Are Bibi and Barak Bluffing on Iran?

RON KAMPEAS
Jewish Telegraphic Agency
WASHINGTON

Just what is Israel’s latest thinking on Iran? Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak in recent months have been more explicit than ever about the likelihood of an Israeli strike on Iran to keep it from obtaining nuclear weapons capability.

A number of current and former top military officials are now suggesting that the duo has gone too far, turning what was meant to be a calculated bluff into a commitment to a strike that could accelerate Iran’s nuclear program and engulf the region in war.

Are Barak and Netanyahu merely posturing, or are they really intent on waging war? It’s an issue getting a lot of attention.

Presbyterians Here Reject Divestment

BRYAN SCHWARTZMAN
Jewish Exponent Staff

With the Presbyterian Church USA once again poised to debate divestment from companies that do business in Israel, the Presbyterian of Philadelphia has adopted its own resolution that rejects such a stance.

And the local clergy opposed to divestment are taking their opposition a step further: The Philadelphia resolution — known in church parlance as an overture — will be presented at this July’s national general assembly in Pittsburgh as an alternative to a resolution singling out Israel for divestment.

The Philadelphia document, which passed by a vote of 61 to 39 at a special April 25 meeting, instead urges the 2.4 million-member Protestant church to adopt a more even-handed approach in addressing its concerns over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The measure asks the national church “to reject a strategy of economic coercion that singles out Israel as the source of the conflict and the ongoing obstacle to peace;
Muslim on ADL Board

Continued from PAGE 1

build bridges between people of different faiths. “We have to address the continued bias against Jews, as well as new biases against new immigrants — Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs,” Ibrahim said, speaking of his decision to join the ADL. “It shows that in the U.S., we can collaborate and create new partnerships between peoples.”

Ibrahim’s election to the ADL board comes six months after he spoke to that body about his first trip to Israel and his behind the scenes efforts to open channels between American Muslims and Israelis.

Marc Kaplin, ADL’s regional chair, said Ibrahim’s story “speaks for itself. He has reached out across religious and ethnic lines. We are pleased to have him.”

Kaplin added, “Our vision is to try and get rid of hate and the way to do that is to have communications with people who are different from what you are.”

So how did somebody who spent much of his life thinking about business and little about religion evolve into an interfaith activist, one who has become knowledgeable about the Koran and a student of the Torah? During an interview at his Center City office, the chief executive of Radian, a private mortgage insurance company, who divides his time among Philadelphia, New York and Washington, sat behind his desk, stacked neatly with books about Islam and Judaism.

The married father of a grown son spoke with the enthusiasm of a professor hoping to transmit his love of a subject. If he learned one lesson growing up in the fourth largest city in India — the product of a cosmopolitan, business-oriented Muslim family — it was that religion need not serve as a barrier between people, he said, flashing his disarming smile. In Hyderabad, Hindus and Muslims often took part in one another’s religious festivals, he said.

He attended Catholic and Anglican schools and read everything he could get his hands on, including the works of Chaim Potok and Leon Uris, mostly because he was obsessed with America in general. “I always viewed Jews as an extension of me. When I was a kid I went to see The Ten Commandments. I thought it was a movie about my own religion,” he said.

“Unfortunately, we live in a world where people growing up will get very negative information about Jews or Muslims,” Ibrahim added. “I was fortunate that my childhood did not have that kind of negative stereotyping. I didn’t have to climb over a wall.”

After graduating in 1975 from Osmania University in Hyderabad with a degree in mechanical engineering, he came to Philadelphia and, in 1978, earned an MBA from the Wharton School of Business, where he is now a major donor and trustee.

His meteoric rise in business took him to top-tier management stints at GreenPoint Mortgage, American Express and Chemical Bank. Since 2005, Ibrahim has been at the helm of Radian, a firm that employs about 1,100 people in offices in New York and Philadelphia.

Like so many Americans, especially Muslim Americans, Ibrahim’s life was changed, and deeply shaken, he said, by the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

“I never thought I was any less American than anyone else. All of a sudden, there was stuff in the media, and people confronted me and somehow made me feel that I couldn’t be American because of my faith,” he said.

“I was just as offended by the people who caused 9/11 to happen as anybody else,” he added. “I don’t see how I could even identify with them. Anyone who attacks my country, regardless of my faith, is just as much my enemy as anybody else’s.”

