

The Reasons for Netanyahu's Panic

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is pushing the panic button over the collapse of the Saudi-Israeli jihadist proxies in Syria and now threatening to launch a major air war, as ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke describes.

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A very senior Israeli intelligence delegation, a week ago, visited Washington. Then, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu broke into President Putin's summer holiday to meet him in Sochi, where, according to a senior Israeli government official (as cited in the [Jerusalem Post](#)), Netanyahu threatened to bomb the Presidential Palace in Damascus, and to disrupt and nullify the Astana cease-fire process, should Iran continue to "extend its reach in Syria."

Russia's *Pravda* [wrote](#),

"according to eyewitnesses of the open part of the talks, the Israeli prime minister was too emotional and at times even close to panic. He described a picture of the apocalypse to the Russian president that the world may see, if no efforts are taken to contain Iran, which, as Netanyahu believes, is determined to destroy Israel."

So, what is going on here? Whether or not *Pravda's* quote is fully accurate (though the description was [confirmed](#) by senior Israeli commentators), what is absolutely clear (from Israeli [sources](#)) is that both in Washington and at Sochi, the Israeli officials were heard out, but [got nothing](#). Israel stands alone. Indeed, it is [reported](#) that Netanyahu was seeking "guarantees" about the future Iranian role in Syria, rather than "asking for the moon" of an Iranian exit. But how could Washington or Moscow realistically give Israel such guarantees?

Belatedly, Israel has understood that it backed the wrong side in Syria – and it has lost. It is not really in a position to *demand* anything. It will not get an American enforced buffer zone beyond the Golan armistice line, nor will the Iraqi-Syrian border be closed, or somehow "supervised" on Israel's behalf.

Of course, the Syrian aspect is important, but to focus only on that, would be to "miss the forest for the trees." The 2006 war by Israel to destroy Hizbullah (egged on by the U.S., Saudi Arabia – and even a few Lebanese) was a failure. Symbolically, for the first time in the Middle East, a technologically sophisticated, and lavishly armed, Western nation-

state [simply failed](#). What made the failure all the more striking (and painful) was that a Western state was not just bested militarily, it had lost also the electronic and human intelligence war, too — both spheres in which the West thought their primacy unassailable.

The Fallout from Failure

Israel's unexpected failure was deeply feared in the West, and in the Gulf too. A small, armed (revolutionary) movement had stood up to Israel – against overwhelming odds – and prevailed: it had stood its ground. This precedent was widely perceived to be a potential regional “game changer.” The feudal Gulf autocracies sensed in Hizbullah's achievement the latent danger to their own rule from such armed resistance.



The reaction was immediate. Hizbullah was quarantined — as best the full sanctioning powers of America could manage. And the war in Syria started to be mooted as the “corrective strategy” to the 2006 failure (as early as 2007) — though it was only with the events following 2011 that the “corrective strategy” came to implemented, *à outrance*.

Against Hizbullah, Israel had thrown its full military force (though Israelis always say, *now*, that they could have done more). And against Syria, the U.S., Europe, the Gulf States (and Israel in the background) have thrown the kitchen sink: jihadists, al-Qaeda, ISIS (yes), [weapons](#), bribes, sanctions and the most overwhelming information war yet witnessed. Yet Syria – with indisputable help from its allies – seems about to prevail: it has stood its ground, against almost unbelievable odds.

Just to be clear: if 2006 marked a key point of inflection, Syria's “standing its ground” represents a historic *turning* of much greater magnitude. It should be understood that Saudi Arabia's (and Britain's and America's) tool of fired-up, radical Sunnism has been routed. And with it, the Gulf States, but particularly Saudi Arabia are damaged. The latter has relied on the force of Wahabbism since the first foundation of the kingdom: but Wahabbism in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq has been roundly defeated and discredited (even for most Sunni Muslims). It may well be defeated in Yemen too. This defeat will change the face of Sunni Islam.

Already, we see the Gulf Cooperation Council, which originally was founded in 1981 by six Gulf tribal leaders for the sole purpose of preserving their hereditary tribal rule in the Peninsula, now warring *with each other*, in what is likely to be a protracted and bitter internal fight. The “Arab system,” the prolongation of the old Ottoman structures by the complaisant post-World War I victors, Britain and France, seems to be out of its 2013 “remission” (bolstered by the coup in Egypt), and to have resumed its long-term decline.

The Losing Side

Netanyahu's "near panic" (if that is indeed what occurred) may well be a reflection of this seismic shift taking place in the region. Israel has long backed the losing side – and now finds itself "alone" and fearing for its near proxies (the Jordanians and the Kurds). The "new" corrective strategy from Tel Aviv, it appears, is to focus on winning Iraq away from Iran, and embedding it into the Israel-U.S.-Saudi alliance.

If so, Israel and Saudi Arabia are probably too late into the game, and are likely underestimating the visceral hatred engendered among so many Iraqis of all segments of society for the murderous actions of ISIS. Not many believe the improbable (Western) narrative that ISIS suddenly emerged armed, and fully financed, as a result of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's alleged "sectarianism": No, as rule-of-thumb, behind each such well-breached movement – *stands a state*.

Daniel Levy has written a compelling [piece](#) to argue that Israelis generally would not subscribe to what I have written above, but rather:

"Netanyahu's lengthy term in office, multiple electoral successes, and ability to hold together a governing coalition ... [is based on] him having a message that resonates with a broader public. It is a sales pitch that Netanyahu ... [has] 'brought the state of Israel to the best situation in its history, a rising global force ... the state of Israel is diplomatically flourishing.' Netanyahu had beaten back what he had called the 'fake-news claim' that without a deal with the Palestinians 'Israel will be isolated, weakened and abandoned' facing a 'diplomatic tsunami.'

