



Episode 329- Iran War Threatened Again?

Guest: Scott McConnell

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WOODS: I read your article that I will be linking to on the show notes page—this is episode 329, so it will be TomWoods.com/329—“How Obama Can Stop Netanyahu’s Iran War.” You begin this piece with some interesting poll information. We’ll get to that in a minute. But I wonder if you could instead set the stage for us by talking about this whole matter of the invitation of Netanyahu to come and address Congress. Can you explain that for anybody who missed it?

MCCONNELL: Sure. Essentially Netanyahu, I think he thinks one his glory moments and one of the places he’s strongest politically. His base is the U.S. Congress, and in four years or so he addressed Congress while he was trying to shut down Obama’s attempts to push Israel towards peace negotiations, and he got I think 29 standing ovations, and so I think if he thinks America is wavering, he can push America in his direction. And also I think he has an election campaign himself. He has an election in mid-March, and he’s not doing great in the polls. And so I think he assumed that the televised images of him telling the Americans what to do and being applauded for it would go over well in Israel. And he works very closely with the Israeli ambassador, obviously, who works very closely and is a former Republican Party operative. So somehow this invitation was arranged without any consultation with the State Department or the White House, which would be pretty much par for the course. So it seemed a very, very irregular operation, not only to people who were skeptical of Netanyahu, but to a lot of even neoconservative Israel supporters and everybody else. But so far as I know, as of now he’s still coming, though there’s maybe some question about that, and what he’s going to talk about is Iran and how the current negotiations between the United States and Iran pose a potential great threat to Israel and how the Congress should try to block or stymie those negotiations I think would be the core of his message.

WOODS: Tell us something about the Obama/Netanyahu relationship. When I look at my Facebook feed, unfortunately, I’ve friended a lot of the worst elements of the Tea Party because their view is they really think there is a deep divide on foreign policy in Washington, and they think that Obama is the anti-Israel candidate, when really I can’t imagine there being an anti-Israel president. That’s just not possible. So what’s the real truth? Their view is that the Obama administration is completely anti-Israel and can’t be relied on. What do you see? Now, I

know you're appealing in effect to Obama to do the right thing here, but what do you generally take to be his angle on all of this?

MCCONNELL: My general take is that Obama is a liberal Zionist. That is to say, he grew up politically among liberal Jews in Chicago, who were part of his early funders, and these are people who believe that there should be a Jewish majority state in Palestine without any question, but they also think that there's a possibility of two-state solution in which the West Bank, virtually all of the West Bank and probably Gaza are a Palestinian state. And that would allow Israel to live in peace with its neighbors and be, according to some visions, a kind a Switzerland of the Middle East. And I think Obama—that's about as—that's sort of the left part—the left-wing of what is permissible in American politics, and I think Obama quite sincerely believes that, and he's made that clear both in his speeches to the Arab world and in his trip to Israel a year and a half ago. He called on Israel to stop the settlements, which are basically ways to prevent a Palestinian state from coming into being by crisscrossing it with roads and road blocks and everything like that, and let the Palestinians have self-determination, and I am not sure—well, it doesn't matter what I think, but I am pretty sure that's what Obama thinks. Netanyahu is pretty much committed to the Likud version of Zionism, which means Israel is entitled to all of—Palestinians can just deport themselves somewhere.

WOODS: Isn't that the case that pretty much everybody—all U.S. presidents for a very long time have at least given lip service to being opposed to the settlements, certainly going all the way back to George H.W. Bush?

MCCONNELL: Well, George H.W. Bush was strongly opposed to the settlements, and he is I think the only president since Eisenhower who actually took some measures against Israel. He blocked loan guarantees which Israel was counting on to build settlements and resettle a big wave of immigrants from Russia and had the beginnings of a real face-off with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which he may have won. But anyway, he wasn't re-elected. He didn't get a second term, and that was that. Clinton—you know, the thing about the settlements is there weren't so many of them before the mid-'90s. They actually—there were maybe 100,000 or so settlers in 1992 when they did the Oslo crisis, so you can pretty much imagine you could get rid of some of them and have some of them with minor land swaps, but now there's 600,000 Israeli Jews live there, and Israel pretty much contemplates having a civil war trying to withdraw them. So the purpose of the settlements was to make a two-state solution impossible. George H.W. Bush understood this. I don't think Clinton did particularly, and I am pretty sure that George W. did not, and Obama does, but it may be that the cow is out of the barn already.

