

America's coalition confusion
Caroline Glick - Mar 31, 2008
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A core question arises from last weekend's Arab League summit in Damascus. Boycotted by half the league's members, the conference demonstrated the depth of Egyptian and Saudi opposition to Iran's rise to prominence in the Arab world. So too, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki's ostentatious participation at the summit showed the strength of Iran's strategic ties with Syria.

The question that arises from the summit is if Egypt and Saudi Arabia are willing to discard even the semblance of Arab unity in order to make clear their opposition to Iran, why do they support Hamas?

Hamas is an Iranian proxy. It receives its arms, training and orders from Teheran. Its leaders reside in Syria. Given their open opposition to Iran, and their increasingly open opposition to Syria as Iran's client, wouldn't it make more sense - from their perspective - to boycott Hamas?

The reason that Egypt and Saudi Arabia support Hamas in spite of its client relationship with Teheran is that for Egypt and Saudi Arabia, support for Palestinian terrorists trumps opposition to Iran. If they are forced to choose between fighting Iran and collaborating with Iran in support of Palestinian terrorists, they will always choose the latter. This is why they are spearheading negotiations between Fatah and Hamas towards the reestablishment of a Fatah-Hamas unity government. This is why Egypt enables Hamas and Iran to use its territory as their weapons supply route.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia think supporting the Palestinians is more important than fighting Iran because the Palestinians fight Israel. As the heads of the so-called "moderate Arab" camp, Egypt and Saudi Arabia hate the Jews more than they fear the Iranians.

The central question then for policymakers in Washington who are trying to deploy a successful strategy for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and asserting regional predominance is how can the Palestinian war with Israel be defused so that the 'moderate' Arab states will be forced to join them in confronting Iran?

THE CONSENSUS answer that the US has come up with is to pressure Israel to make massive concessions to the Palestinians. It is argued that such concessions will appease not just the Palestinians, but more importantly, they

will appease the US's "moderate" Arab supporters in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. As this thinking goes, if Israel can be forced to cough up big enough concessions quickly enough, then the Palestinians will quiet down and the Egyptians and Saudis will be sufficiently satisfied with the "progress" being made to direct their attentions to confronting Iran.

This argument was elucidated this week by Democratic Senator and presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton in an interview with the Jewish Exponent. Clinton claimed that the Oslo negotiating process between the PLO and Israel which her husband embraced as his central Middle East policy from 1993 through 2000 brought levels of violence down between Israel and the Palestinians and so engendered regional stability.

In her words, "I think what we did in the '90s was beneficial in a strategic way and led to a period where, at times, there were no attacks being made, no suicide bombings and no deaths." She then went on to criticize the Bush administration which during its first term in office did not pressure Israel to restart negotiations towards Palestinian statehood with the PLO. Clinton added that she would consider opening negotiations with Hamas if she is elected president.

Clinton's argument is notable for two reasons. First, it accurately reflects not only her view, but the view now being pushed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her bimonthly visits to Israel. As she made apparent in her visit to Israel this week, Rice believes that the only way to reach an agreement is for Israel to empower Fatah and give Hamas a pass. So too, in her clear support for Egypt's negotiations with Hamas, Rice shows that the Bush administration is already holding indirect negotiations with Hamas.

THE SECOND reason that Clinton's argument is notable is because it has been so obviously disproven by reality. During the years that her husband was applying massive pressure on Israel to appease the Palestinians, terror levels against Israel eclipsed anything Israel had seen since the 1950s. In the 15 years which preceded the 1993 Oslo accord, 216 Israelis were murdered in terrorist attacks. In the seven years of the Oslo peace process, 286 Israelis were killed. Indeed, it was only in 1994, when Israel was first transferring territory to PLO control and the Palestinian Authority was building its armies that Israel suffered its first suicide bombing.

During the six years of the Palestinian uprising from 1987-1993, 172 Israelis were killed. During the first six years of the Palestinian terror war against Israel which Oslo produced, more than 1,100 Israelis were killed. Violence levels dropped not because of peace talks, but because of Israeli offensive operations against the Palestinians.

