

Analysis

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WASHINGTON WATCH

Welcome to AIPAC:
Where words
lose all meaning

By Dr James J Zogby

You need to prepare yourself for language shock before listening to speeches at the annual convention of AIPAC, the Israel lobby. Speaker after speaker will use words that you think you understand, but they will use them in ways that so distort their meaning that the experience will leave you exhausted or exasperated. On the opening day, for example, the group's new president, Mort Fridman and a former Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, wreaked havoc with the word "progressive." Motivated by recent polls showing that Israel has lost support among Americans on the left, Fridman issued an appeal to progressives to recognize that "the progressive narrative for Israel is... compelling." And Granholm, building on this theme, declared that "as a progressive" she supports Israel as "a nation that provides universal healthcare... protects women's rights and LGBT rights. It's a progressive's paradise." What both speakers deliberately ignored is the reality that this "paradise" has become an apartheid state that oppresses and oppresses millions of Palestinians whose rights are denied, lands are confiscated, and daily lives have become a hell on earth. Not only that, but as Israel's government moves further to the right it is mired in corruption, violates religious freedom, and embraces Donald Trump. It is at best, a stretch to call them "progressive." The word means something and it doesn't mean Israel.

I was also struck by Ambassador Nicki Haley's description of the United Nations as "bullying Israel" because the world body repeatedly passes resolutions condemning Israeli practices in the occupied territories. Once again, reality is being turned on its head. It's not the UN that bullies Israel, it's Israel that is bullying the Palestinians by repeatedly violating international law and conventions. Because the UN is the body that established Israel and set the terms for "a just and lasting peace," it remains the address for complaints with Israeli behavior. Palestinian recourse to the world body then isn't bullying, it's appropriate.

It also takes more than a little chutzpah for speakers addressing AIPAC to call the UN a bully, since the Israel lobby has long relied on the US Congress to bully Palestinians with repressive and often humiliating legislation, while simultaneously arming and giving a blank check to Israel which it uses to systematically violate Palestinian rights. Then there's the Orwellian talk about "peace, two states and negotiations," none of which bears any relationship with reality. Israel's governing coalition no longer supports a two-state solution. For years, they pretended to endorse this outcome but did so with terms that made it impossible to achieve. Israeli leaders claimed to want "negotiations without preconditions leading to two states," but then proceeded to lay out conditions like: Settlement remain, no consideration of refugees' right to return, no compromise on Jerusalem, and continued Israeli control over the Jordan Valley and access and egress on all borders. Meanwhile, in the two decades since Netanyahu was first elected, the settler population has quadrupled as they continued to expand their settlement enterprise in the occupied territories. In the end, it appeared that Israel's embrace of two states was more a stalling tactic or a fig leaf to mask their aggressive conquest of the entire land and their permanent subjugation of the Palestinian people.

