

Did Saudi King 'Snub' Obama on Iran?

Exclusive: Besides following dangerous “group thinks” on big questions, like the Iraq War, the mainstream U.S. media runs as a mindless pack on smaller details, too, such as the conventional wisdom about Saudi Arabia’s “snub” of President Obama over the Iran nuclear deal, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Media coverage of politics in America all too often consists of reporters issuing seemingly authoritative declarations or quoting anonymous sources to support their prejudices about public figures. Sadly, the same lazy style of journalism, verging on malpractice, also infects coverage of foreign policy and national security, despite the profession’s soul-searching over misleading coverage leading up to the Iraq War and other notorious blunders.

The latest example could have serious consequences for public perception of the Iran nuclear deal. In the wake of Saudi King Salman’s visit to President Barack Obama last week, reporters who should know better dredged up and repeated easily refuted claims that the king “snubbed” Obama last spring to protest the then-interim “P5+1” agreement.

Their unsubstantiated claim is important for two reasons: It makes Obama look like a weak leader, out of touch with and disrespected by important U.S. allies; and it casts further doubt on the wisdom of the Iran accord, which still faces a major test in Congress.

For example, the New York Times’ Peter Baker wrote on Thursday that “King Salman, who refused Mr. Obama’s invitation to a regional summit meeting at Camp David in May in light of the discord over the Iran deal,” was only now ready to put aside his differences with the President after “months of tension.”

Similarly, Dan de Luce, chief national security correspondent for *Foreign Policy*, declared that “The newly crowned king was supposed to conduct his inaugural trip to the United States in May, but the monarch snubbed an invite to attend a summit of Gulf leaders at Camp David because of Riyadh’s strong disapproval of Washington’s nuclear negotiations with Iran.” Having “failed to stop” the agreement, Salman was now pressing Obama “to do more than simply promise to help his nation counter Iran’s proxies in the region.”

Their unqualified assertion about the Saudi snub hearkens back to political speculation, nothing more, aroused last May when King Salman canceled plans to attend a U.S.-sponsored summit of Gulf Cooperation Council leaders. At the time, Republican opponents like John McCain were, not surprisingly, quick to spin the

king's no-show as "an indicator of the lack of confidence that the Saudis and others have."

Pundits at conservative think-tanks like the Center for Strategic and International Studies also weighed in, postulating that Salman's change of travel plans suggested "disappointment at minimum, and perhaps underlying anger that the president doesn't understand their position and doesn't want to." In a classic display of pack journalism, numerous other media outlets carried the same message without an iota of evidence.

Had the Saudis really intended that message, they could simply have refused comment or deflected questions. Instead, they refuted the speculation in no uncertain terms, both on and off the record.

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, told reporters (including the Times' Peter Baker) that the 79-year-old king's decision to send his country's two top officials, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the defense minister, to the summit was no slight.

"The idea that this is a snub because the king did not attend is really off base," he insisted. "The fact that our crown prince and deputy crown prince attend an event outside of Saudi Arabia at the same time is unprecedented." Al-Jubeir said the king decided to stay home to monitor the expanding war in Yemen and pursue a cease-fire.

Speaking off the record, a "person close to the Saudi government" told the Washington Post that "the decision was a combination of the situation in Yemen and what is to be the 'technical nature' of the conversations about Iran at the summit, which the king felt the senior officials in the delegation . . . were better equipped to handle. 'They did not mean it as a snub,' the person close to the Saudi government said. 'They were not trying to send a message.'"

Moreover, contrary to much media speculation, the Saudis were already publicly on board with the Iran negotiations, albeit with caveats about the need to counter alleged Iranian meddling in the region. Back in April, Saudi Arabia's council of ministers, the king's cabinet, said it welcomed the interim P5+1 deal with Iran and "expressed hope for attaining a binding and definitive agreement that would lead to the strengthening of security and stability in the region and the world."

No wonder, then, Saudi Arabia today says "We believe this agreement will contribute to security and stability in the region by preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability."

Now, even if Saudi Arabia's king really had snubbed President Obama and opposed

the Iran nuclear deal, both actions might have spoken well for the U.S. leader. Contrary to the subtext of most stories citing the “snub,” there’s no good reason why a harshly autocratic, reactionary regime founded on primitive Islamist doctrines should guide U.S. interests or policy.

But many casual media consumers will inevitably accept the unexamined assumptions of recent coverage of Saudi-U.S. relations and its implicit critique of the Obama administration. It takes close attention, more than most readers can spare, to see through the misreporting and spin that passes for foreign policy journalism at many of America’s leading media.

If one of the primary purposes of such journalism is to enlighten the public and support more educated citizen debate in our democracy, all too many reporters today are failing at their job.

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Israel’s Bitter Anti-Iran Fight

Israeli leaders put on a full-court press to coerce U.S. lawmakers to line up behind Prime Minister Netanyahu instead of President Obama on the Iran nuclear deal. The Israel ploy appears to not only have failed but to have exposed deep divisions in the Jewish community, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

The insistence that Israel is somehow the national embodiment of the Jewish people has always been dangerous. This is so because it tied a diverse group spread over the globe to the apron strings of a single political entity and its ideology (Zionism). Thus identified, the Jews were allegedly what a bunch of Zionist ideologues said they were – and were also supposedly exemplified by the consistently unsavory practices of the Israeli state.

The Zionists tried to force the Jews into this Procrustean bed through the monopolization of elite Jewish organizations and the emotional blackmail of those who might have dissenting views. The mantra here was that if a Jewish

person had disagreements with Israel, he or she should express them behind closed doors and never in public.

