

Who's Afraid of the Israel Lobby?

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Congress is the last place to look for “the brightest and the best” or the most knowledgeable. Still, most Senators and Representatives are at least somewhat better informed than people whose window on the world is Fox News.

Why then did they make spectacles of themselves listening, yet again, to what Benjamin Netanyahu has to say about Iran? Why would they care?

Why would anybody care what Netanyahu thinks?

The short answer is: because they must.

What Netanyahu thinks matters for the same reason that it matters what Republicans think or, for that matter what, ninety-five percent (or more) of the Democrats in Congress think — about Iran or anything else.

Their ideas are not worth taking seriously, not by a long shot. But their powers and offices are.

This is how it is in modern “democracies.” There is no shortage of people with ideas that merit consideration. But, with rare exceptions, those people are consigned to the margins of political life. Their views almost never affect public policy – not directly anyway, and not in a timely fashion.

Most of the exceptions are on the political right – thanks to the generosity of plutocrats wise enough to look more than one or two steps ahead.

By supplying think tanks and business-friendly university programs with resources sufficient for getting politicians to pay attention, they do sometimes get ideas that would otherwise be paid no heed taken seriously. Needless to say, these would be ideas that serve their interests.

Sound, progressive ideas are seldom taken seriously. They are as welcome in the halls of power as antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria are welcome in modern hospitals.

This is not how it is supposed to be; but, then, the real world of democracy and democratic theory have never been on the same page. The gap has lately become more than usually cavernous, but the problem has always been with us.

It could hardly be otherwise in a political system organized around an ideal of equal citizenship that superintends a capitalist economy in which economic power and unimaginable riches go to only a tiny fraction of the population.

As everyone knows by now, in recent decades that fraction has shrunk back down to Gilded Age levels or worse.

Occupy activists used to contrast the one percent with everyone else. They were too kind to capitalism in its current phase. These days, real economic power is in the hands of only a tiny fraction of the one percent.

Others, further down the line but still at the top of the income and wealth distribution, are holding their own as well. They owe their good fortune to those trickling down phenomena we used to hear so much about in the Reagan days.

Everyone else – the ninety-nine percent figure is not far off — is worse off or no better off than before the neoliberalism Reagan championed took hold.

Institutions that used to alleviate some of the most deleterious consequences of the inequalities capitalism generates are in decline too.

This is what neoliberal politics is about. Under its aegis, the progress achieved in the middle decades of the twentieth century and in the years preceding World War I, has been under attack for decades.

Recent efforts by retrograde Republican governors and state legislators to open up new fronts in that continuing class war are only the latest chapter.

In these circumstances, it is all but impossible to keep economic power from spilling over into the political sphere. What had been a chronic problem that could be mitigated to some extent has become acute.

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In theory, “democracy” means rule of the *demos*, “the people” in contrast to economic and social elites. In practice, the word designates regimes that sustain the power of economic elites over the *demos*, provided only that the governments that superintend capitalist economies come to power through competitive elections that are generally free and fair in a procedural sense. How free and fair they are substantively is another matter.

Thanks to a widespread tendency to conflate liberalism with democracy, it is widely held too that political regimes must respect basic political rights – freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and so on – to count as democratic.

To cloud the issue further, economic “freedoms,” freedoms to engage in what one celebrated libertarian philosopher, Robert Nozick, called “capitalist acts between consenting adults,” are sometimes added to the list.

In the main, though, the standard view holds that what matters for “democracy” is how collective decisions are made, not how many or what kinds of immunities from state interferences there are or how well they are upheld.

To count as a democracy in the real world of politics today, it suffices merely to follow, or at least roughly approximate, the procedural forms that democratic theorists prescribe for electing candidates and making laws.

This understanding suits the needs of capitalism's grandees well.

Perhaps the best reason to defend democracy, conceived the way they prefer, is the one that Winston Churchill famously proffered – that all the practicable alternatives are worse.

Even if he was right, this is hardly an argument calculated to garner enthusiastic support.

Lesser evil considerations often do carry the day in electoral contests, but then, they need hold sway only for brief periods or at critical moments. What the beneficiaries of the status quo need is a political regime that is sustained by a durable sense of its own legitimacy.

This is why economic elites in democratic countries are pleased when the visions of democratic governance advanced by the great democratic theorists of the past are enlisted in support of political forms from which they benefit egregiously.