WOODS: Well, on the whole Iran question what I don't quite understand is how and why this issue has waxed and waned so much over the years. They didn't fiddle this long over going to war in Iraq, and then with Iran it seems like we had some kind of intelligence report a number of years ago that seemed to say, all right, clearly we don't have to worry about the nuclear program, and this has all been hyped up, and then we got—it was just one thing after another

where we would get the military clearly indicating that they would not have confidence that this would be a good idea, and so you think, all right, well, this was a neoconservative, bad idea, and it's probably long forgotten, and why now? Why is it all of a sudden coming back up again?

MCCONNELL: Well, I think just because it's a neoconservative bad idea doesn't mean that the neoconservatives won't be back in power again and won't be able to implement it. I think Obama attempted to—and is attempting—to forge a deal that would pretty much placate the issue once and for all meaning we would stop sanctioning Iran, and we would monitor Iran's nuclear program and Iran would limit its nuclear program and everybody would be happy at least for a while, or the West and Iran would be happy. But the neoconservatives and Israel want to stop this, want to basically throw a grenade into the negotiations. So they—first through various measures in Congress have attached—are now wending their way through various kind of poison pill legislation, which would prevent more or less, de facto prevent Obama from making a successful negotiation with Iran.

But why war? I think they have a great appreciation, they really—even if a war doesn't turn out so well, they are happy if we drop a lot of bombs on Iran, and Israel would like it done, too, but Israel doesn't want to do it alone because they couldn't do it logistically very effectively. But Israel would like nothing better than American B-52s smashing up Iran and ending it as a modern state.

WOODS: When you say Israel, do you mean Likud Israel or Israel, Israel?

MCCONNELL: Well, basically the Likud Israel. The distrust of Iran in Israel stretches not all across the political spectrum, but there are people like Ehud Barak, who was the labor prime minister in 2000, who is very much an Iran hawk. I think Israel has gotten very accustomed and very used to them being the only country in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons and everybody thinking that that's like a normal, acceptable, eternal state of affairs, but it's probably not. It's almost human nature: if your adversary has nuclear weapons, and you have the scientific capacity to build them, you're going to think about doing it. And so Israel has always used this very hyped-up language that the idea of anybody having not nuclear weapons, but a nuclear capacity describing it as an existential threat to Israel, and of course it's not—or to the extent that the United States is under an existential threat from Russia and an existential threat from China and an existential threat from Great Britain and France, yeah, if Iran had nuclear weapons, Israel wouldn't be able to be confident that it was the only place with nuclear weapons, but you can't always get what you want.

WOODS: Well, tell me about the internal dynamics of Iran. You mentioned this in your article. Again, I want to remind people you can read this article at TomWoods.com/329. It seems as if the regime certainly is one thing, but the people are very much something else.

MCCONNELL: Yeah, and the regime is divided, too. There is a president and a foreign minister of Iran who all evidence is they are Western educated, and they are liberalizers essentially, and I think there's almost no question that they could arrive at a successful negotiation with Obama

and Kerry and Britain and France and everybody else, but there's also a Supreme Leader and an Iranian parliament, which has a lot of hardliners in it—people who essentially distrust anything that the United States or the West says—think that the United States is eternally Iran's enemy and dishonest and will do anything it can to screw with Iran and distrust any negotiation at all. So in a way, Iran's negotiating leadership is on a tight leash, too, that is somewhat comparable to the one Obama and Kerry are on, and then there is, as I said, there is a lot of—there's a moderate middle class in Iran, which is unlike the case of pretty much any other country in the Middle East. There's a lot of educated people. There's a scientific infrastructure, and there's a film industry and there's a fashion industry. We're not talking about Saudi Arabia here.

WOODS: Now, what about these statistics that you have here at the beginning in terms of how much Americans are really concerned about the Iranian nuclear weapons program or how much American investors are worried about this as a source of global instability? You have some very interesting numbers in here. I'm sure you don't remember them off the top of your head, but what's the basic message of these numbers?

