

Substance beyond the Humor:

Analyzing the Jones Address

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Brief Analysis

The tempest in a teapot about Gen. James L. Jones's opening joke in his address to The Washington Institute's twenty-fifth anniversary symposium last week diverted attention from the truly newsworthy aspects of the national security advisor's remarks. On five key issues, he made important, substantive, and at times innovative statements of policy. Given the political and strategic timing of his remarks, they should be viewed as one of the most significant statements of administration policy on Middle East issues this year.

National Security Strategy

In a passage totally overlooked by the media, General Jones gave the first glimpse into the new National Security Strategy (NSS) that he said will be unveiled in the coming weeks. This document, which transcends Middle East issues, concretizes the overall foreign policy approach of an administration and usually reflects the thrust of a president's approach to international security. In his remarks, General Jones said the new NSS would be based on four pillars:

- Security -- "We have an enduring interest in the security of the United States, our citizens, and U.S. allies and partners."
- Prosperity -- "We have an enduring interest in a strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity."
- Values -- "We have an enduring interest in upholding universal values, at home and around the world."
- International order -- "We have an enduring interest in an international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges."

A detailed assessment of these pillars and the policies they represent is beyond the scope of this article. But it is important to point out that enunciation of these pillars alone marks a significant shift from the key principles of the final George W. Bush and Bill Clinton NSSs. For example, there is no reference in the Jones statement to democracy, freedom, or liberty, terms that dominated the Bush NSS. Democracy promotion, not specifically mentioned in General Jones's remarks, was also a stated pillar of Bill Clinton's final NSS. Interestingly, there was in the general's

statement an echo from a doctrine advanced by an earlier president -- the reference to "international order" sounds eerily similar to the post-Gulf War call by President George H. W. Bush for the creation of a "new world order." How the new NSS fleshes out these principles into a full strategy will provide a fascinating window into the administration's deepest thoughts about the direction of foreign policy.

Preventing an Iranian Nuclear Bomb

On dealing with Iran, General Jones hinted at a broader commitment about Iran's nuclear program and presented the administration's critique of Iranian behavior in starker and more severe tones than has been the case with most other expositions by senior officials.

In describing Iran's behavior, for example, General Jones's words were blunt and direct, unadorned by qualifiers or comparatives.

To date, we have seen no indication that Iran's leaders want to resolve these issues constructively. After initially accepting it, they rejected the Tehran Research Reactor proposal. They have refused to discuss their nuclear program with the P-5 + 1. The revelation of a previously covert enrichment site, construction of which further violated Iran's NPT obligations, fed further suspicion about Iran's intentions. Iran recently increased the enrichment levels of its uranium to 20 percent. All the while, Iran continues to brutally repress its own citizens and prohibit their universal rights to express themselves freely and choose their own future.

These are not the behaviors of a responsible international actor, and they are not the actions of a government committed to peaceful diplomacy and a new relationship with a willing and ready partner. (Emphasis added)

In effect, General Jones delivered what can be termed the administration's bill of indictment against the Islamic Republic, setting the predicate for further action. The goal of U.S. policy is, as General Jones said, "to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons." Importantly, the use of the word "developing" -- as Vice President Biden did in his similarly overlooked remarks at Tel Aviv University last month -- suggests an expanded objective; the more common formulation is that the United States is committed to prevent Iran from "obtaining" or "acquiring" a nuclear weapon. Whether the president chooses to act -- by implementing sanctions outside the UN Security Council or some other preventive action, for example -- is a separate matter; in his Washington Institute remarks, General Jones delivered the rationale for more assertive action should the president choose to pursue it.

Repairing U.S.-Israeli Ties and the Perception of Tension

The main thrust of General Jones's speech was devoted to an unconditional statement of U.S.-Israel strategic alignment and security partnership. Recently, some other administration officials can be said to have delivered remarks that tried to thread the needle between, on the one hand, celebrating the "unshakeable, unbreakable" bond between the United States and Israel and, on the other hand, hinting that the relationship was also conditioned on how Israel behaves vis-a-vis the peace process. In his remarks, Jones set out to remove any whiff of conditionality from U.S.-Israeli ties:

And we will never forget that since the first minutes of Israeli independence, the United States has had a special relationship with Israel. And that will not change. Why? Because this is not a commitment of Democrats or Republicans; it is a national commitment based on shared values, deep and interwoven connections, and mutual interests.

