

Congress Cheers Netanyahu's Hatred of Iran

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Addressing Congress in the style of a State of the Union speech, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu won 41 rounds of applause as U.S. lawmakers eagerly enlisted in the Israeli-Saudi conflict against Iran and its allies – an enthusiasm that may well entangle the U.S. military in more wars in the Middle East.

Speaking to a joint session of Congress for the third time – tying British Prime Minister Winston Churchill for the record – Netanyahu went far beyond excoriating President Barack Obama's negotiations with Iran to restrict but not eliminate its nuclear program. He portrayed Iran as a dangerous enemy whose regional influence must be stopped and reversed, a position shared by Israel's new ally, Saudi Arabia.

Netanyahu declared:

"In the Middle East, Iran now dominates four Arab capitals, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa. And if Iran's aggression is left unchecked, more will surely follow. So, at a time when many hope that Iran will join the community of nations, Iran is busy gobbling up the nations. We must all stand together to stop Iran's march of conquest, subjugation and terror."



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaking to a joint session of the U.S. Congress on March 3, 2015. (Screen shot from CNN broadcast)

Netanyahu's reference to "Iran's aggression" was curious since Iran has not invaded another country for centuries. In 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq – at the urging of Saudi Arabia – invaded Iran. During that bloody eight-year war, Israel – far from being an enemy of Iran – became Iran's principal arms supplier. Israel drew in the Reagan administration, which

approved some of the Israeli-brokered arms deals, leading to the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986.

In other words, Israel was aiding Iran after the Islamic revolution overthrew the Shah in 1979 and during the time when Netanyahu blamed Iran for the attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and various acts of terrorism allegedly committed by Hezbollah, a Shiite militia in Lebanon. Israel only shifted toward hostility against Shiite-ruled Iran in the 1990s as Israel gradually developed a de facto alliance with Sunni-ruled and oil-rich Saudi Arabia, which views Iran as its chief regional rival.

Netanyahu's choice of Arab cities supposedly conquered by Iran was strange, too. Baghdad is the capital of Iraq where the U.S. military invaded in 2003 to overthrow Saddam Hussein and his Sunni-dominated government — on Netanyahu's recommendation. After the invasion, President George W. Bush installed a Shiite-dominated government. So, whatever influence Iran has in Baghdad is the result of a U.S. invasion that Netanyahu personally encouraged.

More recently, Iran has supported the embattled Iraqi government in its struggle against the murderous Islamic State militants who seized large swaths of Iraqi territory last summer. Indeed, Iraqi officials have credited Iran with playing a crucial role in blunting the Islamic State, the terrorists whom President Obama has identified as one of the top security threats facing the United States.

Netanyahu cited Damascus, too, where Iran has helped the Syrian government in its struggle against the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda's Nusra Front. In other words, Iran is assisting the internationally recognized government of Syria hold off two major terrorist organizations. But Netanyahu portrays that as Iran "gobbling up" a nation.

The Israeli prime minister also mentioned Beirut, Lebanon, and Sanaa, Yemen, but those were rather bizarre references, too, since Lebanon is governed by a multi-ethnic arrangement that includes a number of religious and political factions. Hezbollah is one and it has close ties to Iran, but it is stretching the truth to say that Iran "dominates" Beirut or Lebanon.

Similarly, in Sanaa, the Houthis, a Shiite-related sect, have taken control of Yemen's capital and have reportedly received some help from Iran, but the Houthis deny those reports and are clearly far from under Iranian control. The Houthis also have vowed to work with the Americans to carry on the fight against Yemen's Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Leading the Battle

Indeed, Iran and these various Shiite-linked movements have been among the most effective in battling Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, while Israel's Saudi friends have been repeatedly linked to funding and supporting these Sunni terrorist organizations. In effect, what Netanyahu asked the Congress to do — and apparently successfully — was to join Saudi Arabia and Israel in identifying Iran, not Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as America's chief enemy in the Middle East.

That would put the U.S.-Iranian cooperation in combating Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in jeopardy. It could lead to victories by these Sunni terrorists in Syria and possibly even Iraq, a situation that almost surely would force the U.S. military to return in force to the region. No

U.S. president could politically accept Damascus or Baghdad in the hands of openly terrorist organizations vowing to carry the fight to Europe and the United States.

Yet, that was the logic — or lack thereof — in Netanyahu's appeal to Congress. As he put it, "when it comes to Iran and ISIS, the enemy of your enemy is your enemy." He also argued that Iran was a greater threat than the Islamic State, a position that Israel's Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren has expressed, too.

