

Groups Fear Public Backlash Over Iran

Forward Staff | Fri. Feb 02, 2007

While Jewish communal leaders focus most of their current lobbying efforts on pressing the United States to take a tough line against Iran and its nuclear program, some are privately voicing fears that they will be accused of driving America into a war with the regime in Tehran.

In early advocacy efforts on the issue, Jewish organizations stressed the threat that a nuclear Iran would pose to Israel in light of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's calls to "wipe Israel off the map."

Now, with concerns mounting that Israel and its supporters might be blamed for any military confrontation, Jewish groups are seeking to widen their argument, asserting that an Iranian nuclear bomb would threaten the West and endanger pro-American Sunni Muslim states in the region.

Jess Hordes, Washington director of the Anti-Defamation League, said that the strategy of broadening the case against Iran was not an attempt to divert attention from the threats to Israel. "It is a fact that Iran is a danger to the whole world," Hordes said. "We are not just saying it to hide our concerns about Israel."

Yet many advocacy efforts, even when not linked to Israel, carry indelibly Jewish fingerprints. Last week, Jewish groups claimed victory when the United Nations approved a resolution denouncing Holocaust denial, with Iran's regime as the obvious target. Additionally, numerous Jewish activists are pressing in advertisements and Internet appeals for Ahmadinejad to be indicted in The Hague for incitement to genocide.

In warning of possible scapegoating, insiders point to the experience of the Iraq War. Since the initial invasion in 2003, antiwar groups have charged, with growing vehemence, that the war was promoted by Jewish groups acting in Israel's interest — even though the invasion enjoyed bipartisan backing and popular support, and was not at the top of most Jewish organizations' agendas. The Iraq backlash prompted former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon to order in 2005 that his ministers keep a low profile on Iran.

Now, however, Jewish groups are indeed playing a lead role in pressing for a hard line on Iran. The campaign comes at a time when President Bush's popularity has reached record lows and members of both parties are cautioning against a rush toward war.

Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, addressed the fears head-on last week in an address to Israel's prestigious Herzliya Conference. Lamenting what he called "the poisoning of America," Hoenlein painted a dire picture of American public discourse turning increasingly anti-Jewish and anti-Israel in the year ahead.

Hoenlein dated the trend to the 2005 arrest of two former employees of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman, on charges of passing classified national security

information. Hoenlein argued that the Jewish community made a major mistake by not forcefully criticizing the arrests. Speaking via video, Hoenlein listed several events that had occurred since then: the release of the essay criticizing the "Israel Lobby" by two distinguished professors, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer; the publication of former president Jimmy Carter's best-selling book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid"; the suggestion by former NATO supreme commander and Democratic presidential candidate Wesley Clark that "New York money people" were pushing America into war, and claims by former U.S. weapons inspector Scott Ritter that Israel is pushing the United States to attack Iran.

"In the beginning of the Iraq war they talked about the 'neocons' as a code word," Hoenlein said. "Now we see that code words are no longer necessary." He warned that the United States is nearing a situation similar to that of Britain, where delegitimization of Israel is widespread.

"This is a cancer that starts from the top and works its way down," he said. "It poisons the opinions among elites which trickle down into society."

According to Hoenlein, such critics tend not only to delegitimize Israel but also to "intimidate American Jews not to speak out." He called on American Jews to take action against this phenomenon, saying that Christian Zionists seemed at times more willing than Jews to fight back.

Another instance of casting blame, less widely reported, was attributed to former secretary of state Colin Powell. In a new biography, by Washington Post writer Karen De Young, Powell is said to have put at least some of the blame for the Iraq war on Jewish groups. The book, "Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell," claims that Powell used to refer to the pro-war advisers surrounding former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld as the "Jinsa crowd." Jinsa is the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, a hawkish think tank that supported the Iraq war.

Thomas Neumann, Jinsa's executive director, said he was not offended by Powell's reference, although he was surprised that the former secretary of state would single out a Jewish group when naming those who supported the war. "I am not accusing Powell of anything, but these are words that the antisemites will use in the future," Neumann said.

Whatever worries exist about a negative backlash over Israel, they have not deterred Jewish and pro-Israel activists from publicly pressing for tough U.S. action against Tehran or invoking concern for Israel.

A particularly forceful argument for a hard line against Iran appeared this week in The New Republic, a Washington insider journal widely viewed as a bellwether of pro-Israel opinion. The lengthy article, written by two respected Israeli writers, Michael Oren and Yossi Klein Halevi, both fellows at the Shalem Center, a hawkish Jerusalem think tank, names Iran as the main threat to Israeli survival, regional stability and to the entire world order. This theme has been echoed in publications and press releases put out by most major Jewish groups, including Aipac and the Conference of Presidents.

"The international community now has an opportunity to uphold that order," Oren and Klein Halevi wrote. "If it fails, then Israel will have no choice but to uphold its role as refuge of the Jewish people. A Jewish state that allows itself to be threatened with nuclear weapons — by a country that denies the genocide against Europe's six million Jews while threatening Israel's six million Jews — will forfeit its right to speak in the name of Jewish history."

Debate in Washington intensified last month when the U.S. military began to move against Iranian agents in Iraq. The spotlight has now turned to the Democratic-led Congress, with both hardliners and doves anxiously seeking to gauge lawmakers' reactions to the crisis. Democratic Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, an outspoken critic of Bush's foreign policy, last week introduced a non-binding resolution requiring congressional approval for any American military action against Iran. "To forestall a looming disaster, Congress must act to save the checks and balances established by the Constitution," Byrd said in a statement when presenting his proposed resolution. In the House, Republican Rep. Ron Paul of Texas introduced a resolution calling on the administration to adopt the Iraq Study Group recommendations and to engage with Iran. Also in the House, the 70-member Progressive Caucus held a public forum last week on alternatives to preemptive war against Iran.

Many Democrats, however, are treading lightly. Though many favor talks with Iran — including Rep. Tom Lantos of California, chair of the House International Relations Committee — there is still no significant move in Congress toward barring the president from taking military action against Iran.

Congressional sources speculated this week that Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, might take the lead on such a measure. On January 11, Biden sent a letter to Bush stating that Congress has not authorized any military incursion into Iran or Syria. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat, also stressed the need for congressional approval prior to any military action.

A Democratic staffer described this week the sense of frustration Democrats are feeling over the president's stance toward Iran. "The administration has now the worst of all worlds," the staffer said. "It blocked any diplomatic channel with Iran and at the same time cannot generate the needed sympathy for the issue among the Russians and Chinese in order to apply pressure on Iran."

Jewish organizational officials and pro-Israel lobbyists on Capitol Hill downplayed the possibility that Congress might play a significant role in limiting the administration's response to Iranian nuclear ambitions. "It is very premature," one lobbyist said. "The administration has no war plan and Congress has no plan to block such a war."

If military action is ultimately needed to deal with the issue, it will be difficult to secure public support, because the administration "lied" about intelligence before the Iraq war, said Rep. Jerrold Nadler, a New York Democrat.

"The fact that the administration lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq means that if we get into a real problem with Iran and if it's coming to a crunch there, God forbid, about nuclear weapons, it will be very, very hard for the administration to convince anybody just because they have a record of such dishonesty," Nadler said. "The administration lied about Iraq, and one of the consequences of lying is that people don't believe you even when you're telling the truth."

Nathan Guttman in Washington, with reporting by Daniel Treiman from New York.

Comments disabled

No comments