

Bibi Is Right

There has always been a question whether Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative definition of Israel's security interest was an opportunistic political tactic or a matter of well-thought-out conviction that it was the necessary strategy to achieve for the Jewish state a durable security that would not be available through a more conciliatory approach. Never has that debate been conducted more vigorously than in the recent days around his address last week to the U.S. Congress, and in the lead-up to Israel's March 17 election. Netanyahu was invited by the Republican leadership only, to the disconcertion of the White House.

To all but the most rabid anti-Netanyahu faction, it was an outstanding speech in the force of its advocacy, even to those who rationally disagree with the message. Essentially, the Israeli leader told the U.S. Congress, the American public, and his own electorate that the deal being negotiated between Iran and the group of six (U.S., U.K. France, Germany, China, and Russia) to agree on a cap on the Iranian nuclear program that leaves that country just a few months short of a nuclear weapon would be unverifiable, would be susceptible to invalidation by a very quick, surreptitious progress to nuclear capability, and, even if scrupulously observed, would leave Iran at perfect liberty to complete its nuclear military program after ten years without infringing this or any other agreement.

Netanyahu further declared, referring to the presence in the gallery of 86-year-old Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, that the famous expression in Jewish lore, "Never again!" was now especially apt: "The days when the Jewish people remained passive in the face of genocidal enemies . . . are over. We are no longer scattered among the nations, powerless to defend ourselves. . . . For the first time in one hundred generations, we, the Jewish people, can defend

ourselves. . . . I can promise you#...#: Even if Israel has to stand alone, Israel will stand.”

Netanyahu has been much criticized, even by some sensible Israelis, such as former Israeli security chief Efraim Halevy, for speaking of an “existential threat” to Israel and referring to prospects of genocide and the legacy of the attempted genocide of the last century. Halevy and others allege that Iran does not, in the prevailing or foreseeable military realities, given Israel’s sophisticated air defenses and retaliatory power, possess such a threat and that mentioning it is an empowerment of Iran and an encouragement of the Iranians to play their hand with maximum aggressiveness.

I do not agree with this. Netanyahu has made it clear that if he retains the leadership of his country after the election, Iran’s ability to inflict genocidal damage will be contested, and that if the blood-curdling Iranian saber-rattling of recent years were to go unchallenged, that too would encourage Iranian bellicosity. But, more important, Netanyahu appeared to be playing the one big card Israel holds in this game. The six powers and Iran may reach any agreement they like, but Israel has the ability, and – given the endless threats of Iranian leaders to destroy Israel – it would be difficult to deny Israel the moral right, to deliver a preemptive strike against Iran’s nuclear-weapons program. The preservation of that card and maximization of its credibility opposite Tehran requires Netanyahu to make stark references to the danger Iran poses to his people. Israel has the bunker-busting equipment that could do maximum damage to the subterranean Iranian nuclear program, and it is widely believed that Saudi Arabia, long one of Israel’s most rabid opponents, in one of the strangest turns produced in the Middle East by the stand-down of the United States as an influence in the area, has assured Israel that it could land and refuel such a mission on the way to or from Iran. It is often repeated that such a strike would

cause only a temporary setback, but rarely mentioned that, if Iranian airspace can be visited once, the visit can be repeated as necessary and that each such visit would cost the already domestically unpopular theocratic regime billions of dollars to repair. Saudi Arabia has manfully played its part in constraining Iran's financial resources by cutting the world oil price approximately in half. In threatening to blast Iran's nuclear program, Netanyahu is asserting all the pressure Israel possesses, on both sides of these endless negotiations, to promote a firm agreement that actually does give some comfort to the region that Iran will not soon be a nuclear power.