Farce

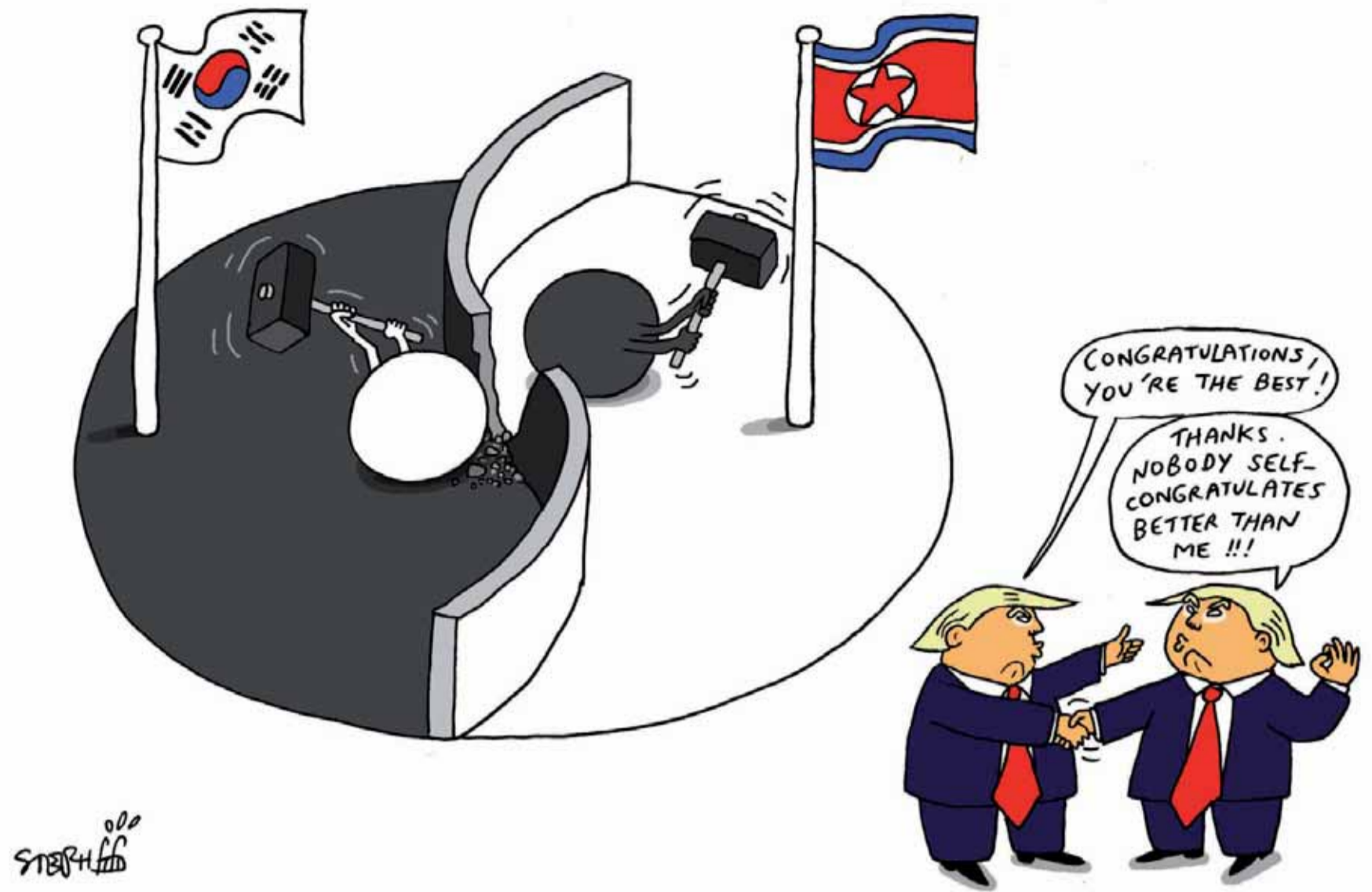
In the face of this reality, it was a bit of a farcical "too little, too late" for the new AIPAC president to declare his organization's support for two states and then lament that this goal was probably unattainable due - he of course added - to Palestinian failures. That Fridman was quickly rebuked by members of the Israeli governing coalition was a clear indication that Israelis have become so emboldened they no longer feel the need for a fig leaf to cover for their ill intent. The topsy-turvy world of AIPAC's use of language was writ large in the juxtaposition of two signs advertising an event on "freedom of the press." Outside the room was a screen that announced the session "Free Speech and Freedom of the Press in Israel." Above it was another sign stating that "This session is off the record and closed to press." No further comment is necessary.

If this weren't enough to set sane minds reeling in confusion or consternation, there were the bizarre claims about "Israel's moral army" or the need to confront "Palestinian fake news" about the occupation army's mistreatment of Palestinian children or how Israel is on the verge of peace with its Arab neighbors, if it were not for the pesky Palestinians who keep getting in the way. Keeping with this "up is down and down is up" approach is newly revised AIPAC-supported "Israel Anti-Boycott Act." When it was initially proposed, the bill was condemned by civil libertarians as a violation of protected free speech. The AIPAC fix was to add language saying that "nothing in this Act...shall be construed to diminish or infringe upon any right protected under the First Amendment." The problem is that the language is non-binding and in no way, affects the binding provisions of the bill that continue to call for punishments for honoring the boycott of Israel. In other words, "we won't be violating your First Amendment rights, but we will." The problem with all of this is that there are true believers in this upside-down fantasy world created by AIPAC and its Israeli partners. The audience of the faithful cheer for the distortions they are being fed. The Members of Congress fall all over themselves announcing their willingness to jump through more AIPAC hoops designed to demonstrate their loyalty to Israel.

Thankfully, the story doesn't end here. Polls are showing that there is some promising movement in public opinion on issues involving Israel and the Palestinians. Republican opinion, driven by rightwing evangelical Christians and neo-Conservatives, remain under Israel's sway. Democrats, on the other hand, are divided in their support for Israel, with young and minority voters no longer buying the AIPAC-created narrative and increasingly more supportive of Palestinians. This deadly contest between reality and illusion will continue.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute

NORTH KOREA'S OFFER OF NUCLEAR TALKS



Trump meeting is a win for Kim

Nuclear-armed North Korea has outplayed a diplomatically naive US president with the agreement to hold a summit, analysts say, and has no intention of giving up its atomic weapons. Donald Trump hailed the planned meeting with Kim Jong Un as "great progress" on the road to denuclearization. But analysts warn that agreeing to a sit-down so early in the process gives Pyongyang something it desperately wants without extracting meaningful concessions in return.

