

Why Netanyahu Spurns an Iran Deal

With new Iranian leadership eager for détente, a negotiated settlement over its nuclear program is within reach. But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appears determined to torpedo an agreement and press ahead toward war, a prospect that ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar addresses.

By Paul R. Pillar

Benjamin Netanyahu will not support any agreement between the United States and Iran. Or to be more precise, he will not support any agreement that is at all reasonable and in both U.S. and Iranian interests and thus has any chance of being negotiated.

Give Netanyahu credit for consistency: he has long made it abundantly clear that he has no use at all for any negotiations with Iran or for any settlement of differences with Iran, on the nuclear issue or on anything else.

Netanyahu thus is doing what he can to destroy the prospects for an agreement. This includes his usual scare-mongering as well as rhetorical tactics such as trying to equate Iran to North Korea. He has depicted Iranian President Hassan Rouhani as representing nothing new and ordered a boycott of Rouhani's speech at the United Nations before he heard a word of what the Iranian said.

In particular, Netanyahu is making demands that he knows would be deal-killers and suggesting that anyone who does not agree with those demands is endangering the security of Israel.

Perhaps if a fantasy agreement somehow were reached in which the government of Iran declares that it has been evil and mistaken all these years, agrees to demolish all facilities having anything to do with its nuclear program, invites teams from the Israeli Defense Forces into Iran to perform the demolition, and has President Rouhani agreeing to use his Twitter account not only to convey Rosh Hashanah greetings but also to recite lyrics from *Hatikvah*, then Netanyahu would announce his support for the agreement.

To understand Netanyahu's posture one needs to realize that it is not only, or maybe even primarily, about a possible Iranian nuclear weapon. It is partly a matter of heading off any rapprochement between Iran and the United States, which would weaken the Israeli claim to being America's sole reliable and important partner in the Middle East.

It is partly a matter of sustaining the Iranian nuclear issue as the regularly invoked "real problem" in the region that serves to divert attention from

matters the Israeli government would rather not talk about or be the subject of international scrutiny. And it is partly a matter of Netanyahu riding a topic he has made a signature issue of his own in Israeli domestic politics and a basis for his claim to tough-guy leadership.

It is pointless to talk about how an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 could be fashioned to win Netanyahu's acceptance, because such acceptance will not be forthcoming. Anyone interested in the peaceful resolution of differences with Iran needs instead to view Netanyahu, and the Israeli Right of which he is a part, and those in the United States who unthinkingly and automatically follow his lead, as irredeemable spoilers and to think about how their efforts at spoiling can be countered.

One way to counter them is to talk directly to Netanyahu's bosses: the Israeli people. Ordinary Israelis, most of whom have not performed strategic analysis about what an Iranian nuclear weapon would or would not mean and instead approach the subject on a more emotional level, have genuine and understandable concerns about such a weapon if one were to materialize. They would have understandable concerns even without their leadership incessantly stoking fears about the subject.

The Israeli people need to be spoken to about what is the best way to achieve their objective of avoiding an Iranian nuclear weapon. They need to have explained to them why a negotiated agreement with Iran is that way, and why their prime minister's way is not.

This will not cause the prime minister to end his efforts at spoiling, but it might energize other voices in Israel and help to make the spoiler-in-chief's efforts less credible, reduce any Israeli backing for Netanyahu taking the ultimate spoiling step of launching his own military attack on Iran, and lead those in the United States who really care about Israeli security to think again about falling in line behind Netanyahu.

This is certainly not the only important issue on which Netanyahu's government is acting contrary to the interests of Israel and its citizens. It would be great to hear more plain speaking by American leaders on those other issues, and on how Israelis are not being well-served by their own leaders. Unfortunately we have not heard much of that, but the Iranian nuclear issue is as good a one as any on which to start. Ideally Israelis would hear such a message from the very top of American leadership.

The Israeli government has complained about a paucity of trips to Israel by President Obama. So it could hardly stand in the way of a trip even if it knew it was for this purpose. Netanyahu's government also could hardly deny him the

privilege of addressing the Knesset for this purpose.

The government let it be known it was unhappy Obama did *not* address the Knesset on his last trip to Israel. And of course Netanyahu has been given the privilege of performing before the U.S. Congress, with members repeatedly jumping up and down out of their seats as if they had ants in their pants.

