

# Congress Seeks Netanyahu's Direction

**Exclusive:** Conservative Pat Buchanan once got in trouble by calling Capitol Hill "Israeli occupied territory," but even he might not imagine what's happening now with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu invited to address a joint session of Congress to decry President Obama's foreign policy, Robert Parry notes.

By Robert Parry (Updated on Jan. 24, 2015, with additional comment by Oren.)

Showing who some in Congress believe is the real master of U.S. foreign policy, House Speaker John Boehner has invited Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address a joint session and offer a rebuttal to President Barack Obama's comments on world affairs in his State of the Union speech.

Boehner made clear that Netanyahu's third speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress scheduled for Feb. 11 was meant to counter Obama's assessments. "There is a serious threat in the world, and the President last night kind of papered over it," Boehner said on Wednesday. "And the fact is that there needs to be a more serious conversation in America about how serious the threat is from radical Islamic jihadists and the threat posed by Iran."

The scheduling of Netanyahu's speech caught the White House off-guard, since the Israeli prime minister had apparently not bothered to clear his trip with the administration. The Boehner-Netanyahu arrangement demonstrates a mutual contempt for this President's authority to conduct American foreign policy as prescribed by the U.S. Constitution.

In the past when Netanyahu has spoken to Congress, Republicans and Democrats have competed to show their devotion by quickly and frequently leaping to their feet to applaud almost every word out of the Israeli prime minister's mouth. By addressing a joint session for a third time, Netanyahu would become only the second foreign leader to do so, joining British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who never used the platform to demean the policies of a sitting U.S. president.

Besides this extraordinary recognition of another country's leader as the true definer of U.S. foreign policy, Boehner's move reflects an ignorance of what is actually occurring on the ground in the Middle East. Boehner doesn't seem to realize that Netanyahu has developed what amounts to a de facto alliance with extremist Sunni forces in the region.

Not only is Israel now collaborating behind the scenes with Saudi Arabia's Wahhabist leadership but Israel has begun taking sides militarily in support of the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Syrian civil war. A source familiar with U.S. intelligence information on Syria said Israel has a "non-aggression

pact" with Nusra forces that control territory adjacent to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

The quiet cooperation between Israel and al-Qaeda's affiliate was further underscored on Sunday when Israeli helicopters attacked and killed advisers to the Syrian military from Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran. In other words, Israel has dispatched its forces into Syria to kill military personnel helping to fight al-Nusra. Iran later confirmed that one of its generals had died in the Israeli strike.

Israel's tangled alliances with Sunni forces have been taking shape over the past several years, as Israel and Saudi Arabia emerged as strange bedfellows in the geopolitical struggle against Shiite-ruled Iran and its allies in Iraq, Syria and southern Lebanon. Both Saudi and Israeli leaders have talked with growing alarm about this "Shiite crescent" stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon.

### **Favoring Sunni Extremists**

Senior Israelis have made clear they would prefer Sunni extremists to prevail in the Syrian civil war rather than President Bashar al-Assad, who is an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam. Assad's relatively secular government is seen as the protector of Shiites, Christians and other minorities who fear the vengeful brutality of the Sunni jihadists who now dominate the anti-Assad rebels.

In one of the most explicit expressions of Israel's views, its Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, a close adviser to Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post in September 2013 that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

"The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc," Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an interview. "We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with al-Qaeda.

And, if you might have thought that Oren had misspoken, he reiterated his position in June 2014 at an Aspen Institute conference. Then, speaking as a former ambassador, Oren said Israel would even prefer a victory by the Islamic State, which was then massacring captured Iraqi soldiers and beheading Westerners, than the continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria.

"From Israel's perspective, if there's got to be an evil that's got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail," Oren said.

Saudi Arabia shares Israeli's strategic view that "the Shiite crescent" must be broken and has thus developed a rapport with Netanyahu's government in a kind of "enemy of my enemy is my friend" relationship. But some rank-and-file Jewish supporters of Israel have voiced concerns about Israel's newfound alliance with the Saudi monarchy, especially given its adherence to ultraconservative Wahhabi Islam and its embrace of a fanatical hatred of Shiite Islam, a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites that dates back 1,400 years.

Though President Obama has repeatedly declared his support for Israel, he has developed a contrary view from Netanyahu's regarding what is the gravest danger in the Middle East. Obama considers the radical Sunni jihadists, associated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, to be the biggest threat to Western interests and U.S. national security.

That has put him in a different de facto alliance with Iran and the Syrian government since they represent the strongest bulwarks against Sunni jihadists who have targeted Americans and other Westerners for death.

What Boehner doesn't seem to understand is that Israel and Saudi Arabia have placed themselves on the side of the Sunni jihadists who now represent the frontline fight against the "Shiite crescent." If Netanyahu succeeds in enlisting the United States in violently forcing Syrian "regime change," the U.S. government likely would be facilitating the growth in power of the Sunni extremists, not containing them.

