

# What Is Netanyahu's "Legacy"?

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*Netanyahu's 15 years as prime minister have come to an end, but his legacy lives on. If there were questions about what exactly that legacy might be, the never-shy Bibi was quick to list his accomplishments in a "valedictory speech" before the Knesset.*

In Trump-like fashion, he boasted that he, and he alone: made Israel a "global power" — able to stand up to enemies; resisted pressure from allies to stop building settlements; ended Israel's "socialist economy" transforming the country into a free-market haven; challenged the old doctrine of "land for peace" and replaced it with "peace for peace" without surrendering an inch of land or "uprooting a single Jew from his home"; gave Israel uncontested military might able to operate anywhere in the region; "transformed Israel into a cyber power"; and paved the way for Donald Trump to end the "Iran deal" and recognise Israeli control over all of Jerusalem.

What interested me most about Netanyahu's presentation was the way it revealed the extent to which he has operated according to the same playbook throughout his entire career and, although he'll never acknowledge it, he has had accomplices both writing the playbook and implementing it.

Netanyahu is sometimes viewed as a maneuverer with no goal other than personal power. That is simply not true. He is, and has always been, an ideologue, a neo-conservative ideologue.

The Netanyahu family ties with American neo-conservatives go back to BenZion's (Benjamin's father) role in helping to launch the movement in the late 1970s. In Bibi's writings and public speaking, he has always adhered to the neocon's Manichean apocalyptic world view: that there is absolute good (Israel and the West) and absolute evil (the rest); that good must fight evil with unrelenting overwhelming force; that weakness or compromise is unacceptable; and that victory is assured.

Shortly after the 1993 White House signing of the Oslo Accords, Netanyahu and a few Israeli colleagues, launched an initiative to sabotage the agreements which they identified as a sign of weakness and compromise with evil. They lobbied members of Congress sending regular faxes making the case that the PLO wasn't to be trusted and that steps must be

taken to abort the agreement because of the dangers it posed to Israel and America.

One of Netanyahu's main allies in Congress was Newt Gingrich. When Republicans gained control of Congress and Gingrich became speaker of the House in 1995, the matchup in Washington became Clinton/Rabin supporting the Oslo Accords versus Gingrich/Netanyahu opposing them. Never before had an Israeli opposition party challenged its own government in Washington. Rabin was incensed and angrily condemned this effort.

Back in Israel, Rabin was so demonised by opponents of Oslo, that he was eventually assassinated in 1995 for what they called "his act of treason", a murder that Rabin's widow always maintained was the result of Netanyahu's incitement against her husband.

When Netanyahu was elected prime minister in 1996 on a platform committed to ending the peace process, Gingrich invited him to address a joint session of Congress. In preparation for his speech, Netanyahu's American neocon advisers wrote a position paper for him devoted to "Making a Clean Break" from weaknesses that characterised the former Israeli government. It emphasised the need to project power to affirm the moral superiority of Israel and the West and the resolve to resist pressure from those who sought compromise.

They stressed undoing the "peace process" with the Palestinians, weakening the PLO, creating alternatives to its leadership, and blocking any official Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. They also called for building regional alliances based on strength to confront enemies, singling out Syria and removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq. Additionally, they called for eliminating US economic aid to reduce any possible future source of pressure, while maintaining US military aid, enabling Israel to continue to fight the West's and its enemies.

That was 1996. In 15 of the next 25 years, Netanyahu has done what he set out to do, at enormous cost. But he didn't do it alone. He had enablers, in Congress and in the George W. Bush and Trump administrations. First and foremost were his neo-conservative allies, who helped develop his plan and aided and abetted him along the way. Playing a supporting role were weak-kneed Democrats who refused to see the game that was afoot and hesitated to block this insidious design.

Here's what they did to enable Netanyahu's "accomplishments", making it ludicrous for him to claim that he and he alone is responsible for Israel's "successes".

It is hard to make the case that Israel became economically and militarily powerful on its own and is a model capitalist society, when the US annually gives an unrestricted \$3.8 billion in military aid some of which goes to Israel's own weapons industry allowing it to become a major arms exporter. For years the US has contributed additional billions to jump-start Israel's high-tech sector and underwrites billions of dollars in unrestricted loan guarantees. And it allows tax-exempt donations from US groups to provide everything from support for social services to illegal land purchases and development in the occupied lands.

It is also hard for Netanyahu to claim that he stands up to the US when he is only able to do so because Israel has the support of Republicans who have thrice invited him to address joint sessions of Congress to "stand up" against Democratic presidents. If it were not for the US turning a blind eye and/or providing protective cover and sanctions against international bodies, Israel would be penalised for its illegal behaviours.

Claiming, therefore, that it was his leadership that made Israel strong and able to resist pressure takeschutzpah to say the least.

It is patently false for Netanyahu to claim that Israel and the West are more secure and the "forces of good" have prevailed because of his leadership and his neocon allies. Today, the Middle East is a mess, still reeling from the disastrous Iraq war which did remove Saddam, but unleashed and emboldened Iran and caused extremist movements to grow and metastasize, leaving the US to face a multipolar region in turmoil. As we have recently witnessed, despite the boasts and bravado, Israel while militarily strong is internally fractured and most definitely not at peace because Palestinians, despite decades of oppression, continue to rise in fierce opposition to the denial of their rights.

This is Netanyahu's legacy. Not his boasts of success, but chaos so great and a hole so deep that it will take decades before we can see real peace and stability based on justice and rights, not on false claims of strength.

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*The writer is president of the Washington-based Arab American Institute.*

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