

Netanyahu's Dance with the US Congress: Israel and the Botched Invitation

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It looks like a measure of hollow desperation – Israel, left out in the cold in terms of isolating Iran, and finding itself looking like the mad hermit wondering if its days are numbered in the self-constructed asylum of life. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is looking more like a lone wolf diplomat (the more civil-minded ones might suggest that instead of terrorist) in search of an audience, and he is hoping to get it with his poorly engineered address to the US Congress. It's all about Iran, dammit, and they are the problem at which fingers are being pointed at.

Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom, recently retired of the Congregation of Adath Jeshurun, a conservative synagogue based in Cheltenham Township, Pennsylvania, is far from pleased. As are many in his congregation. “Most of the Jews I’ve spoken to, who are very concerned with the welfare of the state of Israel, are not comfortable with Netanyahu speaking to Congress, especially not in the way it’s being done.”[1]

Others also see nuisance, and plain old trouble. Leader of the Union for Reform Judaism, deemed the most liberal and largest Jewish denomination in North America; Seymour Reich, former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; and Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, have all raised their concerns (*The Guardian*, Feb 15). From a “circus”, Israel’s position, argued Foxman, had to be restated as that of a sober, cautious adult – “that this was not what we intended”. [2]

Publications such as Philadelphia’s *Jewish Exponent* (Jan 28) see Netanyahu’s gesture as far from helpful. “What is,” the editorial asks, “the most prudent way to proceed with Iran at this juncture?” Netanyahu and those in Congress sympathetic to his case argue that the stick of sanctions is far better, a bruising policy to convince. Rather than running, the Iranians will come to the table, eager to engage after a tactically engineered slap around. The White House position on this is that another round of sanctions at this point will defang the entire process.

While such a paper as the *Jewish Exponent* is hardly friendly to Teheran’s nuclear ambitions, which it finds dangerous, it takes issue with the Netanyahu school of puerile barnstorming. “At this juncture, a very public spat with the Obama administration does no one good, least of all Israel. President Barack Obama will remain in office for the next two years, and Israel needs his continued support.”

On the other hand, one has figures such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, encouraging a cheery turnout to the Congressional bash when the Israeli leader descends. For Wiesel, the problem with Netanyahu’s attention-seeking tour are less significant than a

nuclear Iran which would be the grand advert for genocide. The fiends that would entertain Israel's destruction are age-old, be it that "wicked man in Persia named Haman" who suggested that, "It is not in our interests to tolerate [the Jews]" to "modern Persia" and the Ayatollah Khamenei, who declares that the "annihilation and destruction" of Israel is a paramount goal of Iran.

All other problems follow, and here, Wiesel's isolation of institutionalised anti-Semitic wickedness finds form in that of a pimping service for Bibi's cause. "President Obama, Vice President Biden, distinguished members of Congress, I ask you – As one man who has seen the enemies of the Jewish people make good on threats to exterminate us, how can I remain silent." [3]

Absurdly, Wiesel suggests that members of the US Congress "put aside the politics" to listen to a PM that has only ever been one thing: a political beast who lives and breathes the craft, using a distinct demonology to target his enemies while stirring the pot of instability. Politics is also very much part of the mix in inviting Netanyahu to speak to Congress to begin with, a crude chess game that masquerades as balance and a fair hearing. House Speaker John Boehner, ever happy to rib the Obama White House, is playing a spoiling game, economic in telling the Israelis how "bipartisan" the invitation was, while sticking his tongue out, politically speaking, at Obama.

Advocacy group Christians United for Israel (CUFI) have also joined the advertising drive coming out for Bibi. An action alert, claimed the CUFI, "generated more than 10,000 responses" within five hours of its release.

It also appeals to that rather empty suggestion that balance is needed, and that Congress have some feted obligation to listen to a politician of another state who is insisting on conflict before progress. (Mind you, he is also insisting that US money, weapons and personnel be conscripted in the task.) The point was made by CUFI executive director David Brog: "Our elected officials have a sacred duty to listen to all views on this critical issue – including those which they may disagree – before making up their minds." [4]

Some figures on the Democrat aisle will be cheering the Wiesel line. "A nuclear Iran is a huge threat to the United States and an existential threat to Israel," came the broken-record line from Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY). Ergo "tougher sanctions" – the slap around treatment again – was the recipe. But it is the GOP that is doing its best to encircle Democrat dissent, with Marco Rubio (R-FL) blustering about how, "One of our strongest ally's prime minister wants to speak before the Congress and they won't even attend the speech?"

Historical comparisons are always fraught with danger, as most events remain inimitable instances of exception that take place because of a range of specific factors. The extermination fantasy, enrolled in the cause of justifying Israeli hegemony in the Middle East, is not a useful way to keep peace, let alone get Congress to fill the seats. It presumes, however, that Teheran, the moment it acquires a nuclear capability, will happily go its vigilante way causing a conflagration in the region.

That Israel's own belligerent fantasies aren't deemed equivalent in their dangers – a contemplated, pre-emptive strike on Iranian military targets; the continued violations of the UN Charter to threaten another state's sovereignty that occurs with each statement – should be a prime cause of concern for members of Congress. This botched invitation should be

put to rest, or the arena left empty. But some Israeli politicians already have someone to blame. For Netanyahu confidante and deputy foreign minister, Tzachi Hanegbi, it's that rascal of few words, Boehner. "It appears that the speaker of Congress made a move, in which we trusted, but which it ultimately became clear was a one-sided move and not a move by both sides" (*Forward*, Feb 6).

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Notes:

- [1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/14/netanyahu-congress-reaction-jewish--leaders-boehner>
- [2] <http://forward.com/articles/214320/abe-foxman-calls-on-benjamin-netanyahu-to-scrap-sp/>
- [3] <http://www.mediaite.com/online/elie-wiesel-asks-congress-wh-to-put-aside-the--politics-attend-netanyahu-speech/>
- [4] <http://www.algemeiner.com/2015/02/13/support-for-netanyahu-speech-to-congress--on-iranian-nuclear-threat-surges/>

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