

Netanyahu's public relations fiasco

Finding the proper balance between politics and policy can be difficult. But for seasoned politicians, it is usually second nature. Except when it isn't. That's what played out last week when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his administration bumbled, stumbled and fumbled their response to plans by Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) and Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) to visit Israel and the territories. In the process, a story about two members of Congress who are hostile to Israel became a story about President Trump, and the loser was Israel.

Tlaib is Palestinian-American and has family in the West Bank. Omar has never visited the region. When the two announced their trip last month, everyone knew that their purpose was not to support Netanyahu's reelection campaign. Nonetheless, Israel's U.S. Ambassador, Ron Dermer, issued a diplomatically worded welcome: "Out of respect for the U.S. Congress and the great alliance between Israel and America, we would not deny entry to any member of Congress into Israel."

That's where things should have ended. But last Thursday, Netanyahu announced

that the legislators were no longer welcome, declaring that their announced itinerary "reveals that the sole purpose of their visit is to harm Israel and increase

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incitement against it." He also referred to their support of the BDS movement, and Israel's prohibition on allowing BDS advocates to enter the country.

So what changed after the upbeat Dermer statement? Many observers pointed to a tweet from President Trump, which warned, "It would show great weakness if Israel allowed Rep. Omar and Rep. Tlaib to visit." Almost immediately thereafter, Netanyahu announced the ban.

The decision angered many of Israel's Democratic friends, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), who called it "a sign of weakness." Many mainstream Jewish organizations, including AIPAC, Jewish Federations of North America and American Jewish Committee were also critical.

On the right, the Republican Jewish Coalition, the Zionist Organization of

America, American Jewish Congress and Young Israel supported the decision. The Conference of Presidents, an umbrella group of Jewish organizations, voiced

"reservations," without criticizing the ban.

Then, late last week, Israel announced it would permit a visit from Tlaib on "humanitarian grounds" so that she could visit her aging grandmother — only for Tlaib to decide she wasn't coming after all.

Had Tlaib and Omar made the trip, they would almost certainly have been critical of Israel, but that could have been easily managed. Instead, Israel now has a public relations fiasco that could have lasting and disquieting repercussions.

Israel's first response to the trip made sense. Members of the U.S. Congress, regardless of their political views, should be welcomed to visit the Jewish state. That's part of the price for America's decades-long bipartisan support for Israel. Netanyahu's abrupt about-face leaves us and many others wondering what he was thinking. ■

Letters

A base offense

Regarding "Protesters bemoan 'baseless hatred' of migrants" (Aug. 15), I really wish that people who don't much care about Jewish observance would stop dragooning Judaism into the service of their left-wing politics. Being in favor of secure borders and the enforcement of immigration laws is not "baseless hatred," and the comparison is deeply offensive.

DAVID M. FROST
Silver Spring

Returning to Hebrew

Thank you for carrying the story "Adults find they can learn Hebrew" by Jacqueline Hyman (Aug. 8). I loved reading it. It made me feel that is not too late for me to try again, although I am in my 80s. The pretty table showing the letters of the Hebrew alphabet was a great way for me to start.

LUIS LANDAU
Washington

UNRWA's purpose, then and now

In "UNRWA's corruption runs deep" (Editorials, Aug. 15), you have correctly pointed to the problem of UNRWA corruption and noted that it is not likely that this problem will be solved soon, given present conditions in the UN system.

A point needs to be added concerning the very reason for UNRWA's continued existence. With strong support from the U.S., the UN created the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in 1949. As its name implies, UNRWA's purpose was to provide relief and "works" for the Palestinian refugees. "Works" were construction projects that would help integrate the refugees into their new surroundings. Given the fact that they were in Arab territory in which the population was of the same ethnicity, spoke the same language, and adhered to the same religion, that should not have been difficult.

But integration, the process initiated by the UN for millions of other refugees, was not what the Palestinian refugees or their hosts wanted. They rejected the works programs that would lead to integration. UNRWA tried to make progress with resettlement programs, but failed.

By 1960 the UN officials in charge of UNRWA had given up on the goal of integration. UNRWA's leading officials then made a fundamental change in the

Abbas misses another opportunity

It's hard to take Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas seriously, and he hasn't done much in the past several years to convince anyone that he deserves different treatment. Yet political leaders from around the world who visit Israel regularly meet with him to pay appropriate respect to the titular leader of the Palestinian people. And they rightfully expect reciprocal courtesy from the aging Abbas.

But things have changed since the Trump administration moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, cut funding for Palestinian support programs and issued heated criticism of Palestinian leadership for not engaging in Trump-encouraged peace discussions. Frustration with U.S. policy might therefore explain why Abbas rejected an opportunity to meet with a delegation of 31 Republican members of Congress who were visiting Israel last week, even though he met with 41 congressional Democrats a few days earlier.

Whatever his reasons, Abbas' decision was a mistake.

The two congressional delegations were on separate trips organized by the American Israel Education Foundation, an affiliate of AIPAC. And though the Democrats got to meet with Abbas, the Republicans were relegated to meetings with PLO General Secretary Saeb Erekat and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh. That insulted the Republican delegation.

A Fatah spokesman said Abbas' no-show was due to a scheduling conflict and that the Republican congressmen were informed of the problem five days in advance. But very few people are buying the excuse — and we aren't either. "He cancelled on the Republicans," Rep. Anthony Gonzalez (R-Ohio) told Jewish Insider in Jerusalem. "I think it's because the administration has been awfully hard on Palestinians and very supportive of Israel — which is the right thing to do — and I think he saw the Republicans as maybe not worth his time."

Across the political spectrum, there is pretty much universal accord that Abbas'

move was strategically unwise. As noted by Michael Koplow of the Israel Policy Forum, "The Palestinians need any support they can get. ... There are Republicans in Congress who are uneasy about the Trump approach to the Palestinians, and all Abbas has done in making excuses for not meeting with them is to convince them that there is no reason to push the Trump administration on reversing things like aid cuts. ... He just wasted an excellent opportunity."

We agree. But based upon reactions from the Democrats, we doubt that anything meaningful would have come from an Abbas meeting with Republicans. As reported by Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), who led the Democratic delegation, "Frankly, I did not hear anything new. He indicated he was prepared to sit down and negotiate without preconditions — and then he referenced a number of preconditions."

Maybe the Republicans should be happy that they didn't have to waste their time. ■

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