoned. Now the negotiations have become an essentially bilateral negotiation between the United States and Iran over the scope of Iran's capability, not its existence.

Our purpose at the beginning was to eliminate Iran's ability to enrich uranium. No longer. Now we appear to be ready to accept an infrastructure of thousands of Iranian centrifuges.

We now say our goal is to limit and monitor that infrastructure so that, in theory, Iran could not produce the material for a warhead in less than a year.

But both Netanyahu and Menendez warned that the prospective deal being discussed would leave Iran as a nuclear-threshold state. The world would theoretically have time to respond if Tehran chose to build a weapon. But even these limited restrictions would remain in force for only a decade or so. After that, Iran would be free to expand its production of potential bomb materials. As Netanyahu said to the Congress, "The deal does not block Iran's path to a bomb. Rather, this deal paves the way to a bomb."

Netanyahu and Menendez also warned that this arrangement would very likely prompt other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, to begin working right now to try to match Iran's threshold capability. As a result the negotiations would not prevent proliferation, but would merely try to manage it. Even if we succeeded, the world would be living very close to the trigger point.

Beyond all that, we heard great skepticism that Iran could be prevented from cheating on any arrangement and acquiring a bomb by stealth. As a frightening

previous example shows, the effort by the United States to negotiate the end of North Korea's nuclear program failed after the regime covertly expanded its facilities. With Iran, a nation that has proven to be very untrustworthy, the end result is more likely to be a North Korean situation if the existing infrastructure is not dismantled.

Finally, the Obama administration at one time portrayed the nuclear negotiations as distinct from the problem of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, its attempts to establish hegemony over the Arab Middle East and its declared goal of eliminating Israel. Yet while the talks have proceeded, President Obama has offered assurances to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that the two countries have shared interests in the region.

Meanwhile, a militia sponsored by Iran recently overthrew the U.S.-backed government of Yemen. Rather than contest the Iranian bid for regional hegemony, as has every previous U.S. administration since the 1970s, President Obama appears ready to concede Iran a place in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond. This policy is viewed with alarm by Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey, among other allies.

Finally, we heard concerns about process. Will the Congress have a role in deciding whether the United States should accept the deal? It seems the Obama administration may try to prevent that, by signing a deal with Iran that is not reviewed by Congress.

That is wrong. A major decision like this must be one that wins the support of Congress and the country. Unilateral action by the President without a vote by Congress would alienate even President Obama's strongest congressional supporters. It would also mean that a deal with Iran could be reversed by the next president, a point that Republican senators made just this week in a letter to Iran.

It's easy to conclude that President Obama wishes to avoid congressional review because he suspects a bipartisan majority would oppose the deal he is prepared to make. If so, the right response to the questions now being raised is either to insist on better terms from Iran or convince the doubters that an accord blessing and preserving Iran's nuclear potential is better than all possible alternatives. Alice and I left the conference convinced that it would be better to insist on better terms or walk away than to accept the terms of a bad deal.

What can we do? The answer to this question we also learned at the AIPAC conference. We can urge our senators to support the bill now pending, introduced by Senator Menendez, that insists on congressional oversight and seeks a deal that meets our needs and Israel's needs for security against a nuclear Iran.

The bill is Senate Bill Number 615. The bill's title is "The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015." It establishes a procedure for congressional review of any nuclear agreement with Iran. Under its provisions, Congress could pass a joint resolution objecting to an agreement and barring any statutory sanctions relief. On such a critical issue to U.S. national security, Congress must assert its historic role in foreign policy, review any agreement, and object to an agreement if it will not prevent a nuclear-capable Iran.

Here are the key provisions of the bill:

- Provides a 60-day period for Congress to review any agreement, during which time no additional sanctions relief could be granted to Iran.
- Prohibits the president from providing statutory sanctions relief if Congress adopts a joint resolution disapproving of the agreement.
- Requires a presidential determination that any Iranian nuclear activities permitted under the agreement will not be used to further any nuclear-related military or nuclear explosive purpose.
- Requires the secretary of state to conclude a verification assessment report to determine the extent to which Iran's compliance with the agreement can be verified.
- Requires the president to notify Congress of any credible and accurate information related to a potentially significant breach of the agreement.
- Provides for expedited consideration of legislation reinstating sanctions if Iran materially breaches the agreement.

This week I will send my sermon to the congregation by email. When I do that I will include a link that makes it easy for you to urge Senators Markey and Warren to support this bill.

I am concerned, however, that one or both of them could resist because, as Democrats, they may feel they need to support President Obama. So I will also recommend in my email that you contact friends and relatives who live in other states and urge them to contact their senators about this.

My friends, I had intended to speak today also about ISIS, the Islamic State that has declared itself a caliphate and is a growing threat in the same neighborhood of the Middle East. But that subject is too complex to cover in the time I have today. So next week I will speak about that threat and suggest what we can do about that.

Finally, I know I am addressing a political matter, and I'm always concerned about doing that from this bima because I have the microphone and you don't. So before we turn to the Musaf service, I'd like to leave a few minutes for questions or comments about Iran and its nuclear threat and what I've said this morning. If you have a question or comment, please raise your hand so we can have some discussion before moving on to the conclusion of our service.

POINTS MADE IN THE DISCUSSION THAT FOLLOWED:

- Netanyahu's Israel election campaign ran an ad in Israel just before the speech to Congress comparing him to Ben-Gurion in 1948, undermining his claims that the speech was unrelated to the Israeli election

- Netanyahu has been warning for two decades in repeated speeches that Iran is just about to get the bomb imminently. His warnings have always proved wrong, casting doubt on his prognostication this time.
- In the 1930's multiple warnings about Hitler were ignored. We cannot afford to ignore such warnings, even if we have doubts about the messenger.
- Netanyahu and Menendez and the Washington Post argue that the emerging agreement is a bad deal, but they offer no realistic alternative. They propose terms they want Iran to accept, but don't have a strategy for forcing that acceptance.
- A military effort to stop the Iranian program does not seem likely or feasible.
- The bottom line: whatever the terms of the negotiated agreement, Congress should have a say in its acceptance because Congress represents the people of the United States and we will have to live with the consequences of the agreement. Moreover, the administration plans to present the agreement to the United Nations and to ask the Security Council to accept it; our own Congress should also have that role.