As Yasser Arafat told Palestinian audiences throughout the 1990s, his goal in the Oslo process was to gain the military and political means to continue his war against Israel. Arafat's confidante Faisal Hussein made this Palestinian perspective explicit with the outbreak of the Palestinian terror war in September 2000. Speaking to the Arab media, Hussein said that for the Palestinians, the Oslo process was a "Trojan horse" against Israel. They came to Israel bearing the promise of peace with the premeditated aim of using Israel's willingness to make peace as a means of launching a new round of war whose aim was the political and military destruction of the Jewish state.

THE OSLO process which Clinton praises and Rice apes with her Annapolis process brought the Palestinian issue, which had been buried throughout much of the 1980s to the forefront of the pan-Arab social consciousness and political agenda. This it did to the detriment of other salient issues like Iran's steps towards regional hegemony, Egyptian and Saudi repression of liberal forces in their countries, and, during the 1990s, Saddam Hussein's systematic breach of UN Security Council sanctions.

Here it is worth noting that the pinnacle of US success in building an Arab coalition against a rogue state came in 1990. The Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, which saw the entire Arab world united with the US against a fellow-Arab regime, came not in the midst of a Palestinian-Israeli peace process. It came when there were no diplomatic negotiations whatsoever between Israel and the Palestinians or between Israel and any state.

THERE ARE two principal reasons that the advent of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations weakened pan-Arab interest in working with the US against common threats. First, because the Oslo process empowered terrorists, terror attacks increased. Each terror attack received massive, supportive coverage in the Arab media.

Second, since the Oslo process placed terrorists in charge of Gaza, Judea and Samaria, the Palestinians found themselves ruled by murderers who had no interest in economic development and opposed liberalization and democracy. As a consequence, the Palestinian economic situation went from one of sustained growth to one of massive depredation. The footage of Palestinian terror attacks and Palestinian economic privation shown daily in the pan-Arab media eclipsed coverage of every other issue. And since the US is viewed as Israel's ally, it engendered unprecedented levels of anti-Americanism in the Arab world.

So if the Palestinian-centric model embraced by the US to build an Arab coalition against Iran works precisely to undermine such a coalition by bringing

to the forefront the one issue that the Arabs and the Iranians agree on, what would an alternative model of policymaking look like?

The Achilles heel of the US's current strategy is its reliance on Egyptian and Saudi support. Since Egypt and Saudi Arabia prefer fighting Israel to confronting Iran, a better policy for confronting Iran would be to base a US coalition on states that prefer fighting Iran to fighting Israel. Regionally, Israel, Lebanon and Iraq fit this model.

IF THE US were to shore up these allies and stiffen their resolve to confront Iran rather than divert its attention to a policy which simply serves to galvanize Arab attention and energies against Israel and away from Iran, the US would pose a more imposing threat to Iran. It would also push the Iranian threat to the forefront of political discourse in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Such a revised policy would involve not only shoring up Israeli, Iraqi and Lebanese willingness to confront Iran and Syria. It would also involve scaling back US involvement in the Palestinian conflict with Israel. Such a scaling back could only be successful if at the same time as it disengaged from the negotiations process between Israel and Fatah, Washington also gave Israel a green light to defeat Hamas in Gaza. Such an Israeli operation would both end the specter of an Iranian takeover of Judea and Samaria and remove Iran's ability to reignite the Palestinian conflict at will.

Obviously, to advance such a policy option, the US would have to confront an Israeli government that has embraced the incorrect logic of the current failed strategy of winning Arab support for confronting Iran by forcing Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians. So too, it would have to confront an Iraqi government that is afraid to confront Iran, and a UN that seems to have abandoned its previous willingness to acknowledge Syria's culpability for the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

It would also have to ensure that Israel's military defeat at the hands of Iran and Hizbullah in 2006 will not repeat itself. That defeat enabled Hizbullah to reassert its control over south Lebanon and acquire an even more sophisticated arsenal than it had two years ago.

Replacing the current failed strategy of squeezing Israel in the hopes of winning the support of unreliable Arab allies for confronting Iran will no doubt be a controversial move. It will win the Bush administration no fast friends in Europe or on American university campuses. It will even anger the Israeli Left which now sues for peace with Syria.

The only advantage to be had from basing America's strategy towards Iran on

building a US-led anti-Iranian coalition comprised of states that prefer to fight Iran than to fight Israel is that such a policy has the potential of actually ending Iran's increased domination of the Middle East and of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.