But the influential American neoconservatives want to synch U.S. foreign policy with Israel's and thus have pressed for a U.S. bombing campaign against Assad's forces (even if that would open the gates of Damascus to the Nusra Front or the Islamic State). The neocons also want an escalation of tensions with Iran by sabotaging an agreement to ensure that its nuclear program is not used for military purposes.

The neocons have long wanted to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran as part of their "regime change" strategy for the Middle East. That is why Obama's openness to a permanent agreement for tight constraints on Iran's nuclear program is seen as a threat by Netanyahu, the neocons and their congressional allies because it would derail hopes for militarily attacking Iran.

In his State of the Union address on Tuesday, Obama made clear that he perceives the brutal Islamic State, which he calls "ISIL" for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as the principal current threat to Western interests in the Middle East and the clearest terror threat to the United States and Europe. Obama proposed "a smarter kind of American leadership" that would cooperate with allies in "stopping ISIL's advance" without "getting dragged into another ground

war in the Middle East.”

### **Working with Putin**

Thus, Obama, who might be called a “closet realist,” is coming to the realization that the best hope for blocking the advances of Sunni jihadi terror and minimizing U.S. military involvement is through cooperation with Iran and its regional allies. That also puts Obama on the same side with Russian President Vladimir Putin who has faced Sunni terrorism in Chechnya and is supporting both Iran’s leaders and Syria’s Assad in their resistance to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda’s Nusra Front.

Obama’s “realist” alliance, in turn, presents a direct threat to Netanyahu’s insistence that Iran represents an “existential threat” to Israel and that the “Shiite crescent” must be destroyed. There is also fear among Israeli right-wingers that an effective Obama-Putin collaboration could ultimately force Israel into accepting a Palestinian state.

So, Netanyahu and the U.S. neocons believe they must do whatever is necessary to shatter this tandem of Obama, Putin and Iran. That is one reason why the neocons were at the forefront of fomenting “regime change” against Ukraine’s elected pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich last year. By splintering Ukraine on Russia’s border, the neocons drove a wedge between Obama and Putin. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons’ Ukraine-Syria-Iran Gambit.”](#)]

Even the slow-witted mainstream U.S. media has begun to pick up on the story of the emerging Israeli-Saudi alliance. In the Jan. 19 issue of Time magazine, correspondent Joe Klein noted the new coziness between top Israeli and Saudi officials.

He wrote: “On May 26, 2014, an unprecedented public conversation took place in Brussels. Two former high-ranking spymasters of Israel and Saudi Arabia Amos Yadlin and Prince Turki al-Faisal sat together for more than an hour, talking regional politics in a conversation moderated by the Washington Post’s David Ignatius.

“They disagreed on some things, like the exact nature of an Israel-Palestine peace settlement, and agreed on others: the severity of the Iranian nuclear threat, the need to support the new military government in Egypt, the demand for concerted international action in Syria. The most striking statement came from Prince Turki. He said the Arabs had ‘crossed the Rubicon’ and ‘don’t want to fight Israel anymore.’”

Not only did Prince Turki offer an olive branch to Israel, he indicated agreement on what the two countries consider their most pressing strategic

interests: Iran's nuclear program and Syria's civil war. In other words, in noting this extraordinary meeting, Klein had stumbled upon the odd-couple alliance between Israel and Saudi Arabia though he didn't fully understand what he was seeing.

On Tuesday, the New York Times reported that Obama had shifted his position on Syria as the West made a "quiet retreat from its demand" that Assad "step down immediately." The article by Anne Barnard and Somini Sengupta noted that the Obama administration still wanted Assad to exit eventually "but facing military stalemate, well-armed jihadists and the world's worst humanitarian crisis, the United States is going along with international diplomatic efforts that could lead to more gradual change in Syria."

At the center of that diplomatic initiative was Russia, again reflecting Obama's recognition of the need to cooperate with Putin on resolving some of these complex problems (although Obama did include in his speech some tough-guy rhetoric against Russia over Ukraine, taking some pleasure in how Russia's economy is now "in tatters").

But the underlying reality is that the United States and Assad's regime have become de facto allies, fighting on the same side in the Syrian civil war, much as Israel had, in effect, sided with al-Qaeda's Nusra Front by killing Hezbollah and Iranian advisers to the Syrian military.

The Times article noted that the shift in Obama's position on Syrian peace talks "comes along with other American actions that Mr. Assad's supporters and opponents take as proof Washington now believes that if Mr. Assad is ousted, there will be nothing to check the spreading chaos and extremism.