Behind closed doors the dissenter could be contained. However, if he or she went public with their differences, they undercut the myth of Jewish community solidarity with Israel. To go public in this fashion was a mortal sin, and one risked being shamed within one's community. Those who persisted were labeled "self-hating" traitors.

It is a long-standing effort at censorship. Some people might get upset with those who publicly accuse Charles Schumer of having dual loyalties involving Israel, but no one seemed to get equally upset with those Zionists who have accused thousands of Jews worldwide of being "self-haters" because they publicly came out against Israel's atrocious treatment of the Palestinians.

On "Verge of Fratricide"

It was inevitable that the Zionist requirement of public silence would get harder to enforce the more outrageous the behavior of Israel's political leadership became.

On the American scene, the combination of the brazen intrusion of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu into U.S. politics (particularly his March 3, 2015 address to Congress) and the warmongering position on Iran taken by Jewish organizations openly allied to Israel seems to have been the tipping point. The combined adamance of this Zionist front has forced American Jewish members of Congress to make a choice, and do so publicly. Those who have chosen, against the wishes of the Israeli government, to support the Iran nuclear agreement as reflecting the long-term interests of the United States (and Israel) are now treated to the same degree of defamation as those Jews called "self-haters."

A national window on what Greg Rosenbaum, chairman of the National Jewish Democratic Council, calls "the verge of fratricide in the Jewish community" was opened by a front-page article in the Aug. 29 issue of the *New York Times*, entitled "[Debate on Iran Fiercely Splits American Jews.](#)"

The *Times'* main example of this near-fratricidal behavior is the case of Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-New York, who, like the state's senior senator, Charles Schumer, has spent his entire political career supporting Israel. The only difference between the two is that unlike Schumer, Nadler has come out in support of the Iran agreement. But that is all it took to make him a target.

According to an interview with Nadler in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* and reprinted in the [Aug. 25 edition](#) of the *Forward*, the New York representative was hit by "vociferous attacks" labeling him a "traitor," one who wants to "abandon

the Jewish people.” According to the *Times*’ piece, he has also been called a Kapo (the name given to Jewish collaborators with the Nazis), and a “facilitator of Obama’s Holocaust.”

New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikind, a Zionist stalwart, has sworn to work for Nadler’s defeat come the representative’s next primary election and has been harassing him in various ways ever since he announced his support for the Iran deal.

This sort of thing has been going on across the nation where American Jewry interfaces with national politics. It is interesting that the one who is trying to bring civility back into this internecine debate is a Gentile: Barack Obama.

Again, according to the *Times*’ article, Obama, speaking on “a webcast for major Jewish organizations,” called the treatment of Nadler “appalling” and then, ignoring a fast unraveling political status quo, said “we’re all pro-Israel, and we’re family.” Nonetheless, he concluded that “It’s better to air these things out even if it is uncomfortable, as long as the tone is civil.” Alas, President Obama sounds like a marriage counselor who comes too late to the party.

Persistent Incivility

The truth is that the tone of the edicts coming out of Israel both past and present, and then transmitted by elite Jewish-Zionist organizations down the line to the synagogues and community centers in the United States, has never been civil. Israel’s self-righteous position has always been that it has an unquestionable right to tell American Jewry when to support or not support their own (that is U.S.) national interests.

And if you don’t follow the Israeli lead, you will be accused of betraying “your people.” This persistent incivility has just been below the U.S.’s public radar until now. We can all thank Netanyahu and his Likudniks for the fact that that is no longer the case.

So what does this mean for the future of U.S.- Israeli relations? Well, according to the *Times*, some are predicting “long-term damage to Jewish organizations and possibly to American-Israeli relations.” One thing is for sure, the abrasive Zionist modus operandi will not change. It is built in to the historical character of both their ideology and Israeli culture.

The real questions lie on the American side of the equation. For instance, will American politicians who have belatedly become uneasy with Israeli behavior come to understand that what they face is a fundamental difference in worldview?

Jeremy Ben-Ami, the head of JStreet, in a rare moment of clarity, was cited in

the *Times*' article as having spoken of "a fundamental break between Democratic Party leaders inclined toward diplomacy and the worldview of a conservative Israeli government which has more in common with Dick Cheney." Ben-Ami is surely correct here, even though he shortsightedly confines the problem to the current Israeli government.

A corresponding question is will American Jews who disagree with Israeli policies come to realize that this is more than a family squabble? It is a fundamental break between those who favor humanitarian values and sensible diplomacy, and those who favor the ways of war and ethno-religious discrimination.

In truth, American Jews who support civil and human rights have no more in common with Israel and its culture than they do with xenophobic fanatics of the Republican Right. They just have to accept that fact and, on the basis of that awareness, take a public stand.

It is probably accurate to describe current events as doing lasting damage to American Jewish organizations. It is not the case that "names can never hurt you," and there has been a lot of harsh name-calling within these groups. From the anti-Zionist perspective this is all for the good. These organizations had long ago turned into fronts for Israel and have been hurting, not helping, American Jews.

As for the future of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, it is hard to know if the storm that has blown up over the nuclear agreement with Iran has delivered a lasting blow. The Zionist lobby still has a lot of financial power and an increasingly firm alliance with the Republican Right. And, who knows, we might someday see those barbarians back in the White House.

On the other hand, that evolving alliance will continue to alienate more liberal Jews and Democratic politicians. The safest prediction to make is that while recent events might not spell the end of America's "special relationship" with Israel, they are surely a big step in the right direction.

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