"North Korea has been seeking a summit with an American president for more than 20 years," pointed out arms control specialist Jeffrey Lewis, of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. "It has literally been a top foreign policy goal." The US needs to talk to North Korea, he tweeted, but Kim was not seeking the meeting "so that he can surrender North Korea's weapons". "Kim is inviting Trump to demonstrate that his investment in nuclear and missile capabilities has forced the United States to treat him as an equal."

No sitting US president has ever met any of the North's leaders, much less gone to Pyongyang. Kim's father Kim Jong Il invited Bill Clinton to come after the first North-South summit in 2000, but Clinton demurred; he visited the North only after leaving the White House to secure the release of detained Americans. Jimmy Carter, another former president, also carried out a similar mercy mission, and other trips to try to broker peace.

'Really harsh sanctions'

If the summit goes ahead - and Trump's White House is marked by a tendency to perform sudden about-faces - it will certainly be historic, and not to be sniffed at, argues John Delury of Yonsei University in Seoul. "Engaging (North Korea) is very hard work," he said. "This is the beginning, not the grand solution. But it's a very good start."

Women call time
on sexist culture
in aid sector

From Oxfam staff using prostitutes in Haiti to Syrian women exploited in return for aid and harassment of women in the head offices of global charities, the humanitarian sector has been rattled by media coverage of sexual wrongdoing. But much of what has hit the front pages in recent weeks is not news to those who work in the aid industry, and rules to clamp down on it have been introduced steadily in recent years, experts say. So why has a major public scandal erupted now?

Aid workers and researchers pinpoint two key reasons: Newspaper revelations that have driven Britain to put pressure on agencies to act; and a popular movement that has spread on social media exposing sexual misconduct in different walks of life, starting with the film industry. "There is nothing that makes organizations prioritize something like negative media coverage," said Imogen Wall, a humanitarian consultant and former journalist who co-founded a Facebook group where aid workers chew over tough issues.

Anti-harassment campaigns using first the hashtag #MeToo and then also #TimesUp - devised by Hollywood celebrities - have also triggered a shift at the individual level. Wall noted. "There has not been institutional action on this, but there also hasn't been much self-reflection, and I think that is a really important part of what is happening now," she said. In the Facebook group, which has swelled to 18,000 members over the past three years, both male and female aid workers share experiences of sexual misconduct and offer advice.

But even before the latest wave of news broke, survivors like lawyer Megan Nohert - who in 2015 went public about her rape by an aid contractor in South Sudan while she was drugged - have been collecting evidence and testimonies from others. Tellingly, Report the Abuse, the group Nohert set up for that purpose, had to close in August 2017 due to "a lack of sustainable funding streams", its website says.

Months of raging tensions between the US and North Korea, involving personal insults and threats of war from both sides, gave way suddenly this year to diplomacy, much of it centered on the South's hosting of the Winter Olympics. Experts say Pyongyang was driven to make overtures to the US by the looming impact of ever-tightening sanctions on the North Korean economy and the oft-repeated warning of military action by the Trump administration.

Pyongyang gets
what it wants
without making
any concessions

The North's major trade partner China was implementing "really harsh sanctions" for the "first time ever", Andrei Lankov of the Korea Risk Group told AFP, and the economy was set to "start crumbling" within a year. "More important is a fear of possible military operations by the US," he added. "North Koreans don't want to be shot at." But Pyongyang will play for time for as long as it can, he said. "North Koreans are going to talk about denuclearization a lot without any intention to ever surrender their nuclear weapons."

According to the South Korean envoys who carried the

message from Kim to Trump, the North Korean leader said he was "committed to denuclearization" and expressed his willingness to meet Trump as soon as possible. And he promised to halt nuclear and missile tests while talks are underway. But the North already possesses rockets capable of reaching the US mainland, and last year detonated what it said was an H-bomb. It has long described itself as a full-fledged nuclear power, and Kim has already declared the development of his nuclear forces complete.

'Strategic gamble'

Trump's sudden decision to meet Kim was "a major strategic gamble", said Evan Medeiros, the former Asian affairs director of the National Security Council under president Barack Obama. There had been no clear indication Kim was willing to abandon his nuclear weapons, he said, adding the North had long been "a skillful manipulator". "Kim was likely able to secure the meeting with Trump by taking advantage of Trump's vanity as the self-professed world's best dealmaker and South Korean President Moon Jae-in's fervent desire to achieve peace with North Korea through dialogue."

The White House, which is short on regional expertise - there has been no ambassador in Seoul for more than a year - will be going into any eventual summit without even rudimentary diplomatic groundwork in place. "However skillful a negotiator Trump believes himself to be, there are few people in his administration with experience managing such a complex process with such a wily counterpart," said Medeiros.

