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US–Israeli Relations in the Aftermath of Netanyahu’s Congress Speech

Mahmoud Muhareb | May 2015

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

As Speaker of the United States' House of Representatives, John Boehner's invitation to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address the US Congress over Iran's nuclear project was highly controversial. Following announcement of the invitation, there was a multi-party debate in both the US and Israel. Concerns over and interests in the talk were motivated by an array of factors, many of which were unrelated to Iran or its nuclear program.

Much of the debate stemmed from the context within which the invitation was made: an ongoing squabble between the Republican Party – which holds a majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate – and the leader of the Democratic Party, US President Barack Obama. Netanyahu also had his own context: an approaching election and an attempt to sabotage the Iranian nuclear deal being negotiated in Geneva with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1). Netanyahu hoped, by siding with the Republicans, to dissolve American support for the nuclear deal. At home in Israel, any progress in halting a US-Iran détente would mean a jump in popularity, ahead of elections that were set to be held two weeks after the Congress address.

This paper assesses the fallout of Netanyahu's attempt to sabotage the deal being finalized between the P5+1 countries and Iran. It asks whether and how Netanyahu's bid succeeded or failed, by looking in turn at the points of agreement and disagreement in policy points around a nuclear Iran for Netanyahu's government and the US administration. It assesses US reactions to Netanyahu's address, the debates in Israel concerning, the effect of the Netanyahu-US administration feud on the Israeli elections, and the future of US-Israeli relations.

Netanyahu's Position on the Nuclear Deal with Iran

For more than two decades, Israel has paid close attention to the Iranian nuclear project, and Iran has been a top priority on Israel's political and security agenda. Even though Israel was always the main driver behind international efforts to halt the Iranian nuclear project, under previous governments (of Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, and Ehud Olmert) it had attempted to hide its leading role. Before Netanyahu, Israel had presented a nuclear Iran as a problem of concern to the international community as a whole. As part of its strategy, Israel would deal with the US administration through full

coordination and agreement, and alongside the White House, it dealt with two central 'shared' threats: the Iranian nuclear program and the Palestinian cause. However, Netanyahu, unlike his predecessors, made Israel's particular concern over the Iranian nuclear project a public issue. For this and other reasons, he also failed to maintain a cordial relationship with the US administration. The past year in particular, Netanyahu's relationship with Obama has ranged from cold to tense.

One of the reasons for the split between the leaders followed the change in Iran's leadership. Following Hassan Rouhani's election as President of Iran and his attempts to open up to the West, the US welcomed an end to poor relations and decided to move forward with talks. Iran's look westward worried Netanyahu and other Israeli elite; Israel was not willing to change its position on Iran. The split in common interests would leave Israeli out of negotiations, and thus without the ability to significantly influence the terms of any agreement.

Netanyahu vehemently demanded that any deal between the P5+1 and Iran should involve the complete dismantling of Iranian nuclear infrastructure, a position that was impossible for the P5+1, which sought a peaceful resolution. In November 2013, an interim agreement was reached in Geneva, and was followed by many rounds of negotiations with Iran. The drive to reach a final agreement was so strong, that the interim agreement was extended twice in order to give the parties a chance to reach a comprehensive settlement. The parties announced their intention to reach that comprehensive agreement by July 2015, and set a goal for a final deal before the end of March 2015.² This spelled disaster for Netanyahu.

The Netanyahu government strongly opposed the interim agreement and launched a public effort to sabotage a final deal. Netanyahu worked behind the scenes with the Israeli lobby in the US (AIPAC), the Republican Party, and Christian Evangelist forces to encourage Congress to oppose the agreement. Not only did these groups call for an end to the negotiations, but they also demanded further sanctions on Iran. By the time of the speech, the US administration and Netanyahu were completely split over the issue of a nuclear Iran.

