

News

Groups to Bush: Drop Iran-Israel Linkage

By ORI NIR

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WASHINGTON — Jewish community leaders have urged the White House to refrain from publicly pledging to defend Israel against possible Iranian hostilities, senior Jewish activists told the Forward.

Messages were passed to the White House through several channels, Jewish activists said. And it seems to have worked: Speaking before the annual conference of the American Jewish Committee in Washington last week — his most recent address before a Jewish audience — President Bush talked about America's commitment to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and about his administration's commitment to Israeli security, but he did not link the two, as he has several times in recent months.

"We are basically telling the president: We appreciate it, we welcome it. But, hey, because there is this debate on Iraq, where people are trying to put the blame on us, maybe you shouldn't say it that often or that loud," said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. "Within the Jewish community there is a real sense of 'thank you but no thank you.'"

Communal leaders say that although they deeply appreciate the president's repeated promises to come to Israel's defense, public declarations to that effect do more harm than good. Such statements, they say, create an impression that the United States is considering a military option against Iran for the sake of Israel — and could lead to American Jews being blamed for any negative consequences of an American strike against Iran.

Jewish activists are concerned that "there would be [a scenario] just like with Iraq: the idea that somehow the Jewish community and the neoconservatives have dragged the United States into a conflict with Iran," said Martin Raffel, associate executive director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, a policy coordinating organization that brings together 13 national Jewish agencies and 123 local Jewish communities. "And if things go badly and our people are killed, then who is to blame?"

In early February, during an interview with Reuters, the president was asked about America's reaction to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's threats against Israel. Bush replied: "We will rise to Israel's defense, if need be. So this kind of menacing talk is disturbing. It's not only disturbing to the United States, it's disturbing for other countries in the world, as well." Asked whether he meant that the United States would militarily defend Israel, Bush said: "You bet we'll defend Israel."

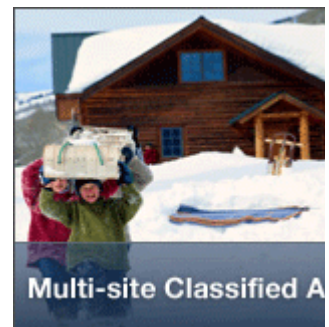
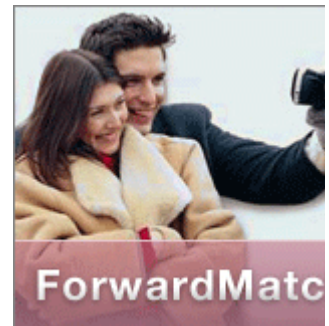
The White House's public liaison office has been ending its e-mails to the Jewish community with the following Bush quote from a March 20 appearance: "I made it clear. I'll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel." At the time, Bush was speaking about the threat posed by Iran.

Most Jewish communal leaders, despite their unease, say that the president talks about defending Israel from Iran out of a deep, personal commitment to the Jewish state.

"This comes from the heart," Foxman said.

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Some, however, say that other factors may be at work, specifically the president's poor approval ratings, even among members of his political base. Two recent opinion polls show Bush's support among conservatives dropping, including among evangelicals, who consistently cite their support of Israel as a key political priority.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the White House is playing politics here," said an activist with a major Jewish group, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Jewish objections to the president's rhetoric have increased in recent weeks, as the storm created by a recent paper by two academics criticizing the influence of the "Israel Lobby" continues to grow. The study, co-authored by John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, has been attracting support in national media outlets with its thesis that Israel, with the help of powerful supporters in Washington, has all but hijacked America's policy in the Middle East.

In one such article, Arnaud de Borchgrave, editor at large at United Press International, wrote April 24 that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the lobbying powerhouse known as Aipac, "has maneuvered to make Israel the third rail of American foreign policy." In addition, more than 1,000 Americans, most of them university professors, have signed an online petition challenging the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, an umbrella body of 52 groups that serves as Jewish community's main united voice on Middle East issues, to "condemn" the "smearing" of Mearsheimer and Walt by several fellow scholars and pundits as "antisemites."

The executive vice chairman of the Presidents Conference, Malcolm Hoenlein, said that none of the Jewish organizations in the umbrella group had accused the two scholars of being antisemitic. But Juan Cole, the University of Michigan professor who initiated the petition, pointed out that the Anti-Defamation League has. In a comment on the study posted on its Web site in March, the ADL expressed the hope that "mainstream individuals and institutions will see it for what it is ññ a classical conspiratorial anti-Semitic analysis invoking the canards of Jewish power and Jewish control."

Even with the buzz surrounding Walt and Mearsheimer's paper, not everyone agrees that the president's statements are potentially damaging for the Jewish community. One senior official with a major Jewish group, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: "So what do [Jewish communal leaders] want? They want the president of Iran to be threatening Israel with nuclear destruction and the United States will say nothing? If that happens they would be complaining: 'Why aren't you committing yourselves to protecting Israel?'"

Robert Freedman, a professor of political science at Baltimore Hebrew University and an expert on Iran, calls the concerns about the president's statements "nonsense" and "foolish." First, he said, the case for tough action against Iran is stronger than the case was for action against Iraq — the intelligence this time is solid, the Iranian president says he wants to destroy Israel and Iran's possession of nuclear weapons poses a much greater danger to the region than Saddam Hussein's regime ever did. Second, according to Freedman, the risk of an entanglement in Iran is much smaller. A military campaign against Iran would most likely not involve a ground invasion, but an air bombing campaign. Third, he said, Israel is not in as good a position to carry out such a bombing campaign as the United States is.

"So," Freedman said, "if the president of the United States says, 'I am going to support Israel and we will not let Israel be destroyed,' that should be taken as a given and as a good given."

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