MCCONNELL: Well, Bloomberg Financial Networks did a poll asking people to rate—this is a group of investors that were polled to rate what they considered major global threats. And 24% said Russia and Ukraine, and another 24% said climate change, and another 24% said cyber-terrorism and things like that. It was down at 2% is Iran because basically Iran has virtually never acted like an aggressive country. Even under its most extreme leaders and anti-Western leaders it's always acted pretty cautiously, and so it just isn't on the radar as a threatening country now. I guess people could say it would be nice if Iran didn't have a nuclear industry, but nobody is particularly worried about it except the Israelis and their friends in Congress who were able to generate this huge amount of hysteria almost about an issue which isn't actually that menacing.

WOODS: I've had several guests on who have talked about the nature of that nuclear program to the extent that it exists and why it may not actually be such a threat after all, and I will link to those also at TomWoods.com/329. So I've kind of covered that angle, but all the same, I feel like it would be Hamlet without the prince to go without asking you to give at least a brief overview to the man on the street of why it is that this big bogeyman really shouldn't be keeping you up at night after all.

MCCONNELL: Well, Iran has a nuclear industry. They started it during the Shah, which was before the Iranian Revolution, and they have various reactors. They have been fairly secretive about it. It seems to me that they probably would like the option, the possibility of building a nuclear weapon. They are surrounded by Pakistan on one side, which they don't always have good relationships with and has nuclear weapons. On the other side, Israel, which has a lot of nuclear weapons. To the north, Russia, which has a lot of nuclear weapons, and they can do it. So I think, and on the other hand, they've said that it's contrary to Islam and that the weapons

are basically taboo, and they didn't use—they were being—during the Iran/Iraq Gulf War of the 1980s, Iraq was using terrible chemical weapons against Iran, which Iran could have retaliated in kind, but it didn't. So I am not entirely dismissive when the Supreme Leader says there is a fatwa against nuclear weapons; I am not dismissive of it.

At the same time, I don't think it's necessarily an eternal fatwa, as it were. So I think Iran wants to keep its nuclear industry going and thinking at some point we might actually have to build nuclear weapons. I don't know what the consensus view is. The consensus view in the intelligence community, so far as I know, is that they have decided not to build nuclear weapons, but that can change. In any case, I don't think it's the end of the world if they do. China was a much more hostile state when they developed nuclear weapons. There's a logic to nuclear containment and deterrence. But I think also if they are willing to negotiate in a way in which their nuclear program is subject to inspections and subject to limits, we should welcome that in negotiation and engage in it, and Obama is doing that.

WOODS: Well, Scott, before I let you go, tell me not necessarily what you expect to happen, but what would thrill or at least please you to hear the president say, let's say, in a televised address relating to the issue of Iran.

MCCONNELL: Well, in the piece I suggested that Obama may have to have a public showdown with Israel on the question and basically say, look, Israel is trying to lead us to war with Iran, and that's not in America's national interest, and some countries' national interest diverge. I am sure that Obama hopes—and I hope, too—that it doesn't get that far—that there's successful negotiation in Iran and that the inside game they are playing, which is basically communicating at an elite level to all the Senate offices that this negotiation is the best way to keep Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, is successful and eventually Israel just realizes that they can't stop it, and it rolls through. But if the negotiations are on the verge of breaking up, and if the Senate gets enough votes to pass legislation that threatens to undermine those negotiations, Obama might have to actually go to the American people to have any chance—say look, we can't have all these Israel lobby influencing senators deciding questions of war and peace for the United States. I don't know if it will get that far, but I would like to think that's a card that Obama has in his pocket and would use.

WOODS: Well, I read in the comments section to your piece the skeptical reply from your friend Phil Giraldi, who likes your piece but just doesn't imagine that Obama has it in him, and even if he did, then if Hillary gets in, she'll reverse it immediately. It's a very, very frustrating position to be in, but I hope people read your piece, again, linking to it at TomWoods.com/329, and of course, check out TheAmericanConservative.com. Scott McConnell, thanks for your time today.

MCCONNELL: Thank you very much, Tom.