

Time to Be A Statesman, Not a Partisan

Prime Minister Harper's trip to Israel and the West Bank will not be just a simple filling out of his *resumé* and staging a series of photo-ops geared to the 2015 election—although it will certainly be both of those things. The domestic Canadian politics of the visit have been made more urgent by the Liberals' point that Justin Trudeau has already been to Israel and the curiously incurious Prime Minister has not, either before coming to office or in the eight years since. Beyond the "comms plans" and optics, though, it is the substance that matters, as the visit falls in the middle of some of the most politically and strategically fraught negotiations of our times--the quest for a two state solution for Israel and Palestine and the curtailing of the Iranian nuclear program. Success or failure in each of these talks will have profound consequences, including for Canadians. The national interest requires the Prime Minister to be more statesman than partisan.

The alleged Iranian nuclear weapons program will likely be preoccupying PM Harper's Israeli hosts. Jerusalem has gone to great lengths to warn that a nuclear weapon-equipped Iran would be a danger to Israel and could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey seek means to deter Iran and defend themselves. Were all that to happen, Israel's nuclear deterrent would lose some or all of its value and its own strategic situation would become near incalculably complex. Under pressure from Israel the US has sworn not just to "contain" Iran but to use force if necessary to prevent the Shia state from producing nuclear weapons. Despite the posturing in Jerusalem, the view is widely held that on its own Israel could only interrupt Iran's nuclear program briefly not stop it and that American participation, even leadership, in attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities would be indispensable to any mission's operational success. The American time frame for any such military action is considerably longer and more conditional than Tel Aviv's because of Washington's vastly greater technical capability and the president's sharing of the public's skepticism of preventive wars.

The unintended consequences of a military attack on Iran would probably include the destruction of the international consensus for imposing sanctions on Iran; redoubled determination on the part of Iranian hardliners to escape the confines of the Non-Proliferation Treaty; deepening

Muslim hatred of the US (and Israel) for an attack on yet another Muslim country; opportunistic political profit-taking by Moscow and Beijing; disruption of oil and possibly financial markets at least temporarily and the concomitant impacts on European economies; and destruction of potentially thousands of lives.

Those are some of the consequences if the attack succeeds in crippling the Iranian nuclear program. A failed operation would be all that and worse, not least, the shredding of Israel's political and military reputation. Further, Americans' attitudes towards Israel could be undermined if the US public, already fed up with fighting in the Middle East, came to believe that Israel had dragged them into another war.

For all of Prime Minister Netanyahu's outrage, real or feigned for bad cop effect, the temporary deal and the ongoing negotiations between Teheran and Security Council members on the Iranian nuclear program is vastly preferable to war. The negotiations might lead Iran to accept limits on its nuclear program, pull Teheran out of its isolation and lead to more normal relations with a democracy-hungry Iranian people. The Iranians have not eternally been enemies of the US or of Israel. Times can change.

The Iranian and Palestinian issues are linked, at least indirectly. The Israeli government's determination to keep building settlements is eroding support for Israel internationally at precisely the time it needs international legitimacy to attract support for action against Iran. In the words of former Israeli national security adviser Uzi Arad "the Prime Minister (Netanyahu) has been dealing with Iran as if there were no Palestine and Palestine as if there were no Iran" (quoted by Ari Shavit in "Does This Mean War?" Haaretz, 2012). But, for Israel, the road to Teheran runs through Washington because the decision-makers on Iran are the decision-makers on Palestine. In addition to its intrinsic merits, an agreement on a two-state solution would give Washington greater "cover" in the Middle East, and in the mid-West too, for military action if Teheran proved intransigent. Given these highly complex circumstances, Prime Minister Harper needs to take special care not to complicate Secretary Kerry's efforts, and to contribute judiciously to them where he can.