

# “This Is Our Munich”?

By Khody Akhavi | July 25, 2007

Last Thursday afternoon, in a tightly packed press room of the U.S. Capitol building, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi stood at the podium and smiled heartily as she pointed to two columns of U.S. postal boxes stacked behind her.

She told the crowd, “Since Iran funds death,” her lobby group, The Israel Project (TIP), was collecting petitions demanding that economic pressure and sanctions be brought against Iran for its refusal to halt its nuclear program and its alleged continued support for terrorism.

The “threat of Iran” and the need to confront the regime has become a mainstream view in the U.S. legislature, attracting support from Republican and Democratic lawmakers alike.

As the George W. Bush administration pushes its international allies to back a more rigid sanctions regime against Tehran, lobby groups such as TIP, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and the neoconservative think-tank Center for Security Policy (CSP) have spearheaded a grassroots campaign to divest in companies that do business with countries that the State Department considers state sponsors of terrorism.

“Terror-free investing is an idea whose time has come,” wrote Frank Gaffney, president of CSP, in a March op-ed in the *Washington Times*.

TIP “fights the war of words and images” to provide a “more positive public face of Israel,” according to the organization’s website. Mizrahi’s lobby group may only be three years old, but it has already attracted strong support from high-profile congressmen such as Sen. Evan Bayh (D-IN) and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA), both of whom sit on TIP’s board of advisers.

Its success in attracting attention to the ostensible nuclear threat posed by Iran is another

demonstration of the power of the Israel lobby to influence U.S. foreign policy and affect the policy debate in Congress. TIP’s press conference was striking for the strong written statements of support issued by more than 13 presidential candidates, including Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) and Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY).

“Allowing Iran, a radical theocracy that supports terrorism and openly threatens its neighbors, to acquire nuclear weapons is a risk we cannot take,” said Obama in a statement read aloud to reporters. “All nations need to understand that, while Iran’s most explicit and intolerable threats are aimed at Israel, its conduct threatens all of us.”

Obama recently introduced the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act, one of several bills making its way through Congress that calls for stiffer economic sanctions on Iran’s energy industry and countries that do business with Iran.

“We cannot permit Iran to build or acquire nuclear weapons. We must also not let go unanswered its state sponsorship of terrorism. We must not stand silent in the face of brutal repression of women and minorities. And we must not tolerate threats to the existence of Israel,” said Senator Clinton.

In her statement, Clinton also plugged her sponsorship of Senate legislation aimed at closing loopholes enabling international corporations to evade sanctions through foreign subsidiaries.

The “Divest Iran” campaign has gained momentum in part as an alternative for lawmakers wary of a direct military confrontation with Iran.

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“The record shows diplomacy can be more successful than you think even if they have had a nuclear test,” said Rep. Mark Kirk (R-IL). “There is an elegant policy road that exists for us to bring about a peaceful solution.”

Kirk also recently introduced a bill in the House of Representatives aimed at companies and countries that provide gasoline to the regime, effectively resulting in a “quarantine on gasoline sales.”

While Iran is one of the world’s largest exporters of crude oil, the country’s refining capacity is severely limited, and the government has been forced to import about 40% of its gasoline from abroad while offering the highest subsidies of gasoline to its citizens in the Middle East.

Most lawmakers in attendance preferred the deliberate ambiguity of leaving the military option “on the table” rather than direct military threats, yet they fiercely condemned Iran and questioned the mental stability of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

“The Soviet leadership never called for the United States to be wiped off the map, but the Iranian leadership has. And no Soviet leader ever followed the dictates of the 12th Imam,” said Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA).

While the president of Iran exercises nominal power (the de facto head of the executive branch is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), Ahmadinejad’s pronouncements have raised his political profile while drawing heavy international criticism. In the rhetoric of U.S. lawmakers, he is represented as an unstable religious radical who denies the Holocaust and is “only a couple deviations away from total insanity,” according to Sherman.

“This is our Munich. We need to stand up to Iran and tell them they cannot thumb their noses at world opinion,” said Rep. Elliot Engel (D-NY), who sits on TIP’s board of advisers.

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*Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.*

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