More calculation would have to be devoted to the timing of delivering such a message, relative to where negotiations with the Iranians stood. But were such a public message to be delivered, it ought to contain passages similar to these:

My friends, the people of Israel—

You need make no apologies for having strong concerns about the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon. Anyone who knows anything about the history of the Jewish people and what has been inflicted upon them in the past, or who has listened to outrageous and hateful rhetoric about Israel from some past Iranian leaders, can appreciate those concerns. The United States not only appreciates them; it shares them.

Even the closest of allies have differences, sometimes over goals, sometimes over the best ways to achieve those goals. The governments of the United States and Israel have their differences. But there is no difference over a commitment to the security of the State of Israel. And there is no difference over the objective of avoiding an Iranian nuclear weapon. On these matters, there is no daylight between us.

The commitment of the United States to the objective of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon is demonstrated by the extraordinary measures it has taken, by itself and as a leader of international coalitions, toward that end. Those measures have included in particular one of the most comprehensive sets of sanctions ever imposed on a state, sometimes at economic and other cost to the United States.

So we agree on the goal. All that remains for us, Israelis and Americans, to talk about is the best way to achieve that goal. All those sanctions I just mentioned begin to point to that way. For if the sanctions are not to be just a spiteful way of inflicting pain on a country we may not like, but instead are really going to be put in the service of our shared goal, then they have to be used as leverage.

That means using them to obtain an agreement that gives the Iranians the sanctions relief they seek in order for us to gain what we seek: arrangements that will assure us that Iran's nuclear activities will not be used for any military purpose.

A negotiated agreement is the only way we can obtain such assurance. Whatever you or we may think about Iran, it is a sovereign state that neither one of us can control. We will get what we want from the Iranians only as part of an agreement in which they get much of what they want. The shape of such an agreement has been apparent for sometime, even though distrust and politics on each side have prevented us from getting there until now.

There is simply no other way to achieve our shared goal. Other paths not only would not achieve it but would entail major other costs and risks as well, to Israel as well as to the United States. Threats and pressure alone will not do the job. Iran is a proud state, as is Israel and as is the United States. Just as neither you nor we would give in to demands some other state might make of us under threats and pressure, we should not engage in wishful thinking that Iran would do so.

The use of military force would not do the job. It would not erase technical know-how. Worse, it would almost certainly lead the Iranian regime to take a decision which, according to the Israeli and U.S. intelligence services, it has not taken, which is to build a nuclear weapon.

Rather than achieving our goal, the goal would be thrown beyond our grasp. Iran under those circumstances also probably would renounce its international obligations regarding nuclear activities and would end all international inspection arrangements on its territory. This would be the opposite of the enhanced inspection measures which, under a negotiated agreement, would provide our most direct assurance that Iran's nuclear activities were being limited to peaceful purposes.

Worst of all, the use of military force would condemn Israel to unending warfare with another major regional state. That is not something I would wish on you, our Israeli friends, any more than I would wish it on Americans.

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Christianity's Contradictions on War

Though based on the pacifist teachings of Jesus, Christianity has been an accomplice to more wars and genocides than any other religion, a paradox

reflected in the contradictory views of 16th Century protestant reformer Martin Luther and 20th Century civil rights martyr Martin Luther King Jr., as Gary G. Kohls explains.

By Gary G. Kohls

Like the vast majority of Christian religious leaders of his era, Martin Luther, the Father of the Protestant Reformation, met the definition of a "Constantinian" Christian, that is a Christian who espoused theological teachings that were tolerant of violence and accepted non-democratic, authoritarian and male-dominant practices. Those teachings represented the theological framework of the Christian church that became the state religion starting with the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early Fourth Century.

Luther also was an Augustinian monk, an order named after Augustine of Hippo, who died in 430 and was later canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. St. Augustine regarded the nonviolent ethical teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as simply metaphorical and therefore irrelevant in times of crisis. Augustine epitomized Constantinian Christianity, and Luther was a good student of Augustine.

Indeed, most of the influential religious leaders of the 1500s (including Luther, John Calvin, Henry VIII and the various popes) seemed to have an unwritten ecumenical agreement that you could kill one another and still be following Jesus. A cursory reading of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation Wars that drenched Europe in the blood of Christian killing Christian in the 16th Century will attest to that statement.

Constantinian-type Christianity (in stark contrast to Sermon on the Mount Christianity, which was the original form of that religion and the norm during the first few generations of its existence) follows a number of aberrant, anti-gospel, violence-tolerant church teachings that had been blessed by the murderous Emperor Constantine. Many of those teachings were made doctrinal by Augustine.

