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American Jews Split from Netanyahu

August 24, 2015

Major Jewish organizations and donors are pressing the U.S. Congress to get in lockstep behind Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, but they are out of step with most American Jews who support the accord, reports Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

On Aug. 13, The New York Times carried a front-page article entitled “Donors Descend on Schumer and Others in Debate on Iran.” The article opened a window on the activities of big money donors in the Congress of the United States.

According to the Times story, Sen. Charles Schumer, D-New York, had been consulting with John Shapiro, a wealthy financier and “longtime benefactor” of the senator and other Democratic politicians. Shapiro is also the head of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), an organization that claims 100,000 members and that, since 2009, has described itself as “a center for Jewish and Israel global advocacy,” thereby misleadingly tying these two interests – Jewish advocacy and Israeli advocacy – together.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations in 2012, drawing his own “red line” on how far he will let Iran go in refining nuclear fuel.

Shapiro’s position with AJC also means that, when it comes to Middle East foreign policy, there is no real difference between his position and that of the Israeli government. This identification is reflected in the AJC’s “unity pledge” concerning the Zionist state.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Shapiro told Schumer what Israeli-inspired analyses to read before he made his decision on the nuclear deal. According to the Times, Shapiro also informed the senator that the Egyptian “president” Abdel Fattah el-Sisi felt sure that the deal would “increase regional terrorism.” It can be assumed that Shapiro failed to mention that this was an opinion that differed from the public position taken by the Egyptian foreign minister.

Soon thereafter Schumer announced that he would oppose President Barack Obama’s negotiated nuclear agreement with Iran. One can find multiple critiques on the web of Schumer’s reasons for taking this position, so we won’t go into it here. For our purpose the important point is that Shapiro wasn’t the only Jewish donor trying to pressure legislators and, in fact, many were urging not rejection but acceptance of the Iran deal.

American Jewish Support for Iran Deal

The Times article identifies several wealthy Jewish donors who were lobbying in support of the Iran agreement but doesn’t tell us if they have been as successful as Shapiro. These include the billionaire entrepreneur S. Daniel Abraham, TV producer Norman Lear (founder of People for the American Way), and the famous billionaire George Soros.

There are several additional points that can be added to this aspect of the Times story:

–There are a good number of Israeli intelligence professionals (to say nothing of their American counterparts) who “have very positive views of the nuclear agreement.” Despite efforts by the Netanyahu government to silence them, their positions are now coming out in the media.

–Hundreds of prominent American Jews have publicly supported the agreement in a Times ad and open letter to Congress.

–Recent polls show that most American Jews support the deal with Iran. According to a poll conducted by the LA Jewish Journal Survey, “by a wide margin, American Jews support the recently concluded agreement with Iran.” Indeed, according to this poll, even a majority (51 percent) of those who described themselves as “very attached emotionally to Israel want Congress to approve the deal.”

All this information undermines the myth that Israel (or worse yet, Benjamin Netanyahu) speaks for the Jews. This has always been untrue, yet Israel’s persistent insistence that it is true constitutes a typical “big lie” which, repeated over and over again, takes hold in the popular mind and comes to appear as a reflection of reality.

It is the resulting pseudo-truth that helps men like John Shapiro be so persuasive. Along with all the money he can bring to the table, he can claim that he speaks simultaneously for Israel and American Jewry. His political benefactors will believe this because it is consistent with an established myth.

That is why it is important to point out, at every opportunity, instances that undermine the myth. The case of the Iran nuclear agreement is just such an instance.

An Organizational Approach

There is one other lesson to be learned from the Times story. Lobbyists like Shapiro have an advantage because unlike most of the Jewish donors who support the nuclear agreement, they can approach Congress as the leaders of focused organizations that have a relatively large membership with deep pockets.

The Jewish donors out there who may want to defy Israel and its claim to speak for the Jews must also approach the U.S. government in a focused organizational fashion if they are to compete with Mr. Shapiro and other groups such as AIPAC. There are, of course, smaller Jewish groups that are defiant of Israel and its practices, groups such as Jewish Voices for Peace. But such organizations, while giving the lie to the Israeli claim to represent all Jews, haven’t the numbers or the money to successfully compete for influence in Congress.

One might also mention JStreet, which really doesn’t qualify here, because nine times out of ten it offers a resolutely Zionist analysis.

When all is said and done, the opposition forces in Congress probably will be unable to destroy the nuclear agreement with Iran. Will this achievement encourage the Jewish donors who favored the deal to come together and form a single Jewish organization outspokenly

independent of Israel and its camp followers in the U.S.? One would hope so, because this is really what is needed if we are to liberate the U.S. Congress and political parties from the myth of a unified Jewry in support of Israel.

In the meantime there is an even bigger job to make the same case to rest of the world. Be it in Europe or the Arab world, the myth is growing and shaping people's thinking. As a consequence, to the extent that a person is hostile to Israel's policies and practices they run the risk of becoming hostile to "Jews," which opens the way to stark anti-Semitism.

This process can only aid and abet the ambitions of the Zionists. So let us strive for clear thinking on this matter and popularize the fact that Jews are quite diverse in their views and a growing number of them are not supporters of Israel or its practices. In this way we can undercut the myth that falsely connects them to Israel.