These visions come from many vantage points and are motivated by a variety of fundamental concerns. However, free and fair competitive elections play an important role in all of them. And, in all of them, what matters is that elections be substantively, not just formally, free and fair.

It goes without saying that, in this respect, the real world of democracy falls far short.

Nearly all justifying theories of democratic governance accord pride of place to representative institutions, but few of them defend those institutions for their own sake. For most of the great theorists of the past, representative government is a second-best alternative to direct democratic rule, which is ruled out on grounds of practicability.

Therefore, from the standpoint of most democratic theorists, the more the institutions of representative government resemble the workings of popular assemblies, the better those institutions are.

In this respect, America is “exceptional,” in comparison with other real world democracies because its institutional arrangements veer even farther away than most from the ideal.

Our institutions would be more democratic in the relevant sense if, for example, we had proportional representation or run-off elections or anything but winner-take-all electoral contests dominated by semi-established political parties in which the winners don't even need to garner a majority of all the votes cast.

Our institutions would be more democratic too if we elected presidents directly, without an electoral college that makes the votes in “swing states” count more than the votes of everyone else; or if our legislature's “higher” chamber, the Senate, did not so blatantly offend such basic democratic norms as one-person-one vote and, with its filibusters and other arcane procedures, even the method of majority rule.

And, as if this weren't enough, lately our democracy has been further diminished by a Supreme Court that identifies restrictions on campaign contributions with restrictions on free speech, and by Republican efforts at voter suppression.

Nevertheless, the illusion persists that Congress is a deliberative body, comprised of selfless legislators determined to do as well as they can for their constituents, all ninety-nine percent or more of them.

It was to that forum that the leader of the self-declared “nation state of the Jewish people,” set forth his views. This time, he did his best not to seem ridiculous; he even left his cartoonish visual aids behind.

Still, what a nauseating spectacle it was. Netanyahu, an inveterate buffoon, is said to see himself as a later-day Churchill. And, indeed, he did seem almost Churchillian compared to the Senators and Representatives who jumped up and down like puppets, applauding his latest presentation of the Likud line.

What on earth did they think they were doing? And why were they doing it?

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There is a short answer for that too: they are afraid of the Israel lobby.

And because our media is afraid too, most Americans either don’t notice or let it pass. Base and servile obeisance has become so normal in the Home of the Brave that hardly anyone even pays attention.

In even a remote approximation of the democracy of the philosophers, ridding the Middle East – and the world – of nuclear weapons would be Topic A in Congress and indeed in all the legislative bodies in the world.

But that can’t happen here because it would raise the question of Israel’s bombs – by all accounts, there are at least eighty of them, maybe as many as two hundred – and of Israel’s demonstrated bellicosity.

Keeping these topics strictly, absolutely *verboten* is high on the Israel lobby’s to-do list.

Keeping up the demonization of Iran is high on its list as well. Israel needs existential threats, after all; not just because Elie Wiesel-style holocaust mongering is no longer enough to keep so-called “diaspora” Jews on board, but also to keep Israeli Jews in line.

Iran is good for that because, in the real world, it is hardly a threat at all.

If Iran too had a bomb, it might deter some Israeli depredations in neighboring countries, Lebanon especially, and in occupied Palestine. Netanyahu wouldn’t want that, and neither would most other bona fide members of the Israeli *Herrenvolk*.

However, most American Jews, like most people around the world, would find that situation more of a relief than a threat. Zionist fanatics would, of course, disagree. But their reasons too are not worth taking seriously.

But like the Israeli government and the Republican and Democratic Parties, they cannot be ignored, as they deserve to be and as they would be were reason in control. They cannot be ignored because their financial and organizational resources are more than sufficient for promoting their cause.

To that end, they use every means of persuasion they can deploy, and they use Democrats and Republicans.

There are some who maintain that they do this not because they can, and not even to

feather their own nests (though they are not beyond taking advantage of opportunities to do so when they can), but because, despite their wealth and power, they remain inordinately, even pathologically, insecure; that, no matter what the evidence suggests, they believe that, in the final analysis, only a Jewish state can truly protect Jews.

No doubt, this is what many of them do think.

How odd, though, that some of the richest and most powerful people in the United States would think this way — when, as they surely know, the “nation state of the Jewish people,” world Jewry’s purported refuge of last resort, relies absolutely upon the United States for its prosperity and military invulnerability, and for its de facto immunity from the requirements of international law.

