

Signalling for War: Benjamin Netanyahu before Congress

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He has been busy, drunk with that transformation that afflicts Israeli politicians when touring the United States. Deflecting and parrying while stabbing and thrusting, he should never have given an address to Congress in these circumstances. Cold water has been poured on it from high above. There were promises that certain members of Congress would not attend.

Instead, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu was feted a third time, equal in number with Britain's Winston Churchill, something which will no doubt be emblazoned on some artefact. While *Haaretz* (Mar 3) noted that Netanyahu was the "Superman at AIPAC" he was "no Churchill." While lacking Churchillian, brandy fuelled gravity, Netanyahu's puritanical address was certainly grave, a picture of the "Likud/Republican position on negotiations over Iran's nuclear program".[1]

The motivation for Netanyahu's lecturing blast was one-dimensionally simple. At no point should a nuclear deal of any substance be made with Iran, run by deceptive, orientalist savages who so happen to have discovered Twitter. "Iran's supreme leader... spews the oldest hatred of anti-Semitism with the newest technology. He tweets that Israel... must be destroyed."

That way lies calamity, a self-boxing suggestion spouting the idea that doom is going to arise, less from the mullahs than the frothing patriots in Israel itself. "No deal is better than a bad deal. Well, this is a bad deal. It's a very bad deal. We're better off without it." Such atavistic presumptions are not merely dangerous but undermining in the diplomatic theatre. It is far better to term it anti-diplomacy - "Do what I say, or else."

Cold shoulders and distance from Iran is also suggested. Leave the negotiating room with disdain. Abandon talks. Let the Iranians work out that they are unpopular, that they will have to capitulate and dissolve into fit of regime changing ecstasy. This self-defeating point encourages Iran to go on the vigilante pathway to obtaining a nuclear weapon, and the image of a Freudian death wish comes to the fore. We dare them, and hope they do not disappoint us.

Then came the conceptual deficiencies in the argument, what Matt Duss, head of the Foundation for Middle East termed an "Islamist Voltron Theory." [2] Central to it is conflation, involving the false lumping together of interests. It follows that constellation of views that all who are against Israel's own policies are somehow conniving together in a secret boardroom to plot the fall of the Jewish state. "When it comes to Iran and ISIS, the enemy of your enemy is your enemy." This is also the simplifying idiocy of Bush-speak:

Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda were mortal enemies but accomplices at the same time.

In the opinion of the *Washington Post's* Paul Waldman, the speech "may well have done Netanyahu and his American supporters far more harm than good" (*Washington Post*, Mar 3). In the views of opposition head Isaac Herzog, who is gunning for Netanyahu's position as leader of the Zionist Union Party in the elections this month, it was futile nonsense. While Netanyahu might ventilate, "tonight's speech will not influence the deal or Iran's desire for a nuclear weapon." Cooperation with the White House, he insisted, was vital (*Defense News*, Mar 3).[3]

Democratic Leader, Nancy Pelosi, had to do the dance of diplomatic distance – acknowledge the ties with Israel while dumping on its belligerent leader.[4] All could "agree" that "a nuclear armed Iran is unacceptable to both countries." Israel stood "as the greatest political achievement of the 20th century," with which the US would "always have an unshakable commitment" to.

But the Israeli prime minister's speech was dripping with "condescension toward our knowledge of the threat posed by Iran and our broader commitment to preventing further nuclear proliferation." All bases, in other words, had to be covered.

The other side of this roughly minted coin of non-diplomacy is Netanyahu's own intelligence services, who continue to provide a different story to rock the boat. It is not one the Prime Minister is keen to accept, since it portrays an Iran that is less barking mad than he would like. This unfolded in 2012, when he warned members gathered at the UN General Assembly that Iran was some 70 per cent on the pathway to finalising "plans to build a nuclear weapon".

The language of apocalypse was mandatory fare then, as it is now.

"By next spring, at most by next summer, at current enrichment rates, they will have finished the medium enrichment and move on to the final stage. From there, it's only a few months, possibly a few weeks, before they get enough enriched uranium for the first bomb. A red line should be drawn right here, before – before Iran completes the second stage of the nuclear enrichment necessary to make a bomb."

That same year, former Mossad chief Meir Dagan suggested that his services, and those of the Prime Minister, were not ad idem. This was hardly surprising – their estimates did not tally with Netanyahu's doomsday manual. "An attack on Iran before you are exploring all other approaches is not the right way." [5]

The release of cables by Al Jazeera's Investigative Unit revealed a continuing scepticism towards Tehran's designs. A report by Mossad to their South African peers in October 2012 suggested that Iran was "not performing the activity necessary to produce weapons." Scientists were "working on closing gaps in areas that appear legitimate such as enrichment reactors."

Mossad's report did not rule out the prospects that some weapons capability might, from a certain vantage point, be acquired. (The need to satisfy superiors can be endemic.) The greatest misunderstanding underlying the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime lies

precisely in misunderstanding the dual nature of nuclear energy – hence the caution. Undertaking such activities “will reduce the time required to produce weapons from the time the instruction is actually given.”

Noam Chomsky prefers the geopolitical implication of Netanyahu’s stonewalling behaviour. “They have a common interest in ensuring there is no regional force that can serve as any kind of deterrent to Israeli and US violence, the major violence in the region.”[6] Keep the fires with Iran burning, both within Israeli and US Republican camps, and the insurance policy for violence will be assured. In President Barack Obama’s own words, “The prime minister didn’t offer any viable alternatives.”

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2015/03/03/why-netanyahus-speech-didnt-do-his-american-allies-any-favors/>

[2] <https://twitter.com/mattduss/status/572795355093458944>

[3]

<http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/congress/2015/03/03/israel-netanyahu-reaction-speech-congress-election-politicians-relations/24322549/>

[4]

<http://www.democraticleader.gov/newsroom/pelosi-statement-prime-minister-netanyahus-address-congress/>

[5]

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/02/leaks-netanyahu-misled-iran-nuclear-programme-guardian-iran-nuclear-speech-2012-150218165622065.html>

[6] http://www.democracynow.org/2015/3/2/noam_chomsky_opposing_iran_nuclear_deal

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