

Candidly Speaking: Down from the fence

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The head of the World Jewish Congress has done his people a service by openly challenging Obama's treatment of Israel.

World Jewish Congress president Ronald Lauder should be applauded for calling on the Obama administration to end the antagonism and one-sided pressure it has been applying against Israel.

The call was in an open letter to President Barack Obama published today as a full-page ad in The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and The Jerusalem Post. By this act, Lauder broke the curtain of silence, self-imposed by most of the American Jewish establishment since Obama's exploitation of an untimely announcement by a mid-level municipal Israeli authority about construction in an exclusively Jewish east Jerusalem neighborhood as a pretext to launch ferocious attacks on Israel.

The notable exception was ADL head Abe Foxman, a Holocaust child survivor, who from the outset emerged as a lone mainstream Jewish voice remonstrating against the bias and harsh treatment. Recently, he even proposed a protest march on Washington.

The overall response from other Jewish agencies was disappointingly muted, and seemed to have been based on the delusion that US-Israel relations would somehow improve of their own accord.

The opening presentation at the AIPAC conference by the new president, Lee Rosenberg, did convey concern and urged that differences not be aired publicly. But there was a reluctance to openly confront the Obama administration's discriminatory behavior.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, specifically created to act as the voice of American Jews in relation to Israel, was extraordinarily passive despite the fact that its executive vice president, Malcolm Hoenlein, is certainly no dove.

As for nonestablishment leaders, there were indeed loud rumblings from independent Jewish personalities, including prominent supporters of the Democratic Party who had voted for Obama in the mistaken belief that he would adhere to his electoral undertakings. Thus, Alan Dershowitz wrote an explicit warning of the dangers of the US following the path of the disastrous appeasement blunders of Munich; Marty Peretz, editor of The New Republic, fiercely castigated Obama.

Leading Democrat and former New York mayor Ed Koch did not mince words. He accused Obama of demeaning and slandering Israel and being willing to throw the Jewish state under a bus in order to pursue his pro-Arab agenda. He confessed that he rued the day he voted for a president who was willing to betray and abandon Israel.

And needless to say, there were protests from the political Right – the Zionist Organization

of America and the Jewish Republican Coalition. There were also anguished calls from many Jews at the grassroots level.

It has always been committed Jews who have stood at the forefront of political action in such situations.

IN THIS context, though perhaps belated, Lauder's public criticism is important. It will undoubtedly unleash a storm of castigation, but will hopefully draw attention to the gravity of the situation, which many supporters of Israel were hitherto unwilling to confront, and oblige Jewish organizations and agencies sitting on the sidelines to take a stand.

If the recent American Jewish Committee poll is an indicator, many American Jews are confused by repeated affirmations of the "unshakeable alliance," and simply unaware of the extent of the growing rift between Israel and the Obama administration. This is exemplified by the contradiction that 75 percent of those polled affirm that the primary goal of the Arabs is the destruction of Israel rather than the return of territories, yet many continue supporting the Obama administration.

Lauder's call will thus hopefully enable a growing proportion of the 78% of Jews who voted for Obama to appreciate the extent to which he has betrayed his electoral undertakings and is apparently willing to sacrifice Israel's security to appease the Arabs.

Lauder was previously closely associated with Binyamin Netanyahu, and his critics undoubtedly will accuse him of acting as his instrument. I know for a fact that this is untrue. He acted as a proud American and leader of world Jewry.

Lauder is a formidable global businessman with considerable investments in Israel and a major philanthropist. He was appointed ambassador to Austria by president Ronald Reagan, and is renowned for establishing the Ronald Lauder Foundation, which funds the revival of Judaism and Jewish culture in Central and Eastern Europe after the Cold War. Prior to being elected president of the WJC, Lauder also served as chairman of the Presidents Conference.

The WJC under Lauder's helm has hitherto been largely dormant. But by taking this new initiative he is thrusting the global Jewish body into the limelight and taking a position that may in the long term prove to be of importance, not only to the American-Israel relationship but also for the American Jewish community's image of itself.

It will balance the policy failures of some of his predecessors, one of whom, Rabbi Stephen Wise, headed the WJC during World War II and compromised an otherwise impressive leadership record by being cowed by president Franklin Roosevelt into remaining silent over the failure of the Allies to take action to try to stop the Holocaust.

Edgar Bronfman, Lauder's predecessor, despite major contributions to the welfare of the Jewish people, made the crucial error of claiming to know better than the Israelis what was good for them. In August 2003 he precipitated a major storm, in which I personally intervened, by calling on president George W. Bush to pressure prime minister Ariel Sharon. In doing so, Bronfman anticipated the emergence of J Street.

IF LAUDER sticks to his guns, he will emerge as a Jewish leader who was prepared to stand up and be counted in the face of his president's wretched behavior towards the Jewish state. There will be shrieks from some of Obama's supporters and intensified efforts to intimidate American Jews. The Israel bashers will accuse Lauder of harboring dual loyalties and placing the interests of Israel ahead of those of the US. The despicable distorted spins

insinuating that Israel is endangering American troops will be reiterated. The Arabs, enemies of Israel and all anti-Semites will combine efforts to undermine and slander all Americans who support the Jewish state.

However, Lauder can take heart from the considerable support for Israel which prevails among the American people, as exemplified in the bipartisan resolution favoring Israel carried by more than three quarters of the House and only a few days ago by a similar majority in the Senate.

This is an historic time. There are real dangers threatening the Jewish state, and the role of the US will be crucial for our welfare.

An open letter in itself is no substitute for people power to counter the Obama administration's present course of appeasement. But it may provide a rallying cry to rouse American Jews and friends of Israel to speak up and remind their president that breaching his electoral undertakings concerning Israel is not only shamefully immoral, but also undermines US global interests in this volatile region, where Israel stands alone in the name of democratic freedom.

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