² "The half-full glass of the nuclear deal," Zvi Bar'el, Haaretz, February 24, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/.premium-1.2573090>

Netanyahu and the US Administration: Points of Agreement/Disagreement

Despite the evident split in positions, there remain points of agreement between the White House and Netanyahu. The US administration and the Israeli Prime Minister both believe Iran is working toward military nuclear capabilities, and that it has the scientific, technological, and research capacity needed to develop this. They also agree that a nuclear Iran directly threatens their interests in the region and that it would cause a major shift in the balance of power in the Middle East, boosting Iran's confidence and lifting its regional status. Both believe that an Iran with nuclear weaponry would spur on other Middle Eastern countries – led by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt—to seriously pursue nuclear armament which would affect Israel's monopoly over nuclear weapons in the region.³

This, however, is where the agreement ends. Netanyahu disagrees with the US administration on how to deal with the Iranian nuclear project, as well as on what a successful deal entails. Netanyahu wants any deal with Iran to put an end to the entire infrastructure of its nuclear project. He also insists on completely halting any Uranium enriching activities, and insists that any enriched Uranium in the country be transported to a location outside of Iran. Any and all centrifuges must be dismantled and removed, and the heavy water facility in Arak, as well as the nuclear facility in Fordow, must be shut down. Netanyahu believes that in order to achieve these goals, more painful economic sanctions must be imposed, and a military option maintained until the Iranian regime capitulates. Capitulation would almost surely lead to the downfall of the current Iranian régime.

The goals stated by the White House are vastly different. First, it seeks a guarantee that the Iranian nuclear project be set back, so it would be at least a year away from enriching enough Uranium to produce a nuclear bomb. To achieve this, most of the enriched Uranium would have to be transported outside of Iran to a third party country. Additionally, a significant reduction in centrifuges would be necessary. The year that this 'setback' would buy would, according to the White House, give the US and its allies

³ "The Interim Deal on the Iranian Nuclear Program: Toward a Comprehensive Solution?" Emily Landau and Anat Kurz, (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies).

enough time to make sure that Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful and that Iran is adhering to the deal. This would require a strict monitoring mechanism over the different Iranian nuclear facilities. If it appeared that Iran was breaching the deal, the US would have enough time and military capability to destroy the Iranian nuclear facilities, thus putting an end to the entire Iranian nuclear project.⁴

Reactions to the Speech: US Administration

The invitation extended to Netanyahu to address Congress, and his acceptance of it, angered the US administration for the following reasons:⁵

- Obama and his administration were not consulted, which is a breach of protocol.
- It aimed to sabotage the ongoing negotiations between the US and Iran, which the Obama administration is exerting significant effort to achieve as part of its Middle East strategy.
- The US administration considered Netanyahu's acceptance of the invitation as interference in internal US affairs. It also added fuel to the feud between the leaders, since it shamelessly sides with the Republicans,
- The address makes Netanyahu a major player in the feud between Congress and the White House.
- Allowing Netanyahu to use Congress as a campaign stop in his upcoming election makes the US seem impartial in the outcome.

Ahead of the speech, steps were taken to outline the position of the US administration to the address. Announcements were made stating that none of the top White House officials would meet with the Israeli leader, from President Obama, to his Vice-President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry, and House Minority leader Nancy Pelosi. The figures also announced their intention to boycott the address along with the White

⁴ "Obama: Netanyahu Address distracts from attempt to halt Iranian nukes," Barak Ravid, Haaretz, March 3, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.257904>

⁵ "White House: Netanyahu invitation is a beach of protocol," Barak Ravid, Haaretz, January 21, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2545423> and "Netanyahu stubbornness burns him in the White House," Barak Ravid, Haaretz, January 30, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2552673>

House staff. Tens of Congressmen from the Democratic Party joined the boycott. Added to this, the White House worked in advance to dispel the fear over an Iran deal that Netanyahu was expected to fan, launching a widespread media campaign. Statements released before, during and after the speech defended Obama's policy, stressing his aim to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue peacefully. The White House asked that the negotiations with Iran be allowed to run their course before resorting to levying more economic sanctions or the use of military force.