Abraham Denmark, director of the Wilson Center's Asia program, predicted: "Kim will accomplish the dream of his father and grandfather by making North Korea a nuclear state, and gain tremendous prestige and legitimacy by meeting with an American president as an equal. All without giving up a single warhead or missile." —AFP

Social spending

It wants in particular to move ahead with social reforms - increased child benefit and changes in health insurance and education spending. The coalition agreement foresees 12 billion euros (\$15 billion) of investment in family, child and social measures, a stabilization in pensions, curbs on employers' use of fixed-term contracts and a review of how healthcare is funded. SPD leaders know they need some quick wins. One recent poll had the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) surpassing the SPD for the first time in a national survey to become the second-strongest party.

However, senior members of Merkel's conservative bloc - her Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) - feel Social Democrat policies got too high a priority in the last government. Its first year saw the passage of a flagship pension reform to lower the retirement age and legislation to introduce a national minimum wage - both key SPD projects.

This time, the conservatives' parliamentary leader, Volker Kauder, says his group will not allow that to happen again. "The CDU/CSU parliamentary group will ensure that for each SPD issue, a concern of the CDU and CSU will be put forward," Kauder said at a CDU party conference held to approve the coalition deal. For the conservatives, taking a tougher line on immigration after the 2015 refugee crisis is a top priority, as is spending on domestic and foreign security. "If there is room for manoeuvre in the budget, we won't forget the armed forces," Kauder said.

The coalition deal foresees additional fiscal space of euro 46 billion (\$57 billion) over the next four years. Any additional surplus is earmarked primarily for defense, development and crisis prevention, with spending to be split equally between military and non-military projects.

But SPD leaders are likely to be skeptical about any big jumps in the defence budget. They have also raised questions about the NATO target of moving toward spending 2 percent of gross domestic output on the military. Should economic growth slow and tax revenues come in weaker than projected - a scenario that new US trade tariffs could help to bring about - the social spending plans dear to the SPD could also be threatened. —Reuters

Independent watchdog

The widespread use of short-term contracts for aid workers, a donor-led emphasis on value for money, and a public view that agencies should spend as little as possible on overheads all contribute to a results-oriented model that makes it harder to detect, sanction and deter sexual wrongdoing, experts said. Dorothea Hilhorst, a professor at the International Institute of Social Studies in Rotterdam, said aid agencies had viewed sexual misconduct within their operations as an important matter but had not seen it as urgent amid a host of competing challenges in their efforts to assist those in need.

That will now likely change, with senior management having to get involved rather than passing it to their human resources departments to deal with, she said. But she warned against a knee-jerk reaction leading to a burst of new standards and institutions to tackle the problem. "The sector has been working (on this) for the last 15 years and has standards that are very up-to-date. The only problem with the standards is that they are not being implemented well enough," she said.

The academic welcomed commitments by the British and Dutch governments in the past week at separate meetings with agencies to set up independent bodies to scrutinise aid operations and ensure standards are adhered to. Ombudsman-style offices should be established on the ground where aid is being delivered and employ local people, Hilhorst said. The Netherlands plans to trial this approach in a pilot country to be selected in the next two months.

Speaking out

While the voices of aid recipients abused overseas are rarely heard in the corridors of power in donor countries, a small number of women who have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment closer to home have been trying hard to speak out. Alexia Pepper de Caires, who worked at Save the Children from 2011 to 2015, walked into a board meeting uninvited on Tuesday. She demanded those in leadership positions, including international chairman Alan Parker, take responsibility for failing to protect staff from sexual misconduct at the charity's UK arm. —Reuters

Tensions build in
new, 'explosive'
German coalition

Fault lines are emerging in Germany's new government before ministers have even held their first cabinet meeting, with tensions over the sequencing and extent of reforms already pulling at the fragile coalition. Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives only turned to the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) to prolong their 'grand coalition' out of desperation after talks on a three-way alliance with two smaller parties collapsed last November.

Their subsequent 177-page coalition deal, clinched last month after difficult negotiations, is peppered with the phrase "We want to", leaving plenty of leeway for disagreements over competing priorities. "Pensions, healthcare, Europe and asylum and migration policy are all areas where there are explosives built into the coalition agreement," Detlef Seif, deputy EU spokesman for Merkel's conservative parliamentary bloc, told Reuters.

With more than five months gone since September's election, Merkel is keenly aware that voters expect the new government - which takes office on Wednesday - to address their economic, social and security concerns quickly. "With our coalition agreement, we have a book full of assignments and tasks to implement," she said on Monday. The pressure is on for both camps to deliver: the inclusion in the coalition deal of a clause that envisages a review of the government's progress after two years gives each the opportunity to leave the ruling alliance then if it is not working for them.

The priority the government gives to different reforms set out in the coalition deal, the extent to which it implements them, and the personnel involved promise a cocktail of pressures that Merkel will need all her political skill to balance. The SPD only agreed to ally with Merkel after promising a list of distinctive policies to secure the approval of party members, many of whom wanted the SPD to regroup in opposition after voters gave it no credit for the last four years of governing under Merkel.