Constantine, it should be pointed out, was a ruthless military dictator who had rivals and even had members of his family killed. He was never a Christian in his lifetime and only consented to being baptized when he was on his deathbed. Augustine shaped his theology to be in conformity with the authoritarian, obedience-demanding, pro-violence, justified-war politics of the emperor; and Luther followed suit.

The Lutheran Church

Luther's reformation attempts created great schisms in Christianity when he tried to reform a corrupted Roman Catholic Church by endorsing violent means and therefore predictably failed to bring any peaceful Christ-like transformation to the "reformed" church. (See the horrific details of the massacres in the Peasant's War of 1525 that Luther endorsed and that ruthlessly put down a peasant's liberation movement.)

I was born and raised Lutheran but have always been uncomfortable with Lutheranism's tendencies towards conservative politics, conservative theologies, flag-waving patriotism and teachings that tend to justify (or be silent about) American war-making. (Those tendencies are also prevalent in other American Protestant churches.)

After considerable study of the history and theology of the earliest form of Christianity, I now know that the Protestant church's simplistic acceptance of their nation's wars is totally contrary to the ethical teachings of the nonviolent Jesus which was faithfully taught by the earliest communities of faith.

After being confronted with these truths about the early pacifist church, my theology and politics have both moved to the opposite end of the theological spectrum of the church of my birth, toward the left-wing, pacifist, anti-fascist, nonviolent teachings of Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr. and away from the traditional violence-justifying doctrines of Augustine and Martin Luther.

In Luther's defense however, he did make three insightful statements which resonate with me and which give me some hope that the Protestant churches might wake up some day and start teaching what Jesus taught.

As has been the experience of so many other non-violent (and therefore anti-war) Christian activists, King's commitment to the Sermon on the Mount ethics of Jesus has shaped my response to America's current Bush/Obama foreign policies of aggressive militarism and perpetual war (and the inevitable civilian deaths, refugeeism, starvation, pestilence and the spiritual and economic bankruptcy of the nations that participate in war).

Failing to Preach the Gospel

Here are three statements from the writings of Martin Luther, which Martin Luther King would have approved:

—"The church that preaches the gospel in all of its fullness, except as it applies to the great social ills of the day, is failing to preach the gospel."

—"War is the greatest plague that can afflict humanity; it destroys religions,

it destroys states, it destroys families. Any scourge is preferable to it.”

–And then this profoundly important exchange, in which Luther taught one of his followers to trust the ethics of the gospel rather than the threats from his war-making government and courageously become a selective conscientious objector to war.

The questioner asked: “Suppose my lord was wrong in going to war?”

Luther: “If you know for sure that he is wrong, then you should fear God rather than men (Acts 5:29), and you should neither fight nor serve. For you cannot have a good conscience before God.”

Questioner: “Oh, no, you say, my lord would force me to do it; he would take away my fief and would not give me my money, pay and wages. Besides I would be despised and put to shame as a coward, even worse as a man who did not keep his word and deserted his lord in time of need.”

Luther: “I answer: You must take that risk and, with God’s help, let whatever happens, happen. He can restore you a hundred fold as he promises in the gospel”

I suspect that Luther’s wisdom in those statements developed in his later years, for surely a more spiritually mature Luther would have recognized the suffering of the impoverished and oppressed peasants (that ultimately led to the Peasant’s War of 1525) as one of the great social ills of his day.

In the years immediately prior to 1525, the peasants, inspired by Luther’s anti-church/anti-establishment revolutionary teachings, were finally rising up against their perennial oppressors: the ruling elite, the wealthy landowners and the authoritarian Catholic Church.

Initially the peasants protested nonviolently. They submitted written demands that they be granted their human rights. Tragically, as is still happening in these modern times, the protest movement was brutally put down by the establishment’s obedient soldiers and the peasants were compelled to resort to defensive violence, which ended badly for them (shades of the recent nonviolent protests in Egypt and Syria.)

Luther’s Betrayal of the Peasants

Luther shocked the peasants when he betrayed them and sided with the one percent ruling elite, whose well-armed soldiers slaughtered them in that brief war. Luther forever lost the support of the peasantry when he actually called for their annihilation. Luther wrote in a tract:

“These are strange times, when a prince can achieve heaven by killing peasants

more assuredly than other men can with prayer.”

The reality that the briefly optimistic peasants hadn't comprehended was that their oppressors were the very ones that had protected Luther from being hunted down and killed by the soldiers of the pope.

