



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

NETANYAHU'S CONGRESS SPEECH: MANIPULATING THE MIDDLE EAST'S SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

BY JAMES DORSEY

A satirical video of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to the US Congress captures the essence of his message and his political strategy on the eve of Israeli elections.

"There are three things we must always remember: First Iran, and second Iran, and third Iran, Iran, Iran, again and again; like first Iran, second Iran and third Iran, Iran, Iran," Netanyahu says in the video, speaking to the rhythm of a hip-hop artist commanding his rapt audience of members of Congress to alternately stand and sit down in rapid sequence.

PLEASE CLICK HERE <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Txrcpl49GQ>

Israeli DJ and journalist Noy Alooshe's satire encapsulated both Israel's need to project an existential threat that plays well among policy makers and the public in the US, even if Netanyahu did so in breach of Israel's long-standing foreign policy principle of ensuring that its policies remain aligned with those of the United States. His partisan politics further alienated the Obama administration and segments of the Democratic Party.

Israel's need to project this threat is all the more urgent given that at least as regards the West Bank the Palestinian issue no longer constitutes a security threat. It has been reduced to a political irritant and a political threat given mounting unease and criticism of Israeli policies within the international community. While Israel can still justifiably project Hamas' grip on Gaza as a security threat given its refusal to give up the right to armed struggle, it has become more convenient to wrap that into the larger peril of an aggressive Islamist Iran, political Islam in other parts of the Middle East, and jihadist groups. In playing the Iranian card, Netanyahu exploits the politics of fear to project himself as the strong leader capable of confronting the threat.

The Iranian card moreover plays better to an American audience that is becoming more critical of Israeli settlements and other policies towards the Palestinians and suspicious of an Islamic republic that has a track record of attacking US targets. Such attacks include the 1979 occupation of the US embassy in Tehran during which scores of American government personnel were held hostage for 444 days, the kidnapping and torture to death of a CIA operative in the 1980s, and the 1983 suicide bombing by an Iran-backed group of a US military barracks in Beirut that killed 241 marines. The Iran card also resonates with Americans against the backdrop of Iranian support for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and suspicion of all things political in Islam given the multiple attacks on western targets since 9/11

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To be sure, Iranian denials of the Holocaust, calls for the destruction of Israel and repeated attempts at hiding parts of its nuclear program fans fears among Israelis to whom the World War Two genocide is a living memory and strengthens Netanyahu's hand. Despite the fact that those statements may be more rhetorical than real threats, Netanyahu can justifiably argue that he cannot anchor his national security policy on that assumption that the Iranian regime is likely to change over time even if his overstatement of Iranian nuclear capabilities, inability to provide credible alternatives to US policy, and his past unsubstantiated efforts at crying wolf weakens his strategic advantage.

Israeli critics, including Meir Dagan, a former head of Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, dismiss Netanyahu's assertion that Iran's breakout time, the period it would need under the deal being negotiated with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany to build a nuclear weapon, would be a year or less. Netanyahu argued in Congress that the agreement being negotiated would leave Iran with sufficient infrastructure to develop nuclear weapons in a year at most and grant it free reign once the ten-year agreement elapsed. Netanyahu's analysis ignored various concessions Iran has conceded in the negotiations including a significant reduction of its stockpile of enriched uranium, continued inspections after the agreement elapses, and changes to the Arak heavy water reactor to ensure that it does not produce plutonium

Critics also charge that Netanyahu's emphasis on Iran has led him to underestimate the threats posed by Hamas, as was evident in last summer's Gaza war. The criticism is bolstered by Hamas' continued focus on the rebuilding of tunnels destroyed during the war, highlighted by the recent arrest of three Israeli businessmen suspected of smuggling industrial materials, including metal bars and sheet metal for construction, electric and electronic devices, and communications equipment into Gaza.

Netanyahu's focus on Iran is nonetheless bolstered by understandings with conservative Arab states that are partly rooted in shared distrust of and opposition to Iran and that have generated enough confidence on both sides for Israelis and Arabs to be more public about their common positions in the absence of formal diplomatic relations and despite disagreement over the Palestinian issue. General Amos Gilad, the Israeli defence ministry's director of policy and political-military relations, who played a key role in forging Israel's alliance with Egyptian general-turned-president Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, hinted at the close cooperation with Arab states during a 2014 visit to Singapore. "Everything is underground, nothing is public. But our security cooperation with Egypt and the Gulf states is unique. This is the best period of security and diplomatic relations with the Arabs. Relations with Egypt have improved dramatically," Gilad said. An Egyptian court in February labelled Hamas a terrorist organization.