He began to study Islam more seriously and traveled to Saudi Arabia to complete the Haj pilgrimage, as required by the faith. He also studied other religious texts and said he saw more commonalities than differences.

Enlisting the help of his now 25-year-old son, Winston — who was a member of Alpha Epsilon Pi, the Jewish fraternity at Johns Hopkins University — he established the Ibrahim Family Foundation.

Locally, his firm and the family foundation helped foot the bill for a public commemoration of Sept. 11 that was organized by the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia. Radian is also a sponsor of the ADL’s Walk Against Hate this month.

Three years ago, the father and son team created the Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Project, which each year takes a group of about six students — Muslims, Jews and Christians — from Penn and Hopkins on a trip to Israel for several weeks, with a stop in at least one Arab country for frank exchanges with individuals who span the religious and political spectrum. Last year’s Arab stop was Saudi Arabia.

Even though he was funding trips to Israel, Ibrahim didn’t visit the Jewish state himself until late in 2010. Though he’d never had any issues with Jews or Judaism, per se, he said he did absorb “by osmosis” from other Muslims some negative feelings toward Israel.

“I had some deep reservations about Israel and how I would be treated there,” said Ibrahim. “It was an eye-opening trip. I was made to feel more welcome than I ever could have imagined.”

As for his views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he said: “I don’t care about politics. I don’t want the people to hate one another; because you have so much in common. After all, you are all the children of Abraham.”

Now, one of his goals is to convince more American Muslims to visit Israel and judge the Jewish state for themselves. (He also wants to bring Jewish leaders to Saudi Arabia.)

At a 2009 White House dinner, Ibrahim met Michael Oren, Israel’s ambassador to the United States. That same year, Ibrahim had served as an informal adviser to the White House in advance of President Barack Obama’s address to the Muslim world, delivered in Cairo.

Ibrahim said he helped Oren organize an end-of-Ramadan reception last year for American Muslim leaders, including members of the controversial Islamic Society of North America, at the Israeli Embassy in Washington. The August event had 65 guests, including prominent Muslims and Jews. Ibrahim was out of the country at the time, but his son, Winston, attended.

Oren did not respond to requests for comment about his relationship with Ibrahim. On June 2, 2011 the ambassador posted on his Facebook page that he met with him and that the two “discussed ways of further introducing American Muslims to the reality of Israel and reinforcing our ties based on mutual respect and faith.”

Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL and a friend of Ibrahim’s, said, “The fact is, there are few voices such as his that reject extremism and fundamentalism. I’m just delighted he’s there.”

As Ibrahim tells it, at least one Israeli security official told him that by doing what he’s doing — telling fellow Muslims to abandon their hatred of Jews and Israel — he’s putting his life at risk.

“Do I understand that there are personal risks associated with what I am doing? Yes I do,” he stated. “I’m not going to stand here and say that the challenges I face are not immense. I did not set out to be in the space I now find myself in, which is out of necessity and circumstance.”

According to Sayyd M. Syeed, national director for the office of Interfaith and Community Alliances for the Islamic Society of North America, support for Israel’s existence is becoming less of a third rail in the American Muslim community.

“We had to educate our people,” he said. “We had to recognize the excesses committed against Israel and we had to recognize the suffering of Palestine. On both sides, there has been so much suffering. We need to secure Israel’s existence and provide a dignified resolution for Palestinian statelessness.”

Regarding Ibrahim, he said that “here you have somebody who is very sincerely following the pillars of his faith and he is passionately advocating a better understanding of the Jewish faith. That gives his work so much meaning.”

Ibrahim has participated in some of ISNA’s interfaith programs, but is not a supporter or member of the group. ISNA was identified as an un-indicted co-conspirator in the federal terrorism funding trial against the Holy Land Foundation.

According to the Investigative Project on Terrorism, the group’s leadership has maintained ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and has pursued a radical ideology. But according to the Union for Reform Judaism, ISNA accepts the right of Israel to exist and specifically condemns terrorist attacks against Israelis.

In terms of gauging the effects of his own work, Ibrahim said, “All I can do is hope that there are at least a handful of people who might rethink their preconceived assumptions about others.”

He often finds himself wondering when more religious and lay leaders will “start using religion as a force to bring people together rather than as a force to divide us,” he said. “You can look at it either way; and God knows there are plenty of people who are looking at it the other way.”