Any thoughtful, fair-minded, ethical American must conclude that the Bush/Cheney administration's stated 2001 foreign policy of perpetual war and the continuation of unaffordable, bloated military budgets are two of the great social ills of our time. But war (despite the rape, pillage, starvation and destitution that inevitably goes along with it) seems to be a taboo subject in most of the churches of which I am familiar.

Modern wars can justifiably be described as organized mass slaughter that mostly kills and maims innocent civilians. It is a sobering reality that 80 to 90 percent of the casualties of modern warfare are unarmed non-combatant civilians, largely women and children.

The failure to protect non-combatants in war, according to the Christian Just War Theory, makes that war an unjust one and, in terms of the teachings of moral theology, that makes the killing in that war murder. And that, of course, makes the planners, perpetrators and participants in such wars murderers or accomplices to murder.

Martin Luther King Echoed Jesus

The heroic martyr Martin Luther King, whose prophetic work was modeled after the pacifist Jesus and the pacifist Gandhi (and not, despite his name, the war-justifying Luther), often commented on what was expected of faithful and ethical Christians in their response to injustice. King's views are best summarized by these profound but simple truths about silence in the face of evil:

–“It may well be that the greatest tragedy of this period of social change is not the glaring noisiness of the so-called bad people, but the silence of the so-called good people.”

–“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

–“Cowardice asks the question – is it safe? Expediency asks the question – is it politic? Vanity asks the question – is it popular? But conscience asks the question – is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position

that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular; but one must take it because it is right.”

Luther’s three insightful observations above are as clear as could be, as are the statements of King. The church of Jesus Christ should be paying attention to all of these ethical statements simply because they are corollaries to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount commands to “love your enemies” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” If the follower of Jesus takes these statements seriously, violence against “the other” is impossible.

A few months before his assassination on April 4, 1968, King said he didn’t want all his achievements mentioned at his funeral. What he wanted said instead was this: “Say that Martin King tried to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and that he was right on the war question.”

The vast majority of American Christian churches are silent and therefore wrong on the war questions. Even Luther’s statements on war justifiably indict them for failing to preach the full gospel.

Most of the Lutheran, Catholic and Reformed churches of the Third Reich were equally silent and wrong about the wars of both Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler. And, of course both the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Christian Germany were silent and therefore wrong – on the Jewish question.

It seems to me that true peace churches should be modeling themselves after the primitive, pacifist church of the first two centuries by courageously speaking out against wars and the inevitable cruelty, torture and slaughter that always occurs in wartime.

True peace churches should be warning about the deadly spiritual consequences for both the warriors and their victims. True peace churches should be teaching what Jesus taught about violence (forbidden) and advise their members to refuse to participate in homicidal violence of any kind.

Idealistic peace churches, sadly, represent only a tiny fraction of the churches in America, and they have no choice but to be vocal. To be silent would make them complicit with evil.

When Silence Is Betrayal

Martin Luther King understood the consequences for whistle-blowers and prophets if and when they speak out for peace and justice. He said: “There comes a time when silence is betrayalbut the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony.”

King believed in the truth and practicality of the nonviolent teachings of

Jesus, and, like Jesus, lived that way. And, contrary to the objectives of their assassins, neither their spirits nor their teachings died with them. Both are very much alive, and their spirits and inspiring words live on.

And for those who claim discipleship to the Jesus of the gospels, it should be ethically impossible to adopt the pro-violence stances of the multitude of non-peace churches, whose punitive politics and harsh theologies over the past 1,700 years have tragically dominated the Christian Church.

Jesus often taught about the coming of the Reign of God, which was all about the unconditional, nonviolent love of friends and enemies. He taught his disciples how they should live, how they should love and how they should respond when they were tempted to participate in or be silent about forms of violence such as militarism, racism, economic oppression, torture, cruelty, hunger and killing.

It is clear what Jesus taught. In so many words, he was saying that “violence is forbidden to those who wish to follow me.” The planet and the creatures trying to survive on it are in peril if the church of Martin Luther, Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesus of Nazareth continues to fail in its sacred duty to actively and nonviolently resist – and courageously speak out against – war and violence.

Dr. Kohls was a founding member of Every Church A Peace Church, which has recently merged with the Church of the Brethren’s Living Peace Church organization (<http://livingpeacechurch.tumblr.com/>). ECAPC is a 13-year-old international ecumenical movement to recover gospel nonviolence as a norm for all churches. Since its inception in 2000, ECAPC has been committed to the belief that “The church could lead the world toward peace if every church lived and taught as Jesus lived and taught.”