In this context, President Obama reiterated that if Congress were to levy more sanctions on Iran—which is what Netanyahu was calling for—it would lead to the collapse of the ongoing negotiations before they could either succeed or fail, thus pre-empting a possibly unnecessary escalation. Statements stressed that such an option would also isolate the US from its allies and renew Iran's push to pursue nuclear weapons. It was for this reason that Obama threatened to use his veto against any legislation that Congress might pass that would introduce new sanctions against Iran. The American people, he said, expect the US to use its military force only as a last resort after all other channels have been exhausted.⁶

Beyond public reactions, the US administration took diplomatic measures to stress its position vis-à-vis the speech. It reduced its information shared with Israel in regards to the progress of the negotiations with Iran, believing that Israel's efforts to sabotage the talks trumped its interest in good relations with the United States. Netanyahu confirmed the suspicions of the administration when he leaked to the press information he was receiving from the White House.⁷

These efforts had their effect: one fourth of the Democratic Party Congressmen boycotted the Netanyahu address. During his speech, Netanyahu did detail the ongoing negotiations in Geneva as he had planned, succumbing to public pressure rallied by the US administration on this issue. He neither repeated his calls to completely dismantle the Iranian nuclear program nor called for military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities as he had done repeatedly in the years and months ahead of the address. Netanyahu provided no viable alternative to the deal being negotiated, even though he

⁶ "Congress at the service of Netanyahu," Barak Ravid, Haaretz, January 21, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2545305>

⁷ "Fearing leaks, US reduces sharing Iran information with Israel," Barak Ravid, Haaretz, February 15, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2545423>

often called it a bad deal and constantly called for a “good deal” that would completely prevent Iran from enriching Uranium. This stood in the face of the decision of the P5+1’s concession in a 2013 interim agreement with Iran that allowed the country the right to enrich Uranium for peaceful purposes.

Reactions Inside Israel

While Washington worked to prevent any damage to its position ahead of the Netanyahu address, in Israel, a consensus emerged that it was in that country’s best interests to maintain strategic relations with the US as perhaps the most important element of Israel’s security policy. This sentiment was shared across the political spectrum. It was based on a belief that Israel had gained significantly in past decades from Israel’s alignment with US strategy, from its joint action against common enemies, its common values in particular Democracy, the strength of the Jewish lobby (AIPAC) in the United States, the strength of the Christian Evangelist movement, and the general support for Israel in Congress, as well as the support of US public opinion.

The tension in Washington over Netanyahu’s speech caused widespread debate in Israel over the motivations behind the address, and its timing on the eve of the elections in Israel. Israelis wondered what the consequences of the address would be on US-Israeli relations, and Washington’s position and policies towards the Iranian nuclear program.

Political parties in Israel divided over support and opposition to the address. In favor were Likud, right wing, and religious parties, and opposed were the Zionist Camp, the Future, and Meretz parties, along with a large number of media personalities and specialists in US affairs. Perhaps the most significant opposition to the Netanyahu address came from veterans of the Israeli military and security establishment, who wished for the military to maintain strong relations with the US military and security establishment.

Netanyahu and the supporters of his address to Congress insisted that it served the interests of Israel and that it would help block the Iranian nuclear program. They argued that the move would rally Congress and US public opinion against negotiations with Iran, and downplayed the rift between Netanyahu and the White House. Those against the address made the following arguments:

- Confronting the Iranian nuclear program requires that Israel maintain a good relationship with the United States, one built on trust; a trust that was challenged by interfering in internal American politics.
- Netanyahu's maneuverings, instead of showing strength, signified failure to influence the Iranian nuclear file, and in the process causing serious and dangerous damage to US-Israel relations.
- Netanyahu's undermining of the P5+1 negotiations weakens the power of the international coalition working against the Iranian nuclear program.
- Netanyahu's address lowered the chances of Congress passing legislation for further sanctions against Iran.
- By isolating US Democrats from Israel and AIPAC, the address weakened Israel's strategic position.
- The address turned support of Israel a polemic choice divided along party lines, alienating Democrats and much of the public from future support, which had once been a consensus.⁸
- Jewish Democrats (who make up 28/30 of the Jewish Congress members) were put in an awkward position, not only by Netanyahu's criticism of Obama, but also his support for the religious American Evangelist movement.⁹
- Alienating Congress means that critical positions of Israel have become more common. This is problematic since Congress has so far prevented the Democratic Party from going down the same path as the Social Democratic parties in Europe, which are moving to dissociate from supporting Israeli policies, and sympathized increasingly with Palestinians.¹⁰