Zionist spin doctors will say that recent events justify their paranoia, that what they call anti-Semitism is on the rise everywhere. Needless to say, they exaggerate the evidence, but there is some merit in their claim that anti-Jewish sentiments are on the rise in Europe and elsewhere.

But except perhaps in backward regions where American sponsored provocateurs are at work stirring up nationalist and neo-fascist opponents of the Russian government, there is no resurgence of anti-Semitism. Quite the contrary.

What is on the rise are antagonisms between Muslim communities and communities comprised of Jews from historically Muslim countries.

For this, we have American and Israeli machinations throughout the Muslim world to thank, along with Israel’s endless and increasingly brutal occupation of Palestine. The conditions under which Muslims live in Europe and elsewhere fan the flames as well.

Inevitably, some of the animosity does spill over into populations where remnants of genuine anti-Semitism survive. Ironically, though, Zionist efforts to identify anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism work to keep the phenomenon in bounds.

The reason is plain: the European Right sides with Israel – not just because it is Islamophobic, but also because European fascists and Zionist fanatics are brothers under the skin.

Classical anti-Semitism suffered an historic defeat more than seven decades ago, and is now very nearly a dead letter – especially in western and central Europe. In American politics, it hardly a factor at all.

How ironic therefore that a segment of the American plutocracy would now be conducting itself as if its aim were to revive the old stereotypes and paranoid fantasies! Sheldon Adelson is not the only one whose brazen antics make *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* ring true.

That even their doings don’t revive the old animosities is proof positive that genuine anti-Semitism truly is kaput.

Adelson and other noxious poltroons pay dearly to sway public opinion their way.

They get their money’s worth too. Corporate media, from NPR and *The New York*

Times down into the nether regions where even Fox News seems luminous, are happy to oblige.

Forsaking academic freedom and the once celebrated “life of the mind,” more than a few centers of Higher Learning have taken a similar turn – witness Steven Salaita’s troubles with the University of Illinois.

Needless to say, the Islamic State (IS) is potentially a far greater threat to Israel – and the entire region – than Iran. But those murderous thugs are only good for promoting a generalized Islamophobia. This serves Israel’s purpose too, but not nearly well enough.

Unlike the imaginary bomb Netanyahu came to Congress to preach against, the IS just doesn’t cut it.

This is because the case against them is too “complicated” to serve as existential threat fodder. For this, America’s befuddled foreign policy is largely to blame.

Thus the United States is presently making common cause with its declared enemies against its enemy’s enemies – for example, in Syria, it is siding with the Syrian government (known to our media as “the Assad regime”), with Iran, and even with Hezbollah against the Islamic State.

There is also the problem of America’s staunchest Arab allies — Saudi Arabia and the other “fundamentalist” and essentially feudal dictatorships of the Persian Gulf. Even the denizens of Capitol Hill can understand how execrable the rulers of those countries are and also the extent to which the American empire depends upon them for keeping control of the world’s energy resources under its thumb.

It is widely known too that the money behind the IS comes mainly from those countries. If Obama’s war aims, like those of George Bush before him, were anything like what their proponents claim, those allies of ours would be at the top of America’s enemies list.

Of course, just the opposite is the case for a reason that is painfully obvious: Saudi Arabia and the others are in league with Israel against Iran. Officially, they remain implacable enemies of “the Zionist entity”; effectively, though, they are on the same side.

Making sense of this Salafi-Zionist alliance is a task for future historians working with the benefit of hindsight. For now, the Israeli propaganda machine and its Zionist echo chamber, like the Obama administration, would just as soon keep the issue as far from public view as they can.

After all, there is no chance of spinning any part of this sordid story to Netanyahu’s advantage. For reasons having more to do with oil than Israeli politics, the American foreign policy establishment feels the same way.

It is different with Iran and its imaginary bomb; there, the problem is easily understood.

However, on this issue, the United States and Israel are no longer of one mind.

This makes Netanyahu and his cohort nervous, even desperate. If America comes to terms with the Islamic Republic, Israel is in danger of losing its existential threat.

This may explain why Netanyahu takes the position he does, but not why the mighty law makers of the world's only superpower would abase themselves so pathetically to hear him mouth off about it.

Part of the explanation for that is that Republicans will do anything to stick it to Barack Obama.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this to date is the infamous, arguably traitorous, "open letter" – actually, a condescending and technically inaccurate civics lesson –that Arkansas's child-Senator, smarty-pants Tom Cotton, got forty-seven Republican Senators to send to their Iranian counterparts.