"American planes now bomb the Islamic State group's militants in Syria, sharing skies with Syrian jets. American officials assure Mr. Assad, through Iraqi intermediaries, that Syria's military is not their target. The United States still trains and equips Syrian insurgents, but now mainly to fight the Islamic State, not the government."

Yet, as Obama adjusts U.S. foreign policy to take into account the complex realities in the Middle East, he now faces another front in this conflict from the U.S. Congress, which has long been held in thrall by the Israel lobby.

Not only has Speaker Boehner appealed to Netanyahu to deliver what amounts to a challenge to President Obama's foreign policy but congressional neocons are even accusing Obama's team of becoming Iranian stooges. Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey, a Democratic neocon, said, "The more I hear from the administration and its quotes, the more it sounds like talking points that come straight out of

Tehran.”

If indeed Netanyahu does end up addressing a joint session of the U.S. Congress, its members would face a stark choice of either embracing Israel’s foreign policy as America’s or backing the decisions made by the elected President of the United States.

[For more on Obama and the neocons, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Neocons: The Anti-Realists](#).”]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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## CIA Wants Its Reputation Back

The CIA doesn’t like to be portrayed as the gang that couldn’t shoot straight, so it has been using the leak trial of ex-CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling to insist that it really can shoot straight and indeed is brilliantly protecting America’s national security, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

Six days of testimony at the trial of former CIA officer Jeffrey Sterling have proven the agency’s obsession with proclaiming its competence. Many of the two-dozen witnesses from the Central Intelligence Agency conveyed smoldering resentment that a whistleblower or journalist might depict the institution as a bungling outfit unworthy of its middle name.

Some witnesses seemed to put Sterling and journalist James Risen roughly in the same nefarious category, Sterling for allegedly leaking classified information that put the CIA in a bad light, and Risen for reporting it. Muffled CIA anger was audible, coming from the witness stand, a seat filled by people claiming to view any aspersions on the CIA to be baseless calumnies.

Other than court employees, attorneys and jurors, only a few people sat through virtually the entire trial. As one of them, I can say that the transcript of *USA v. Jeffrey Alexander Sterling* should be mined for countless slick and clumsy

maneuvers by government witnesses to obscure an emerging picture of CIA recklessness, dishonesty and ineptitude.

Consider, for example, the testimony of David Shedd, who was chief of operations for the CIA's Counterproliferation Division when Sterling was a case officer at the turn of the century. On the stand, Shedd presented himself as superbly savvy about Operation Merlin. He'd met with the head prosecutor three times to prepare for testifying. Yet, as a witness, Shedd turned out to be stunningly ignorant about the only CIA operation at issue in the trial.

Like other CIA witnesses, Shedd testified in no uncertain terms that Operation Merlin, executed to give a flawed nuclear weapon design to the Iranian government, was expertly planned and then well implemented in 2000. But his testimony included a key statement that was a fundamentally incorrect version of what happened.

In reality, as Risen reported in his book *State of War*, and as all other accounts affirmed in the courtroom, the Russian scientist working for the CIA carried the nuclear diagram to Vienna, and left it in a mailbox at the Iranian mission office without ever speaking with anyone there. But Shedd flatly testified that the scientist had met with someone in Iran when delivering the diagram.

Shedd's authoritative demeanor about Operation Merlin was matched by the incongruous immensity of his error. He had preened himself on the stand as someone who had been the ultra-adept overseer of Operation Merlin, as the direct supervisor of the man ("Bob S," who testified behind a screen) in charge of that CIA program, touted in court as one of the most vitally important in the agency's modern era.

As much as anything else, the CIA witnesses at the trial seemed offended by Risen's characterization of Operation Merlin as ill-conceived, poorly executed and reckless. Along with the usual abhorrence of classified leaks (at least the ones unapproved by the agency's leaders), the testifying CIA officials and case officers were in firm denial that the Merlin operation was screwed up. I got the impression that most would much rather be considered ruthless or even cruel than incompetent.

The subject of competence is a sore spot for career CIA employees proud of their hard-boiled affects. From their vantage points, it can't be expunged by dismissing critics as impractical idealists and bleeding hearts merely concerned with the morality of drones, torture or renditions.

Jeffrey Sterling has continued to deny the charges that he was a source for

Risen's book. But no one disputes that Sterling went through channels in 2003 to alert the Senate Intelligence Committee staff to his concerns about Operation Merlin.

The first full day of jury deliberations in this historic leak trial is set for Friday. If Sterling goes to prison, a major reason will be that the CIA leadership is angry about being portrayed as an intelligence gang that can't shoot straight. The government cannot imprison Risen the journalist, but it may be on the verge of imprisoning Sterling the whistleblower.

Based on the evidence, it would be delusional to think of the CIA as a place run by straight shooters.

**Norman Solomon is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy and the author of *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. He is a co-founder of RootsAction.org. [This article originally appeared at ExposeFacts.org]**

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