"The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime [in Syria] as the keystone in that arc," Oren told the Jerusalem Post in [a 2013 interview](#). "We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran" – even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

In June 2014, then speaking as a former ambassador at an Aspen Institute conference, Oren expanded on his position, [saying](#) Israel would even prefer a victory by the brutal Islamic State over continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria. "From Israel's perspective, if there's got to be an evil that's got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail," Oren said.

Netanyahu made a similar point: "The difference is that ISIS is armed with butcher knives, captured weapons and YouTube, whereas Iran could soon be armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear bombs."

Of course, Iran has disavowed any interest in developing a nuclear bomb — and both the U.S. and Israeli intelligence communities agree that Iran has not been working on a bomb. Further, the negotiated agreement between Iran and leading world powers would impose strict oversight on Iran's civilian nuclear program, leaving little opportunity to cheat.

Instead, Netanyahu wants the United States to lead an aggressive campaign to further strangle Iran's economy with the goal of forcing some future "regime change." The principal beneficiary of that strategy would likely be Saudi Arabia, which has served as the proselytizing center for the reactionary Wahabbi version of Sunni Islam, which inspired Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

Elements of the Saudi royal family also have long been known to support Islamist militants, including forces associated with bin Laden. Earlier this year, the New York Times reported that convicted al-Qaeda operative Zacarias Moussaoui identified leading members of the Saudi government as financiers of the terrorist network.

According to the [story](#), Moussaoui said in a prison deposition that he was directed in 1998 or 1999 by Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan to create a digital database of the group's donors and that the list included Prince Turki al-Faisal, then Saudi intelligence chief; Prince Bandar bin Sultan, longtime Saudi ambassador to the United States; Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, a prominent billionaire investor; and many leading clerics.

Moussaoui also said he discussed a plan to shoot down President George W. Bush's Air Force One with a Stinger missile with a staff member at the Saudi Embassy in Washington, at a time when Bandar was the ambassador to the United States and considered so close to the Bush family that his nickname was "Bandar Bush."

Moussaoui claimed, too, that he passed letters between Osama bin Laden and then Crown Prince Salman, who recently became king upon the death of his brother King Abdullah.

While the Saudi government denied Moussaoui's accusations, Saudi and other Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms have been identified in recent years as financial backers of Sunni militants fighting in Syria to overthrow Assad's largely secular regime, with al-Qaeda's Nusra Front the major rebel force benefiting from this support.

Shared Israeli Interests

The Israelis also have found themselves on the side of these Sunni militants in Syria because the Israelis share the Saudi view that Iran and the so-called "Shiite crescent" – reaching from Tehran to Beirut – is the greatest threat to their interests.

That attitude of favoring Sunni militants over Assad has taken a tactical form with Israeli forces launching attacks inside Syria that benefit Nusra Front. For instance, on Jan. 18, 2015, Israel attacked Lebanese-Iranian advisers assisting Assad's government in Syria, killing several members of Hezbollah and an Iranian general. These military advisers were engaged in operations against Nusra Front.

Meanwhile, Israel has refrained from attacking Nusra militants who have seized Syrian territory near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. One source familiar with U.S. intelligence information on Syria told me that Israel has a "non-aggression pact" with Nusra forces, who have even received medical treatment at Israeli hospitals.

Israel and Saudi Arabia have found themselves on the same side in other regional struggles, including support for the military's ouster of the elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, but most importantly they have joined forces in their hostility toward Shiite-ruled Iran.

I first reported on the growing relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia in August 2013 in an article entitled "[The Saudi-Israeli Superpower](#)," noting that the complementary strengths of the two countries made their alliance a potentially powerful influence in the world. Israel wields enormous political and media clout — and possesses nuclear weapons — while the Saudis use their oil, money and investments. [For more details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Saudis Said to Aid Israeli Plan to Bomb Iran](#)."]

What the world saw in Netanyahu's bravura performance on Tuesday before the wildly applauding members of the U.S. Congress was him proving his value to his Saudi cohorts, demonstrating how he can make some of America's most powerful politicians behave like trained seals, bouncing up and down to cheer him even when he openly seeks to undermine the sitting U.S. President.

Some of the loudest applause came when Netanyahu told the Congress, "My friends, for over a year, we've been told that 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."

Netanyahu's enthusiastic reception signaled to President Obama that he has little political support for a negotiated agreement with Iran and signaled to Iran that all their concessions are unlikely to lead to any meaningful easing of sanctions from the U.S. Congress.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-

wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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