⁸ "Without the US President, there is nothing for Netanyahu" Chemi Shalev, Haaretz, February 20, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2570346>

⁹ "The rise and influence of the political alliance between the Israeli right and Christian Evangelism," Leenat Schlezinger, MOLAD, Feb 2015, <http://www.molad.org/images/upload/files/evangelists.pdf>

¹⁰ "Netanyahu is good for Republicans," Chemi Shalev, Haaretz, February 27, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2576227>

Positions of the Military Establishment

One of the most notable critics of Netanyahu's acceptance of the invitation to address Congress was the former head of MOSSAD, Meir Dagan. Dagan's position on Iran basically aligns with that of the Israeli military and security establishment, and in a long interview with the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth, Dagan said Netanyahu had "caused the biggest strategic damage to Israel in the Iranian nuclear program issue." Netanyahu, unlike his predecessors, clashed with the US administration and turned the Iranian nuclear issue from an international problem to an Israeli one.¹¹

Dagan suggested it would be better for Israel to support the international effort, whether politically or through intelligence, rather than leading the effort themselves. By not letting the US take the lead, Dagan said Israel was entering the battlefield exposed, since it has yet to sign any international conventions regarding nuclear proliferation and refuses any international oversight of its nuclear facilities.

Dagan criticized Netanyahu's interference with the US administration, which he said has made it unlikely that Israel would get US guarantees to carry out a military operation against Iranian nuclear facilities if Iran were to breach the deal. The military official rebuked Netanyahu, saying that any Israeli Prime Minister who enters a confrontation with the US administration must think about the risks and the consequences to the whole country over the long term. In the current conditions, Dagan said, "the risks of such confrontation are unbearable and we are paying a price for that today. I know part of that price, but I'm not allowed to give any details."¹²

On the eve of Netanyahu's trip to Washington, after Dagan had laid out his position in the press, a group of 180 retired generals known as the "Officers for the security of Israel" asked Netanyahu not to address congress. They said in a statement that the address "would cause destructive damage to the relations with the US,"¹³ citing both the policy he intended to outline and his antagonistic approach. Instead of

¹¹ "There's an address but no responsibility," Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer, Yedioth Ahronoth, February 27, 2015.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "High ranking retired officers to Netanyahu: Cancel your destructive address in Congress," Gili Cohen, Haaretz, March 1, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2577494>

antagonizing the United States, the statement said, a stronger alliance should be sought.¹⁴

Conclusions

Israel maintains a consensus over two things: the importance of preventing Iran from reaching the nuclear threshold, and of maintaining a special strategic relationship with the US. As a result, there is general opposition to Netanyahu's decision to address Congress, not only because of a possible failure to sabotage the nuclear deal, but also because of concerns of continued tensions with the White House and its long-term consequences.

In Washington, Obama and the leaders of the Democratic Party were generally able to thwart Netanyahu's efforts to influence Congress and US action on Iran's nuclear program. It is very likely that the summer of 2015 will see a comprehensive deal between the P5+1 and Iran, following considerable efforts by all parties.

Netanyahu can thus be said to have failed in rallying Congress against Obama, forcing the Democrats to rally behind their President. This shifted the Democratic Party's position on Netanyahu and his politics, and also turned support for Israel into a contentious party issue. Looking ahead, Israelis worry that if Netanyahu is able to form a cabinet after the upcoming Israeli elections, whether it will be a cabinet that depends on the far right and religious parties for its support (versus a national unity cabinet alongside the Zionist camp). A right-wing support base for the leader would mean a further erosion of relations between the countries. With another two years in office, a new Netanyahu government could face serious consequences, from a US refusal to use its veto in the UN Security Council, or providing behind-the-scenes support for the European Union's direction to put economic and political pressure on Israel. Whatever the case, Israel will have to be cautious moving forward.

¹⁴ Ibid.