Would they have undertaken efforts to sabotage negotiations with Iran on their own, were Israeli machinations not a factor? Did Netanyahu's lecture to Congress play a role? Did the machinations of neocons and plutocrats? These are questions that investigative journalists will have to explore.

What is plain, for now, is that a reason why Republicans were so willing to humiliate themselves so flagrantly is that when it comes to knocking Obama, and thwarting his every move, Benjamin Netanyahu is a past master.

Netanyahu figured out, even before they did, that Obama has feet of clay. The Republican leadership is more blatant in their efforts to bring Obama down, and their base is more blatant still. But this is only because they can get away with it.

Because Israel's need for American support is so extreme, Israel's government cannot. Netanyahu is foolhardy and arrogant enough to test the limits, but there are lines that even he dares not cross.

Using Congress as a backdrop for what was essentially a campaign stop March 3 was a step too far – something he and his advisors realized only after it was too late.

But there are plenty in Congress who still haven't figured it out. For this, thank the rightward drift in American politics that has swept more than a few Christian Zionists into Congress, along with distressingly many God-fearing fellow travelers. In their minds, Netanyahu, like Israel itself, is on a mission from God.

And there are no doubt other legislators who genuinely do identify with the interests of the right-wing government of that ethnocratic settler state. Anyone who has grown up in American schools and with American media would have to be unusually independent-minded not to be drawn in that direction.

And, of course, whatever legislators themselves may think, many of them represent constituents – Jewish and Christian – some of whom do have strong pro-Israel feelings.

But the main reason why they humiliated themselves so shamelessly is that they fear the Israel lobby.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is the jewel in the lobby's crown. Netanyahu's speech was timed to coincide with AIPAC's annual Washington convention-extravaganza – where, this year as in year's past, the empire's movers and shakers come to pay obeisance to the lobby's might.

And so it was that many of the Democrats and Republicans who cheered Netanyahu on as he told them how evil Iran is and how urgent it is that its nuclear program be stopped abased themselves before the lobby's potentates just a day or two before.

No doubt, some of them did it out of conviction, but most Senators and Representatives, like most Americans – and many American Jews – care very little about Israel itself. When they rally around the (Israeli) flag, prudence, not principle, is the reason why.

AIPAC organizes donations, but campaign contributions are not the main reason Democrats and Republicans do its bidding. Constituent pressure is not the main reason either except perhaps in a few jurisdictions.

These would be decisive considerations were there not other factors to take into account – the national interest, for example and broad public opinion.

Those considerations were always present, but, as often happens, minorities that care intensely prevail over majorities that think differently but care hardly at all. The difference now is that the minority is shrinking — in size, if not in intensity — while the majority is growing and caring more.

Political organizing by groups seeking justice in Israel-Palestine – the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, for example – is one reason why. Ironically, the Netanyahu government is a more important reason.

Even with Israeli apologists and American corporate media doing their utmost, *y'esh gavul*, as progressive IDF refuseniks say: this means, both, “there is a border” and, more aptly, “there are limits.” There are only so many lawless depredations that public opinion can accept — dumbed down and disinformed, as the public may be.

But Congressional Democrats, many of them, and Republicans, all of them, don't care – not yet. They are too afraid to care.

They fear that if they don't stay in AIPAC's good graces, AIPAC, along with other Israel lobby institutions, will bring them down – not literally of course, but politically. They fear that AIPAC and the others will cause their political death.

It doesn't happen often, because it doesn't have to: Democrats and Republicans police themselves. But it did happen, in recent memory, to Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia. In the more remote past, Illinois Senator Charles Percy was also a victim. There have been others as well.

There don't need to be many. A capable ghostwriter, commissioned by a later-day John Kennedy to write a sequel to *Profiles in Courage*, would be hard put to find anyone to write about from among the bought and paid for legislators of our time. Slavishly toeing the line comes naturally to them.

The joke is on them, however: AIPAC is not yet a full-fledged Paper Tiger, but its power is in decline. Already, it is sufficiently enfeebled to be ignored and even defied.

Indeed, if ever there was a case where “there is nothing to fear but fear itself,” this is it. All that is needed is for someone, in a position to be heard, to call their bluff.

Thanks to Netanyahu's overreaching, and the GOP's desire to gain the allegiance of American Jews (dream on!), this has already happened – sort of.

Obama refused to meet with Netanyahu, bringing Joe Biden, normally AIPAC's most fawning subject, and the rest of his administration along.

