

The House that Bibi Built as Prime Minister of Israel

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For half of the past two decades Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu has served as prime minister of Israel. Whatever his ultimate fate (given the ongoing criminal investigations he is currently facing), it is clear that he has had a profound impact on Israel, the Palestinians, and the entire region.

There are those who have doubted that Netanyahu had any core beliefs, other than the desire to retain power. But even with his maneuvering and his penchant for prevarication, there are, in fact, core beliefs that have directed his career.

Shortly after his first election as Prime Minister, and before his maiden address to the US Congress, a team of Reagan-era neoconservatives (many of whom ended up in senior positions in the George W. Bush Administration) wrote a paper for Netanyahu to guide his remarks before Congress and to US audiences. The paper, echoing many themes from Netanyahu’s own writings, was called “[A Clean Break](#).” Since he was already aligned with these views, he repeated the paper’s themes and policy proposals during his many public appearances in Washington. “A Clean Break” can be seen as Netanyahu’s road map to relations with the US and the Middle East region.

The central themes of the paper were:

- ending the Oslo process and rejecting “land for peace” formula; reasserting Israel’s claim to the “land of Israel”; weakening the ability of the Palestinian Authority to govern; and poisoning the PA’s image in the US to damage its standing,
- securing Israel’s northern border, by confronting Iran, promoting internal conflict in Lebanon, and destabilizing Syria,
- strengthening ties with US Republicans, including proposing ending US economic aid in favor of military aid and buying into the Reagan-era idea of a “missile defense” system—a concept favored by the GOP, and
- confronting Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein’s rule.

Over the past two decades, Netanyahu and his US allies, whether in or out of office, pursued these same objectives. To a great extent, they have succeeded.

This unholy alliance between US neoconservatives and Netanyahu was no accident. They had long been partners. Back in the late 1970’s, Netanyahu convened many of these same thinkers to Israel for a summit at the Jonathan Institute—an event which some have called the birth of the American neoconservative movement. Back then, their focus was hostility to

the Soviet Union and the “national liberation movements” alleged to be Soviet pawns. The ideology they spawned was decidedly pro-Israel and anti-Arab, and extremely hostile to all things Palestinian.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Oslo peace process, and the election of Bill Clinton, the focus of both the neocons (as they were called) and Netanyahu shifted. Seeing US Republicans as his allies in the effort to sabotage the peace process, Netanyahu’s Likud party set up a shop to provide talking points to GOP members of Congress. Their goal was to make Republicans partners in their fight with the Clinton administration/Labor Party endorsed peace process. With the GOP take-over of Congress in 1995, followed by Netanyahu’s election in 1996, the stage was set to kill the Oslo process. It was an unholy alliance of Likud and the GOP squared off against Labor and the Clinton Administration.

The goals laid out in “A Clean Break” were not so much prophetic as they were a road map in which the neocons and Netanyahu laid out their plans for a new US-Israel partnership, a destabilized Arab World, and an end to Palestinian aspirations for independence.

Whenever Netanyahu met with resistance from Clinton, he turned to the Republican-led Congress for support. He was dogged in his efforts to sabotage peace and largely succeeded. Even the one agreement Clinton finally forced him to sign with Arafat only served to lock the Palestinians into an untenable situation by consolidating Israeli control over much of the West Bank and their nightmarish presence in the heart of Hebron.

While the “break” envisioned in “A Clean Break” was not as “clean” as the one he may have sought, the impact of Netanyahu’s first term created conditions that ultimately led to his hoped for end of the peace process.

After his return to office in 2009, he was forced to endure eight years of a Democratic administration, led by Barack Obama. Once again, he turned to his relations with a Republican-led Congress to resist pressures to make peace.

With the election of Donald Trump coupled with Republican control of Congress, Netanyahu feels more comfortable. His allies in Congress are vigorously pushing his agenda. There are bills designed to: further punish and discredit the already weakened PA; deny funding to UNWRA; outlaw the BDS movement; and recognize, through clever slight of hand language, Israel’s control over the “territories.” The Trump Administration, which began its tenure, proposing to deliver “a great deal” to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has reportedly lowered its ambitions to a proposal mirroring a long-discredited 40-year-old Likud concept of “limited Palestinian autonomy” denying Palestinians full sovereignty and any rights in Jerusalem, while releasing large areas of the West Bank to Israeli expansion.

Netanyahu, the Likud, and their neoconservative allies can rightly claim that the vision they projected for the Middle East in “A Clean Break” is being realized. But, in reality, what they have created is an unsustainable mess that includes: a weakened and dependent PA that was denied the ability to govern causing it to lose legitimacy; a fractured Palestinian polity, with Hamas in control of a humanitarian disaster in Gaza; an Iraq in shambles and in its wake, an empowered and emboldened Iran and a metastasized terrorist threat that now challenges many countries; and a hardened, though divided Israeli electorate from which it is unlikely to see any new peace-oriented leadership emerging.

So this is the “House that Bibi Built.” It is his legacy. While Israel proceeds along its merry

way, each day building more settlements, demolishing more Palestinian homes, dishing out more hardships to an embittered captive people, far from being the secure and stable dream Netanyahu envisioned, it is seething cauldron waiting for the next explosion.

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