

# Netanyahu Uses US Congress as Prop

By addressing the U.S. Congress for a third time, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu will again demonstrate his mastery of the American political process, using the backdrop of repeated standing ovations to keep Israelis from thinking too much about economic troubles, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A recent poll confirmed what other polls and many observers have noted about concerns of the Israeli public as Israel's general election next month approaches. Presented with a list of six subjects and asked which is the most important one for the government of Israel to address, 48 percent of all likely voters picked "economic issues." Nineteen percent said it was relations with the Palestinians, 14 percent picked education, and only 10 percent chose "the Iranian threat." Instability in the region, enlisting ultra-Orthodox, "other," and "don't know" collectively got 11 percent.

Compared with a poll that asked the same question two years ago, "economic issues" went up five percentage points and "the Iranian threat" went down two. Given how much the incumbent government unceasingly pounds away in its rhetoric on the Iranian issue and how dire a threat it portrays it to be, it may be remarkable how few respondents chose that subject.

Two salient facts about the Israeli economy provide the background to the views and concerns of Israeli citizens. First, Israel is a prosperous state with an economy that, looked at in a macro way, is admirably dynamic. Don't let that \$3 billion in annual aid from the United States fool you into thinking that Israel needs that money; Israel is in the top 25 countries of the world in GDP per capita.

But second, and perhaps not surprisingly given that Israel has been ruled by a right-wing government for the last several years, Israel has some of the worst economic inequality among the developed countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Israel's high-tech success has not trickled down to much of the rest of the economy. Despite the nation's overall prosperity, a good many ordinary Israelis strain to make do. This is especially true of young adults of the millennial generation, particularly with regard to finding affordable housing.

A demonstration of these patterns that was more dramatic than opinion polls came in huge street demonstrations in the summer of 2011, when many Israelis marched and chanted, "we demand social justice." The hundreds of thousands of

participants, bearing in mind the size of the Israeli population, represented a far bigger display than anything the Occupy Wall Street people were able to mount in the United States.

There is a genuine opening here for the Israeli Center-Left. The Israeli public, compared to the American public, is more positively inclined toward a welfare state and more tolerant of government deficits and public sector spending.

The way Likud and the rest of the political Right counters this vulnerability is to keep trying to shift the focus by hammering away on what it presents as national security issues, keeping the Israeli public scared, notwithstanding the overwhelming regional military superiority that Israel enjoys at all levels, and portraying itself as best able to protect Israelis from what is scary.

For Benjamin Netanyahu, the specter of Iran and especially its nuclear program has been central to this political strategy. When Netanyahu comes to Washington and makes his Congressional appearance that Republican/Likud political operative Ron Dermer (aka the Israeli ambassador) arranged for him, he bolsters his domestic political standing in a couple of ways.

One is that, insofar as he is successful in sabotaging any agreement to restrict the Iranian program, he can continue to fulminate about the Iranian bogeyman in as unrestrained fashion as he always has. If he can kill an agreement, he puts off the day when scaremongering about Iran gets even less of a rise out of the Israeli electorate than what the recent poll measured.

In the meantime, the speech itself enables Netanyahu to show the U.S. Congress again eating out of his hand, reassuring his voters that he has everything under control as far as U.S. politics are concerned, notwithstanding any unpleasantness with the current U.S. president.

Lest there be any doubt about Netanyahu's use of Congress as an electoral prop in this way, in the last previous Israeli election in 2013, Netanyahu's political coalition broadcast a campaign ad that used footage from an earlier Congressional appearance of his, replete with several of those standing ovations from the members (and also used a clip of Netanyahu's display of his cartoon bomb before the U.N. General Assembly). The ad conveyed the message, "When Netanyahu speaks, the world listens."

The structure of the Israeli economy thus does more harm besides making it hard for some Israelis to find housing and pay bills. It also provides an added political incentive for their government to undermine U.S. foreign policy, to constrain U.S. freedom of action in the Middle East, and to destroy the best chance the world has had to ensure that the Iranian nuclear program stays

peaceful.

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