The battle over Iran's nuclear capability is as much a struggle for the maintenance of a military power structure in the Middle East that is dominated by Israel and conservative Arab states as it is one of political power. Few question Iran's need of peaceful nuclear capabilities. Nonetheless, its nuclear program that has been at the root of the sanctioning and isolation of Iran now serves the Islamic republic as a primary tool to engineer its return to the international community and its recognition as a regional major player. Iran's exploitation of the nuclear issue resembles that of North Korea, which sees its nuclear weapons as the key to maintaining the attention of the United States that it thinks it deserves. In contrast to North Korea, Iran has the advantage that it has far more assets to leverage.

The playing of the Iranian card as an existential threat also serves Netanyahu as a tool to overshadow the most serious threat posed by the Palestinian issue: calls for a boycott of, sanctions against and disinvestment from Israel because of its policies in the occupied territories and towards Gaza that have gained traction among activists and academics and has considerable

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resonance in Europe. Israeli officials in private and public discussions repeatedly cite countering the Boycott, Sanctions and Disinvestment (BDS) movement as a policy priority. Israel sees efforts to charge it with war crimes for its conduct of last year's Gaza war as part of the BDS campaign.

The seldom mentioned elephant in the room is of course Israel's own nuclear capability. While few doubt Israel's development of nuclear weapons, Israel has consistently refused to confirm or deny their existence. It has suppressed domestic reporting on the issue and has always maintained that it would not be the first country in the Middle East to use nuclear weapons. Israel's position has been carefully crafted to ensure official deniability, counter pressure to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and ignore past calls by various Arab states for the declaration of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East.

In effect, Netanyahu's campaign against Iran amounts to a demand that Israel remain the sole, albeit unacknowledged, nuclear power in the Middle East. The Washington-based Arms Control Association recently estimated that Israel has between 80 and 100 nuclear warheads and fissile material for up to 200. The destruction last year of Syrian chemical weapons under UN supervision and the Israeli bombing of a Syrian reactor effectively removed any immediate weapons of mass destruction threat to Israel and ensured its nuclear monopoly.

Implicit Western backing for Israel's position is rooted in a double standard that judges Israel as a trustworthy, rational western democracy and Islamist governments and groups as aggressive and dangerous and potentially irrational. Conservative Arab states have bought into the logic even if Saudi Arabia is believed to have arm's length access to nuclear technology and weapons through its alliance with Pakistan. As a result, the United States' dominant role in regional security, particularly in the Gulf, is bolstered by Israel's nuclear capability and tacitly endorsed by Arab states.

That endorsement has made it easier for the United States and Israel to ignore calls for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East, a proposal mandated by the 2010 NPT Review Conference and endorsed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The strategic understanding between Israel and the conservative Arab states could nonetheless serve as a basis for agreement on a nuclear free zone under one pre-condition: a resolution of the Palestinian issue that would allow Israel and its Arab allies to establish formal diplomatic relations. The late Saudi King Abdullah offered a basis for that with his 1982 peace plan that has so far been thwarted by a combination of Israeli intransigence and a divided Palestinian polity that renders Palestinian political will and decision-making impotent.

In first engaging in US partisan politics with his support for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney in the 2012 election and most recently with his acceptance of the Republican invitation to address Congress, Netanyahu was building on changes in the US-Israeli relationship that started when Likud in 1977 first broke the Labour Party's domination of Israeli politics and the rise of the Republicans, with whom Likud had greater affinity, in the Senate in the 1980s and both houses of Congress in the 1990s.

Relations between the Republicans and Likud were bolstered in recent decades by increased Christian fundamentalist support for Israel. They are further symbolized by the fact that Israel's ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, is a former Republican Party political consultant. Closer ties between the Republicans and the Likud were mirrored in a gradual distancing between Israel and the Democrats illustrated by the founding in 2008 by Jeremy Ben-Ami, a former aide to President Bill Clinton, of J-Street, a more liberal pro-Israel lobby that sought to offset the influence of the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), the powerful, increasingly pro-Likud Israel lobby.

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Israel retains broad bipartisan support in Congress despite the fact that more than 50 Democratic members like President Barak Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry boycotted Netanyahu's visit and speech. Nevertheless, by engaging in US partisan politics Netanyahu has sharpened the dividing lines and further cemented the gradually changing nature of Israel's relationships with the dominant US political players. In doing so, he risks creating cracks that could allow the Obama or future Democratic administrations greater opportunity to pressure Israel, assuming Netanyahu's Likud is able to hold on to power in this month's Israeli elections. By the same token, the tone and atmospherics of US-Israeli relations could change if a coalition headed by Israeli Labour Party leader Isaac Herzog, who is more comfortable with the Democrats, emerges victorious. That could convince the Obama administration to renew its push for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and potentially open the door to a more fundamental effort to denuclearize the Middle East that would include all parties, including both Israel and Iran.

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