

THE “WIPE OFF THE MAP” CONTROVERSY: A Rare Admission From Israel in Relation to the “Iran Threat”

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Was it a momentary lapse of concentration or an honest admission?

Last week, in an interview with Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor in Jerusalem, I heard something I have not heard before.

Let’s start with the background.

With the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) talks on Iran’s nuclear programme about to kick off, and the air thick with talk of a military attack on Iran, it seemed appropriate to try to gain some perspective from the Israeli establishment.

As Minister of Intelligence and Atomic Energy with a background in Iran issues, Meridor was the perfect man to talk to to.

An able and experienced politician, Meridor was mostly happy to skirt the direct questions and recite approved talking points.

It’s when I challenged him on the biggest talking point of all, Iran’s supposed determination to “wipe Israel off the face of the map,” that Meridor seemed to stumble outside the lines of the agreed narrative.

Meridor: [Iran’s leaders] all come basically ideologically, religiously with the statement that Israel is an unnatural creature, it will not survive. They didn’t say ‘[we’ll wipe it out](#)’, you are right, but [that] it will not survive, it is a cancerous tumor, it should be removed;

Nabili: Well, I am glad you acknowledged they didn’t say they will wipe it out, because certainly Israeli politicians...

Meridor: ... they say it will be removed, needs to be removed ...

The minister spent much of the ensuing conversation arguing that for Iran to simply question Israel’s long term future amounts to an existential threat; there are many who agree with him.

But it’s his acknowledgement that there’s nuance in Iran’s position that’s so significant, and so rare.

Politicians from Binyamin Netanyahu through Britain's William Hague and most of the US congress won't do it; they have invested a great deal of political capital in arguing just the opposite, claiming incessantly that Iran will launch a nuclear weapon on Israel because, in their minds, Iran's president has more or less said so.

As Gary Leupp, Professor of History at Tufts University in the US [points out](#), this position has remained unmoved by contradictory facts:

Ahmadinejad himself has repeatedly said that his remark was misinterpreted. In January 2006, complaining about the 'hue and cry' over his statement, he said: 'Let the Palestinians participate in free elections and they will say what they want.' In July 2008, he told a meeting of the D-8 nations (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey) that his country would never initiate military action but that the Israeli regime would eventually collapse on its own.

But there's little doubt which opinion is most heard, and most listened to.

The *Guardian* of April 13, 2012, contained a remarkable example of this.

[This article](#), questioning the legality of an attack on Iran, is unusual anyway, simply because it addresses the issue of international law at all.

But more surprising are the statements in it, made by some fairly learned lawyers, which are not so much legal analysis as verbal callisthenics.

That [Alan Dershowitz](#) gives Israel the legal green light to bomb Iran is to be expected, but here's Anthony D'Amato, a professor of international law at Northwestern University:

Iran says it wants to push the Israelis into the sea and that they are constructing nuclear weapons. That's enough for me to say that cannot be allowed. If the US or Israel takes the initiative to block that action, it can hardly be said to be violating international law. It can only be preserving international law for future generations.

The combination of factual error and partisan analysis here is remarkable.

Firstly, his characterisation of Tehran's policies is almost unique.

If "Iran" (and he doesn't actually clarify who he means here) has ever actually said that it wants to "push Israelis into the sea" he doesn't point us to the source.

Secondly, he doesn't explain why such comments from Iran should cause more existential anguish than [similarly belligerent comments](#) made by Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman in reference to Palestinians, or [by Hillary Clinton](#) in reference to Iran.

As for the concept of "preserving international law for future generations," he does not clarify his thoughts on whether Russia and China might also be justified in unilaterally attempting such a feat, or in deciding what can and cannot be allowed in international politics.

But what's most bizarre is his completely erroneous belief that Iran itself has said it's constructing nuclear weapons.

It hasn't

There's no reason to believe that a man of D'Amato's standing should lie, bare-faced, to an internationally respected newspaper; therefore it's more likely that he's simply accepted what someone with an anti-Iran agenda has told him.

So if a man who "has argued cases before the European Court of Human Rights" can fall prey to hearsay and mis-information, can we be surprised that the average consumer of mainstream media can buy into this "big lie"?

Let's hope, as the latest round of nuclear talks gets under way, the people around the table will, like Meridor, admit the existence of nuance and allow for alternate opinions.

Because if Harvard's Stephen Walt [is right](#), and the P5+1 is intent on sabotaging the negotiations before they start ... well ...

Let's just hope.

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