His eloquent and at times rather affecting words before the Congress rang much more believably as an assertion of the preemptive-strike option than does the desultory auto-cue comment from Washington that if agreement is not reached, "all options are on the table." Perhaps, but everyone, especially the Iranians and Israelis, expect the preemptive-strike option to remain there and not be enacted if it is Obama's decision. But it would be very hazardous to assume that Netanyahu is bluffing, particularly as the cheerleaders for any such action by Israel would be led by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, even if only discreetly and at an intergovernmental level, whatever was happening in the much-invoked, but usually irrelevant, Muslim street. Apart from other benefits to those countries, the removal of the Iranian threat would enable them to defer indefinitely their own nuclear programs, which would be their only plausible response to the arrival of Iran in the nuclear club.

Apart from reminding the world that this option was open and that the world's Jews, in the form of their state, were not now condemned to passivity, Netanyahu urged the six powers and the Obama administration to play a better game of poker. He also reminded the Congress that Iran was the world's foremost promoter of terror, and of how often it had been complicit in

the violent deaths of American servicemen and civilians. He naturally mentioned that, in the time that these talks had been in progress, as the six powers' position was rolled back from permanent abolition of the Iranian nuclear program to retention of it in a condition only a few months from completion, and even that only for about ten years until the removal of all restrictions, Iran had become the preeminent influence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and now Yemen. Netanyahu also made the generally underemphasized point that the Iranian missile program, the delivery system, is not under discussion at all. Surely no one, even in the Obama administration, imagines that these missiles will be developed and deployed for the ultimate purpose of delivering a small quantity of conventional explosives to a target in another country or continent.

He made a strong argument that the relaxation in sanctions to this date should be reversed until Iran ceases aggression against its neighbors, stops promoting international terrorism, and ceases to threaten to annihilate Israel. And he counseled that any Iranian threat to walk out of the talks be ignored: "Call their bluff; they'll be back, because they need the deal a lot more than you do. . . . If Iran wants to be treated like a normal country, let it behave like a normal country." Obama and former House speaker Nancy Pelosi complained that there was "nothing new" in the Israeli leader's remarks. But when someone is saying things that are sensible and is almost the only statesman in the world who is, changing tunes is not what is called for.

Stylistically, Netanyahu impeccably thanked and placated President Obama, though his olive branch was brusquely rejected, and his address, though very purposeful, was never bombastic; it was in fact quite elegant, including hints of Winston Churchill and Ernest Hemingway ("Some change! Some moderation!" and "a farewell to arms control"). The gravity of the Iranian threat justified his acceptance of Speaker John

Boehner's invitation, which was itself justified by the administration's straight-arming of the Congress by refusing to show it any agreement with Iran, and probably promoting yet another political legal harassment (in this case, of Democratic senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, for co-sponsoring a tighter-sanctions bill against Iran). As co-chair with the Speaker, Orrin Hatch, in his capacity as president pro tempore of the Senate, represented a distinct rise in gravitas from the churlishly absent Joe Biden. The result of the match is Netanyahu won, Obama lost, and Boehner broke even.

The charge against Netanyahu from Halevy and many others is that he has no policy except rigidity, and that he does not believe in a Palestinian autonomous entity any more than the Palestinian leaders accept the legitimacy of Israel as Jewish state; that, under him, there will be no serious negotiations and Israel will seek to occupy the West Bank forever. It is certainly time, if he is reelected, for Netanyahu to address the peace process with a little more imagination. The solution has been visible at least since the famous "Moratinos non-Paper" after the Taba Summit meeting in 2001, in which the West Bank would be narrowed and the Gaza Strip deepened and the two connected by a secure road to create a Palestinian entity. Israeli pre-election polls indicate that Netanyahu has gained appreciably since his speech and, despite heavy reservations about him in much of Israel, he is probably the most generally acceptable of the candidates who can be relied upon to defend Israel's security effectively. If he is returned, he really should make a serious effort to revive the Taba approach. Begin did it at Camp David and Sharon did it with Gaza, and they were reckoned to be hawks as fierce as Netanyahu until about the age Netanyahu has now attained (65). Ever since Great Britain, in 1917, in the depths of World War I, effectively sold the same real estate at the same time to the Jews and the Arabs (who included a considerable number of Christians then), the two-state approach was the only possible

solution, and if, as now seems likely, he is still in office after March 17, Benjamin Netanyahu should get on with it.

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