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Dealing With the Devil in Geneva

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 25, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The news that Iran reached an interim agreement with the United States and other nations regarding its nuclear ambitions is news, period. It is way too soon to say this is good news. It may be dreadful news if Iran uses the next six months to put the finishing touches on its nuclear bomb or, as is more likely, plays along for a bit until the West distracts itself, and then completes its goal of building a nuclear weapon. For the moment, then, clear thinking people are well advised to view this deal with skepticism.

The principal reason for skepticism has to do with our negotiating partner. The new Iranian president, Rouhani, still answerable to the mullahs, may be more moderate and less frighteningly unhinged than his predecessor Ahmadinejad, but the regime is, by any standards of civilized behavior, knee-deep in evil. They support terrorists in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza. They enforce a Savonarola-quality moral regime, denying women?s rights and executing gays, that should, at the very least, make a good liberal wish to think twice when thinking good thoughts in their regard. And, most pertinent to the issue at hand, they repeatedly call for the elimination of Israel. There is, inarguably, no other people that came closer to wholesale elimination than the Jews, so the threat is especially ugly.

Given the geo-strategic challenges facing Israel, the threat is not simply ugly, it is real and it must be met. Jews learned in the twentieth century that they are ill-advised to entrust their security to others. Some commentators seem to think that the opposition of the Israeli government to this new deal is rooted in a certain truculence on the part of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The issue is not truculence, nor is it even the challenging political situation Netanyahu faces in Israel: Any Israeli Prime Minister would take the same stance on such an existential threat. Netanyahu did not say he prefers a military solution to a diplomatic solution. No one does. He said that this diplomatic agreement is no solution at all.

There is historical warrant for his view. World War II was not postponed by agreeing to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. Instead, when war came, the Germans did not have to contend with the forty or so border forts the Czechs had ceded, nor the Czech army which ceased to exist when Hitler went back on his promise and subsumed the entire nation into the Reich. More recently, Americans breathed a sigh of relief when Bashir Assad agreed to hand over his chemical weapons without American military intervention but, to be clear, the war did not end for the Syrian people, it is just that we Americans avoided.

There is also historical warrant for the view that diplomacy is always ipso facto the preferred route. We have just commemorated the death of President Kennedy and his signature achievement as President was standing up to his own generals and reaching an agreement with the Soviets during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Israeli-Egyptian border has been astonishingly peaceful since Sadat and Begin signed the historic Camp David accords.

Still, there is something troubling about the willingness of some commentators on the left, especially on the Catholic left, to view Israel with suspicion and Iran with trust. Last week, America magazine published an article [1] by Margot Patterson in which she castigated the Israeli government. She refers to ?willing pawns of the pro-Israel lobby in this country? as if those of us who support a robust U.S.-Israel relationship are somehow dupes. ?The lobby takes its talking points from Israel?? she writes, seemingly unaware of the wide diversity of

opinions within Israel, and refers to Israel?s ?maximalist demands.? I find it strange that someone would consider a government?s demands that its people be safe considered ?maximalist.? Patterson?s worry about the power of the pro-Israel lobby in this country stays clear of the explicit charge of dual loyalty, but she is still trafficking in the kind of rhetorical tropes that have an ugly history.

On the subject of Iran, Patterson is, at best, willfully naïve. She writes:

There is often something ugly in the way the United States engages with its enemies, particularly those not truly threatening to us such as Iran. The exaggerated statements about the unique danger of Iran?s nuclear program, the hyperbole about Iran?s threat to Israel, a threat that has been overstated, misrepresented and manipulated yet rarely is challenged, the hype and hysteria manufactured to convince the public of the putative danger posed by Iran all go towards creating smoke but not light on the issue.

Iran is ?not truly threatening to us?? Are they not the principal supporter of terrorism throughout the region? Is she unaware of their role in propping up the murderous regime in Syria, the thugs in Hamas who have made Gaza unlivable, and, via their client Hezbollah, destabilized Lebanon and hurled rockets into northern Israel? True, they have not hurled a rocket into Manhattan. But, does anyone doubt that they would if they could get away with it? I am dumbstruck that this idiotic article got past the editors at America.

It is interesting that Ms. Patterson fails to note something that should also be noted: Israel is not alone in raising concerns about the negotiations in Geneva. (Suggested title for her next article: ?The Elders of Arabia.?) The government of Saudi Arabia is deeply troubled, albeit less vocal about it. Of course, the leaders of Saudi Arabia do not need to explain themselves as does Netanyahu because they are accountable to no one while Netanyahu, unlike almost every other leader in the Mideast, can be tossed out of office by the vote of a freely elected parliament at any time. The sanctions against Iran weakened a regime that, with or without nukes, worries the Saudis and other moderate Sunni regimes. Indeed, one of the undoubtedly happy consequences of this rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran is that it has driven the Saudis and the Israelis to recognize common interests in the region.

The question of whether diplomacy works or not has to do with the application of principle to the facts on the ground. The principle is clear: Recourse to war must always be a final resort. But, if you are Israel, and your neighbor who continually refers to your people as sub-humans, and continually threatens to ?eliminate? you, you understand that last resorts come quickly to small countries in volatile regions. And, a last resort can be a final resort when a small country faces a neighbor with a nuclear capability. This is not to say that the recourse to a military option is always desirable, not that it will achieve the desired political objective. It is to say that facts on the ground matter to the degree to which even the best principles can be applied and how. During the afternoon at Waterloo, as his troops grew tired, the Duke of Wellington famously said, ?Would God that night or Bluecher would come.? In September, 1940, as the Royal Air Force was stretched to the limit and its pilots facing a similar exhaustion, Churchill recalled Wellington?s remark, adding, ?This time we did not want Bluecher.?

There is reason to be hopeful about the agreement arrived at in Geneva. Robert Einhorn at the Saban Center [2] at Brookings highlights why he thinks the deal is a good one for those who are concerned about peace in the region and understand a nuclear Iran would be the greatest threat to such peace. We know one person is thrilled by Secretary of State John Kerry?s achievement: Vice President Joe Biden. If Kerry pulls off a negotiated settlement, it can only highlight the fact that his predecessor at Foggy Bottom, Hillary Clinton, has difficulty pointing to a single major accomplishment during her tenure.

The six-month agreement will, hopefully, lead to a permanent one. Perhaps, the regime in Iran will open a window in its dealings with the West which, in time, will see all sorts of winds pass through. A dam of repression, like a dam on a river, has trouble plugging leaks, and the only long-term solution to the threat Iran

poses to her neighbors is to see a different regime in place. Today, I make Secretary Kerry?s skepticism my own. He said of his handiwork: ?We have no illusions. We don?t do this on the basis of somebody?s statements to you. We do it on the basis of actions that can be verified.? Let?s hope there is verity in the promises Iran has made. And, let us be prepared if those promises prove false. When dealing with the current regime in Iran, the devil is not in the details, he is at the negotiating table. And, Israel and its supporters like myself, are not foolish to point that out.

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