

Israel: Samson's Children

Amitai Etzioni

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Israel makes me stay up nights. There are too many people who “know” that Iran will not build a bomb (“they said so, repeatedly!”); that if it does build one—Iran is not going to drop it on Tel Aviv (“they are not crazy”); that Iran is merely clamoring for attention (“you know, they have long been ignored and humiliated”).

These *may* be all well-taken points; what troubles me is that many of my colleagues, commentators, and media mavens are so damn sure. After all, the leaders of many nations say a great deal that you don't want to try to cash in at the bank. John F. Kennedy, Moshe Dayan, and the generals of India and Pakistan came awfully close to nuclear blows, and nobody considers them crazy. Surely Truman was not. And there is no denying that whoever wipes out Tel Aviv will be lionized around the camp fires in the Middle East for the next 1,000 years. It's a prospect that just *might* tempt someone who has a nuclear trigger to pull it. That is, even if he does not believe that Allah commands him to “go and set forth to eradicate Satan,” which is what Iran's leaders call Israel, on their benign days.

The fact that Israeli elected officials, military officers, and intelligence experts tell all who will lend them an ear—privately but without fear of attribution—that if Iran continues to develop its nukes, Israel will bomb Iran, is hardly making me sleep any better. There are good reasons to believe that Iran's nuclear assets are widely dispersed and very well protected in caves and under mountains of cement. (At least this is what I was told when I was in Iran.) Still, Samson, Masada, and the Holocaust—deeply lodged

in the Israeli collective consciousness (the way Pearl Harbor and 9/11 are in American lore)—might lead Israel to strike out if it feels sufficiently threatened, cornered, and betrayed. Samson, blinded and defeated, leaned on the pillars of the temple and brought it down on his enemies and himself. On a barren mountaintop, the last Israeli fighters killed each other rather than surrender to the Romans. And even Israeli schoolchildren know that we will “never again” be herded like “lambs to the slaughter,” which is the way Israelis learn the lessons of the Holocaust. Those who plan to twist Israel's arm to the breaking point best take into account that those who stand on the edge of the abyss may jump rather than yield, taking others with them. Americans tend to be optimistic, positive thinkers; they have little sense of people who by nature are much more anxious and fatalistic.

President Obama could greatly alleviate Israel's concerns if he declared that an attack on one of the USA' allies—from Japan and South Korea to Saudi Arabia and Israel—would be treated as if it was an attack on the American homeland itself. Hillary's one time comment to this effect was very hedged and not endorsed by the White House.

Nor do I expect that the so-called Israel lobby—or anybody else—will save the day by leading the Obama Administration to protect Israel from an Iranian attack. I cringe when I read that former president Carter believes that the Israel lobby is so strong that “It's politically impossible...for any member of Congress to make a public statement condemning or criticizing the policies of Israel. It would be politically suicidal for them to do so.” He seems to never have heard about Congressman Dennis Kucinich who has taken numerous anti-Israel positions. (He voted even against a resolution condemning Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's call for Israel to be “wiped off the map.”) Representative James P. Moran regularly opposed US

A. Etzioni (✉)
Gelman Library, The George Washington University,
Room 714 J,
Washington, DC 20052, USA
e-mail: etzioni@gwu.edu

policies supportive of Israel. Even reliably pro-Israel Congress members such as Howard Berman and Carl Levin read Bibi Netanyahu the riot act during his recent visit to DC.

I find little comfort in the Jewish community, whatever is left of it following waves of out-marriage and assimilation. Many Jews, far from solidly lining up behind Israel, are embarrassed by its exercise of “disproportional” force, and troubled by the way their non-Jewish friends may react to such assertive behavior. They are the children of American Jews who during the Holocaust feared to speak up, lest they make waves. As people who have been often exiled from one nation, forced to seek refuge in another, Jews have learned to keep their heads down.

While a few political scientists claim that the Israel lobby is a uniquely powerful one, as I see it, these days Jews are disagreeing with one another even more than in many other times, although consensus never was our strongest suit. Dissonance is especially evident in Jewish feelings about the current “right wing” government, a term that is usually applied to Fascist regimes such as that of Pinochet in Chile and Franco in Spain.

Moreover, many Jews in public office, in the media, and in think tanks are calling for Obama to “get tough with Israel” (led by David Aaron Miller, in *Newsweek*). A whole new lobby—a Jewish one—called J Street has risen in opposition to the older Jewish lobby, AIPAC. A recent survey found that 50% of young Jews in the USA feel that it would not be a personal tragedy for them if Israel were killed off, which I find particular disconcerting because I would cry for any nation that is slaughtered.

My wife and I and our children campaigned for President Obama. I believe he has the makings of one of our very greatest presidents. However, when it comes to Israel, I am worried about his long standing close friendship with some of the most vociferously anti-Israel personas including, such as Professor Rashid Khalidi. As Bibi Netanyahu reported to his close associates after his visit to the White House, Obama sees the issue through the eyes of the Palestinian plight, not Jewish history. And to be fair, there is a great deal of plight that should have been avoided, that should not be allowed to linger any more.

Above all, one cannot but lose sleep over the change in President Obama’s position. Just after the election he stated that “Iran’s development of a nuclear weapon I believe is unacceptable. We have to mount an international effort to prevent that from happening.” Recently he diluted this stance. He now holds that “We are engaged in a process to reach out to Iran and persuade them that it is not in their interest to pursue a nuclear weapon and that they should change course.” Also, that “it is in the world’s interests for Iran to set aside ambitions for a nuclear weapon...” and other such statements, all true, all welcome and all—a far cry from “unacceptable.” And this is before the negotiations with Iran have even started!

There are those who believe that Israel can be saved by what is called the two state solution, which would lead Palestinians and Jews to live side by side in security and peace—and pacify the Arab world and Iran to boot. I am all in favor of this road to peace. However, I know of no one who believes that this road can be traveled quickly, while Iran may very well assemble its bomb very shortly. I am hence sorry to say that what can and should be done to end the tragic conflict in the Holy Land will not address the existential threat Israel now faces.

All these may be morbid ruminations of a Holocaust survivor, who fought for Israel’s independence, whose family members live in Israel, and who is imbued with a strong commitment to a safe homeland for Jews, whatever concessions this may entail to others. And surely no decent human being would oppose finding a diplomatic way out of the mounting crisis. However, as the clouds gather and darken, for those who care, the question of the steps that must be taken if diplomacy fails can no longer be avoided.

On second thought, even those who care little for Israel, may toss about a bit if they consider what other allies of the USA will hold, if the one long declared an especially close one is allowed to go under.

Amitai Etzioni is University Professor at The George Washington University and author of *The Moral Dimension: Towards a New Economics* (Free Press, 1988). His most recent book is *Security First*, Yale 2007. He served in the PalMach and IDF.