

Netanyahu: “A Danger to Israel”, say 200 Israeli Military and Security Veterans

A group of Israeli generals have launched an attack on Netanyahu as he prepares to address the US Congress

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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In an unprecedented move, 200 veterans of the Israeli security services accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday of being a “danger” to Israel.

The new group, called Commanders for Israel’s Security, warned that Netanyahu was doing irreparable harm to the country’s relationship with Washington, just two days before he is due to address the US Congress.

The Israeli prime minister is expected to use the speech to try to undermine negotiations currently taking place between major world powers and Iran. He has [claimed](#) that any agreement reached at the talks’ conclusion, later this month, will leave Iran a “nuclear threshold state” hellbent on destroying Israel.

Half a dozen former generals spoke out at a press conference in Tel Aviv on Sunday, urging Netanyahu to cancel the speech before ties with the US deteriorate even further.

The White House is reported to be furious that Netanyahu arranged his appearance before Congress behind President Barack Obama’s back.

With an Israeli election less than three weeks away, Netanyahu has already faced attacks from centrist political rivals and parts of the Israeli media over his clashes with the White House on Iran.

But it is the first time he has faced a large-scale backlash from members of Israel’s security establishment – and is likely to be more damaging to Netanyahu’s popular image as a strong leader on security matters.

The group comprises retired officers and those serving in the reserves, all of whom held a rank equivalent to general. Many are household names.

Yaron Ezrahi, a politics professor at Hebrew University and expert on Israeli-US relations, said there was no precedent for what he termed a “rebellion” by so many former senior officials.

“This is a very powerful and distinguished group of former commanders, who are extremely worried about where Netanyahu is taking Israel right now,” he said.

“It is clear they are speaking not only for themselves but also on behalf of many active commanders who are not allowed to speak their mind but share this group’s views.”

6,000 years of experience

General Amnon Reshef, widely regarded in Israel as a hero for his role in the 1973 war against Egypt and Syria, said the group’s membership had grown rapidly since he established it three months ago.

“We are experts with more than 6,000 years of security experience between us,” he told Middle East Eye. “It is time the prime minister listened to us before he wrecks our strategic interests with our closest ally.

“Nothing good for Israel can come from humiliating the US president.”

Among the generals denouncing Netanyahu on Sunday was Amiram Levin, a former head of the elite Sayeret Matkal commando unit, in which Netanyahu himself served.

Reshef’s attack echoed that of Meir Dagan, a former head of Israel’s spy agency Mossad, who has called separately for Israeli voters to remove Netanyahu.

Dagan, who is due to speak at an anti-Netanyahu rally next Saturday, told the Yedioth Aharonoth daily last Friday that the Israeli prime minister was taking “intolerable risks” with Israel’s security.

“The veto umbrella provided by the Americans [at the United Nations Security Council] could vanish, and Israel would promptly find itself facing international sanctions,” he [added](#).

Ezrahi said the spate of attacks on Netanyahu by such high-level figures could become a “turning-point” in the elections.

“The difference between a right-wing Netanyahu government and a centrist one is a handful of seats, so these criticisms have the potential to do him a lot of damage.”

Netanyahu’s stance on Iran received a further blow last week with [publication of a leaked Mossad document](#). It showed that he had misled the United Nations in 2012 about his own intelligence services’ assessment of the threat posed by Iran’s nuclear programme.

According to the Mossad report, Tehran was not actively pursuing a military nuclear programme. In contrast, Netanyahu had warned the international community that the Iranians were only a year away from building a bomb.

Iran denies that its nuclear research is aimed at developing weapons, saying it seeks only a civilian energy programme.

Growing distrust

In a possible sign of the increasing distrust between the Israeli prime minister and his closest security officials, Netanyahu is [reported](#) to have kept his national security adviser, Yossi Cohen, in the dark about his address to Congress.

The US media reported last week that Cohen, a former senior Mossad official, had privately [expressed concern](#) to US officials about Netanyahu's speech.

Reshef said that the group would use its high profile to wage a public relations campaign to persuade the Israeli public that Netanyahu's approach was wrong.

"It is not going to be easy," he said. "Israelis have been brainwashed for many years. We need to give them a different message - they need to understand the real situation and Israel's true interests."

A poll by the Israel Democracy Institute recently [found](#) that 58 per cent of Israeli Jews believed a Netanyahu government would be best placed to deal with Israel's security issues.

Reshef said Commanders for Israel's Security had wider concerns about Netanyahu's policy in the region.