"Difficult though it is for his political detractors to acknowledge, Netanyahu's claim resonates with the public because it reflects something that is real, and that has shifted the center of gravity of Israeli politics further and further to the right. It is a claim that, if correct and replicable over time, will leave a legacy that lasts well beyond Netanyahu's premiership and any indictment he might face.

"Netanyahu's assertion is that he is not merely buying time in Israel's conflict with the Palestinians to improve the terms of an eventual and inevitable compromise. Netanyahu is laying claim to something different — the possibility of ultimate victory, the permanent and definitive defeat of the Palestinians, their national and collective goals.

"In over a decade as prime minister, Netanyahu has consistently and unequivocally rejected any plans or practical steps that even begin to address Palestinian aspirations. Netanyahu is all about perpetuating and exacerbating the conflict, not about managing it, let alone resolving it...[The] message is clear: there will be no Palestinian state because the West Bank and East Jerusalem are simply Greater Israel."

No Palestinian State

Levy continues:

"The approach overturns assumptions that have guided peace efforts and American policy for over a quarter of a century: that Israel has no alternative to an eventual territorial withdrawal and acceptance of something sufficiently resembling an independent sovereign Palestinian state broadly along the 1967 lines. It challenges the presumption that the permanent denial of such an outcome is incompatible with how Israel and Israelis perceive themselves as

being a democracy. Additionally, it challenges the peace-effort supposition that this denial would in any way be unacceptable to the key allies on which Israel depends...

"In more traditional bastions of support for Israel, Netanyahu took a calculated gamble — would enough American Jewish support continue to stand with an increasingly illiberal and ethno-nationalist Israel, thereby facilitating the perpetuation of the lopsided U.S.-Israel relationship? Netanyahu bet yes, and he was right."

And here is another interesting point that Levy makes:

"And then events took a further turn in Netanyahu's favor with the rise to power in the United States and parts of Central Eastern Europe (and to enhanced prominence elsewhere in Europe and the West) of the very ethno-nationalist trend to which Netanyahu is so committed, working to replace liberal with illiberal democracy. One should not underestimate Israel and Netanyahu's importance as an ideological and practical avant-garde for this trend."

Former U.S. Ambassador and respected political analyst Chas Freeman [wrote](#) recently very bluntly:

"the central objective of U.S. policy in the Middle East has long been to achieve regional acceptance for the Jewish-settler state in Palestine."

Or, in other words, for Washington, its Middle East policy – and all its actions – have been determined by "to be, or not to be": "To be" (that is) – with Israel, or not "to be" (with Israel).

Israel's Lost Ground

The key point now is that the region has just made a seismic shift into the "not to be" camp. Is there much that America can do about that? Israel very much is alone with only a weakened Saudi Arabia at its side, and there are clear limits to what Saudi Arabia can do.



Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi.

The U.S. calling on Arab states to engage more with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi seems somehow inadequate. Iran is *not* looking for war with Israel (as a number of Israeli analysts have [acknowledged](#)); but, too, the Syrian President has made clear that his government intends to recover "all Syria" – and all Syria [includes](#) the occupied Golan Heights. And this week, Hassan Nasrallah called on the Lebanese government "[to devise a plan](#) and take a sovereign decision to liberate the Shebaa Farms and the Kfarshouba Hills" from Israel.

A number Israeli commentators already are saying that the "writing is on the wall" – and that it would be [better](#) for Israel to cede territory unilaterally, rather than risk the loss of hundreds of lives of Israeli servicemen in a futile attempt to retain it. That, though, seems

hardly congruent with the Israeli Prime Minister's "not an inch, will we yield" character and recent [statements](#).

Will ethno-nationalism provide Israel with a new support base? Well, firstly, I do not see Israel's doctrine as "illiberal democracy," but rather an apartheid system intended to subordinate Palestinian political rights. And as the political schism in the West widens, with one "wing" seeking to delegitimize the other by tarnishing them as racists, bigots and Nazis, it is clear that the *real* America First-ers will try, at any price, to distance themselves from the extremists.

Daniel Levy points out that the Alt-Right leader, Richard Spencer, depicts his movement as *White Zionism*. Is this really likely to build support for Israel? How long before the "globalists" use precisely Netanyahu's "illiberal democracy" meme to taunt the U.S. Right that this is precisely the kind of society for which they too aim: with Mexicans and black Americans treated like Palestinians?

'Ethnic Nationalism'

The increasingly "not to be" constituency of the Middle East has a simpler word for Netanyahu's "ethnic nationalism." They call it simply Western colonialism. Round one of Chas Freeman's making the Middle East "be with Israel" consisted of the shock-and-awe assault on Iraq. Iraq is now allied with Iran, and the Hashad militia (PMU) are becoming a widely mobilized fighting force. The second stage was 2006. Today, Hizbullah is a regional force, and not a just Lebanese one.



Far-right militia members demonstrating outside Ukrainian parliament in Kiev. (Screen shot from RT video via YouTube video)

The third strike was at Syria. Today, Syria is allied with Russia, Iran, Hizbullah and Iraq. What will comprise the next round in the "to be, or not to be" war?

For all Netanyahu's bluster about Israel standing stronger, and having beaten back "what he had called the 'fake-news claim' that without a deal with the Palestinians 'Israel will be isolated, weakened and abandoned' facing a 'diplomatic tsunami,'" Netanyahu may have just discovered, in these last two weeks, that he confused facing down the weakened Palestinians with "victory" — only at the very moment of his apparent triumph, to find himself alone in a new, "New Middle East."

Perhaps *Pravda* was right, and Netanyahu did appear close to panic, during his hurriedly arranged, and urgently called, Sochi summit.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

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