Jones went further. He evidently decided this was the forum to correct the impression left by CENTCOM commander Gen. David Petraeus's remarks, echoed by President Obama, that inaction on the Middle East peace process -- a

codeword for Israeli recalcitrance -- complicates U.S. regional policy and may even extract a heavy cost in terms of U.S. "blood and treasure." To do so, he offered a ringing endorsement of the value of the U.S.-Israeli relationship to U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. While this reiterated statements the president himself made, Jones's comments had special significance given his military background.

I can also say from long experience that our security relationship with Israel is important for America. Our military benefits from Israeli innovations in technology, from shared intelligence, from exercises that help our readiness and joint training that enhances our capabilities, and from lessons learned in Israel's own battles against terrorism and asymmetric threats.

Over the years, and like so many Americans -- like so many of you here tonight -- I've spent a great deal of time with my Israeli partners, including my friends in the IDF. These partnerships are deep and abiding. They are personal relationships and friendships based on mutual trust and respect. Every day, across the whole range of our bilateral relationship, we are working together for our shared security and prosperity. And our partnership will only be strengthened in the months and years to come.

Balancing Israeli and Palestinian Demands

On the Middle East peace process, General Jones repeated previous statements by the president in support of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because, as he said, it is in U.S., Israeli, Arab, and global interests -- and because it denies Iran an opportunity to exploit conflict for its own gain. On the peace process, the innovation in his remarks came in the toned-down formulation he used when he hinted at what is widely viewed as the source of deep tension in U.S.-Israeli relations in recent weeks, i.e., U.S. consternation over Israeli housing policy in Jerusalem.

Specifically, in the brief and relatively mild reference he made to this issue, he made sure to include in the same breath a U.S. demand of the Palestinians regarding incitement: "We also continue to call on all sides to avoid provocative actions, including Israeli actions in east Jerusalem and Palestinian incitement, that fuel suspicion rather than trust." Here, his objective seems to be to refute allegations that Washington has singled out Israel and to underscore the fact that both parties need to take measures to improve the prospects for diplomatic progress. Indeed, the new grammatical formulation is such that copyeditors would have to mangle Jones's sentence if they only wanted to focus readers' attention on the request to Israel.

A Robust Counterattack on the Charge of Dual Loyalty

General Jones opened his remarks to the audience with generous words about his host, The Washington Institute. In such circumstances, these remarks are usually warm and brief. In this case, however, the general devoted 458 words to his discussion of the Institute, constituting a substantial portion of his address. The effect was to deliver a clear and direct rebuttal to accusations made recently about "conflicts of interest" or "dual loyalty" by current and former Washington Institute scholars. If he had been asked to testify against the charge of special pleading for any particular foreign power, General Jones's words could not have been more powerful:

I especially want to thank the Institute for your work on behalf of the effort that President Obama called for in his speech last year in Cairo -- that is, greater understanding between the United States and Muslim communities around world.... In that spirit, you've been promoting mutual understanding for many years, whether it's welcoming to Washington scholars from Cairo to Baghdad, your Arabic-language website, Rob's weekly Arabic-language interview show, or his recent documentary recounting the little-known story of how Arabs saved Jews from the Holocaust.

So thank you all...for analysis that has strengthened our national security...and for promoting the mutual understanding that can lead to a safer, more secure world for us all. And I wish you continued success, because, frankly, our nation -- indeed, the world -- needs institutions like yours now more than ever.

While spurious accusations against the bona fides of Institute scholars are largely an inside-the-Beltway issue, they have important ramifications -- for the careers of current and former Institute scholars, for the receptivity within the halls of government to Institute research and analysis, and, more broadly, for the promotion of vigorous debate on the direction of U.S. policy. On all these levels, General Jones delivered a definitive statement.

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