Still, some sixty Democrats plus Bernie Sanders, a quasi-Democrat, decided not to attend Netanyahu's speech.

It was not a clean break; that has yet to come. Instead, proclaiming their support for Israel, the refuseniks fabricated lame excuses.

Obama said he didn't want to interfere with the Israeli election – as if interfering with elections in foreign countries is something American presidents would never think of doing.

Nancy Pelosi showed up but her co-thinkers – call them Pelosiite Democrats and realize that they comprise what counts as the Democratic Party's leftwing — said that they objected to the violation of diplomatic protocol; that when a foreign leader addresses Congress, the visit should be arranged through the White House, not the speaker of the House.

Bernie Sanders, nominally a socialist and officially an "independent," bought into this excuse too. So did the other Great Progressive Hope of "the democratic wing of the Democratic Party," Elizabeth Warren. It is worth noting that, unlike Sanders, she waited to be sure that she would not be going too far out on a limb before deciding not to attend.

The Black Caucus, to their everlasting credit, got the ball rolling. But, to their shame, their express rationale was the most disingenuous of all. They said that by inviting Netanyahu without even bothering to tell America's first African American President, Republicans insulted the President and, through him, African Americans generally.

Fair enough, and courageous too, in view of how actively AIPAC *et. al.* have been lobbying African American legislators lately. The lobby is desperate that they not sign on to the growing awareness in the communities they represent that Gaza is Ferguson writ large.

But, alas, the Black Caucus is home to more than a few devotees of the never-badmouth-Obama school. Keeping this up must be exhausting, inasmuch as even the most stalwart Obama booster knows full well that Obama has not done a whole lot for African Americans lately – or, for that matter, since the day he took office.

Nevertheless, despite all the prevarications and subterfuges, the fact remains: with African American legislators in the lead, sixty Democrats defied AIPAC and lived to tell about it. They are better off morally for having done so; politically, they will probably be better off too.

And there is nothing now that AIPAC can do about it.

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How fitting that Netanyahu was introduced at the AIPAC extravaganza by none other than the soon to be indicted *gusano* Senator from New Jersey, Democrat Robert Menendez, enemy of just causes everywhere — from Palestine to Cuba to Venezuela to Ukraine! A corrupt man about to be disgraced, introducing the man of the hour to a nefarious lobby in

decline.

That lobby can still terrorize Congress, but it cannot prevail even there for long. This is clear as can be: the writing is on the wall.

AIPAC is becoming a Paper Tiger right before our eyes.

The pace might slow down a tad if Israel tones down its offenses to justice and international law. And if Netanyahu loses the coming election, the one that brought him to Washington last week, that might slow the pace as well.

But until there is a government in Israel that will abide by the rule of law and promote equal rights for all, there will be no going back from what Netanyahu's recklessness and arrogance hath wrought.

That won't happen if what nowadays passes for a center-left coalition comes to power in Israel, any more than it will if, as still seems likely, Netanyahu wins.

This is because in Israel, as in the United States, the problems run deeper than personalities.

Indeed, the prospects in Israel are even bleaker than they are here.

In the United States, necessary radical changes still remain out of the question, but, with the GOP hell bent on putting its ludicrousness on display, ameliorative policies are becoming more feasible than ever.

In Israel, it looks like the time for ameliorative policy changes has passed; the settler movement and its allies are now so powerful that even the vaunted "two state solution" now seems almost utopian.

This is why it sometimes seems that it would take an act of God to squeeze a little justice out of "the nation state of the Jewish people."

Don't hold your breath waiting for this to happen!

Meanwhile, the realization that America has no business giving Israel's leaders carte blanche to do what they want to Palestinians and to neighboring states is spreading. So is the idea that Israeli efforts to influence American politics are outrageous.

Despite all the warnings the Israel lobby can muster, it is even dawning on many people that an Iranian bomb would be no existential threat to anybody; and that, so long as Israel remains a nuclear state, it might even be a good thing to have a countervailing deterrent in the region.

There is not enough plutocratic money in the universe to keep these plain truths suppressed much longer.

Most Americans, indeed most American Jews, have already caught on. Congress will be the last to figure it out, but even there, common sense is bound eventually to take hold.

Thanks to the Netanyahus of the world and the Sheldon Adelsons – and most ironically, thanks to AIPAC and its cognate organizations — that day may come sooner than anyone

now dares hope.

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