The group was set up late last year to put pressure on Netanyahu's government to re-enter peace talks with the Palestinians based on the Arab Peace Initiative, a Saudi plan that would normalise relations between Israel and the Arab world in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

"We can't keep waging a war every couple of years in Gaza or with our neighbours," said Reshef.

Netanyahu has in the past justified his refusal to agree to a complete withdrawal from the occupied West Bank on the grounds that Iran would set up "terror bases" there as soon as the army left.

Reshef rejected this scenario. "The IDF [Israeli military] is very strong and can defend Israel's borders. We can deal with the threats from all of Israel's enemies."

Hawkish views

The group includes security veterans known for their hawkish positions, including former military chief of staff Dan Halutz. He called for leftwing activists who criticised an operation he ordered in 2002 against Hamas leader Salah Shahadeh in Gaza that killed more than a dozen Palestinian civilians, most of them children, to be tried for treason.

Ezrahi told MEE there were two specific factors driving the security establishment's campaign against Netanyahu.

The first related to the damage he was seen to be doing to the traditionally strong ties between the Israeli and US militaries.

"These commanders have spent a lot of time in the US, at the Pentagon. They have a close working relationship with the US command and rely on their support for equipment, strategy, intelligence-sharing. All of that is under threat from Netanyahu's behaviour."

Further, Netanyahu's removal of a diplomatic horizon had left senior commanders feeling they were carrying an impossible burden in policing the occupied territories.

"They recognise that there is no military solution to Israel's predicament with

the Palestinians and that borders created by force are inherently fragile and insecure.”

Tamir Pardo, the current Mossad head, is reported to have privately rejected Netanyahu’s claim that dealing with Iran was Israel’s top priority. According to the Haaretz newspaper, he [told](#) a group of Israeli businesspeople last summer that the “biggest threat to Israel’s security is the conflict with the Palestinians and not Iran’s nuclear program.”

Of particular concern among the security agencies, said Neve Gordon, a politics professor at Ben Gurion University in Beersheva, has been Netanyahu’s threats to launch an attack on Iran without support from Washington.

“The view is that an Israeli attack could only set back Iran’s nuclear programme a few months or a year, but the consequences in the region would be harsh indeed,” he said. “They don’t see any benefits from Netanyahu’s approach, but they do see a lot of dangers.”

Jittery about Pentagon ties

Almost as soon as he stepped down as head of Mossad four years ago, Dagan slammed Netanyahu’s idea of an Israeli attack on Iran, [calling](#) it the “stupidest thing I have ever heard”.

In his interview on Friday, Dagan said covert operations designed to bring about regime change were a better approach: “What we could have done was gain time with secret operations or nurture opposition forces and minorities within Iran.”

According to Israeli analyst Ben Caspit, the security establishment has become increasingly jittery about the future of its relationship with the Pentagon.

Caspit said some officials were worried that the US might consider abandoning its traditional Middle East allies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in favour of strengthening relations with Tehran. They fear that the Pentagon might conclude its support for Iran is more important in stabilising the region than backing Israel.

Citing a senior US official, Caspit [dismissed the idea](#) as a “conspiracy theory”, but observed it was one gaining traction among Israeli security service staff.

Such fears will only have been heightened by reports that the Obama administration is [refusing to share information](#) with Israel about the Iran talks after suspicions that Netanyahu has been leaking details to undermine the White House’s position.

Ezrahi said Netanyahu was currently more concerned about keeping the electoral support of his rightwing constituency than antagonising his military commanders.

Netanyahu had earlier staked much of his credibility with the Israeli public on bombing Iran but had been blocked by opposition from his commanders, as well as the US and Europe, added Ezrahi.

He now needed to create a similar kind of “drama to prove he is a tough military leader” by taking on the White House in place of Iran. Ezrahi said: “The speech is like a diplomatic missile aimed directly at the White House.”

That view was confirmed by Israeli political analyst Yossi Verter. He said Netanyahu's election strategists had [concluded](#) that "every American slap in Netanyahu's face only strengthens support for their party's leader among his electoral base". One reportedly told him: "Obama is our best campaigner."

Uri Avnery, a veteran peace activist and former MP, [wrote](#) at the weekend that the address to Congress would be a perfect election stunt for Netanyahu. "It will show him at his best. The great statesman, addressing the most important parliament in the world, pleading for the very existence of Israel."

If Netanyahu wins the election on 17 March, as is currently predicted, Ezrahi expected him to seek a unity government with the centrist Zionist Camp party. "He will be facing threats of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, and will want to present a more moderate face to the world."

See <http://www.jonathan-cook.net/2015-03-01/netanyahu-a-danger-to-israel-say-200-security-verters/#sthash.iScaGXqn.dpuf> more at:

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