

Behind Israel's Hostility toward Iran

For a decade after Iran's Islamic revolution, Israel quietly armed the regime which Prime Minister Netanyahu now condemns as an "existential threat." What caused the shift? Part of the reason was and remains domestic Israeli politics and managing the U.S. relationship, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Western news media has feasted on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's talk and the reactions to it as a rare political spectacle rich in personalities in conflict. But the real story of Netanyahu's speech is that he is continuing a long tradition in Israeli politics of demonizing Iran to advance domestic and foreign policy interests.

The history of that practice, in which Netanyahu has played a central role going back nearly two decades, shows that it has been based on a conscious strategy of vastly exaggerating the threat from Iran.

In conjuring the specter of Iranian genocide against Israelis, Netanyahu was playing two political games simultaneously. He was exploiting the fears of the Israeli population associated with the Holocaust to boost his electoral prospects while at the same time exploiting the readiness of most members of U.S. Congress to support whatever Netanyahu orders on Iran policy.

Netanyahu's primary audience was the Israeli electorate. He was speaking as a candidate for re-election as prime minister in an election that is just two weeks away. His speech was calculated to play on the deep-rooted anxiety of Israeli voters about the outsiders who may want to destroy the Jewish people.

Netanyahu reminded his Israeli audience that, "In our nearly 4,000 years of history, many have tried repeatedly to destroy the Jewish people." That was an obvious allusion to the annual Jewish ritual at Passover of repeating the warning that "in every generation they have risen up against us to annihilate us."

But Netanyahu drew a parallel between the story in the book of Esther about a "powerful Persian viceroy who plotted to destroy the Jewish people 2,000 years ago" and "another attempt by another Persian potentate to destroy us."

Netanyahu was taking advantage of what former Israeli deputy national security adviser Chuck Freilich calls the "Holocaust Syndrome" or "Masada complex" that is woven into the fabric of Israeli politics. His ranting about an Iran intending to wipe out the entire country has appealed especially to his Likud

constituency and other Israelis who believe that the outside world is “permanently hostile” to the Jewish people.

Other Israeli prime ministers have played the Holocaust card for domestic purposes too. Yitzhak Rabin actually started it during his tenure as Prime Minister from 1992 to 1995, pointing to the alleged “existential threat” from Iran in order to justify his policy of negotiating with the PLO. It was also Rabin who established the propagandist theme of Iran as a terrorist threat to Jews across five continents that Netanyahu continues to cite today.

Phantom of Genocide

Later, however, Netanyahu would use the alleged Iranian threat to do exactly the opposite: refuse to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Many former senior military and intelligence officials have never forgiven Netanyahu for what they consider a reckless policy toward Iran that they link to his failure to deal with the Palestinian problem.

The demonization of Iran has also served Netanyahu’s political interest in manipulating the policy of the U.S. government and other world powers. By portraying Iran as bent on the genocide of the Israeli Jews, Netanyahu has sought to get the Americans to threaten war against Iran, hoping for a real military confrontation that would lead to actual war with Iran that would reduce that country’s power. A key element in Netanyahu’s manipulation of the United States and other nations has been the suggestion that if they don’t take care of the problem he may be forced to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities.

He has failed to achieve that maximum objective, but he has been successful in his lesser objective of getting the United States to organize a system of “crippling sanctions” against Iran.

The portrayal of Iran as a serious threat to Israel’s existence has been serving Israeli diplomatic interests ever since Rabin reversed more than a decade of low-key policy toward the Islamic Republic and suddenly began claiming that Iran would have nuclear weapons and missiles capable of hitting Israel within three to seven years and appealed to the United States to stop it. The government even hinted in January 1995 that it might have to attack Iran’s nuclear reactors (Iran had only one) as it had done against Iraq 12 years earlier.

Rabin, who did view Iran as a threat to Israel in the long run, deliberately exaggerated that threat, as one of his advisors later acknowledged, in part to ensure that the United States would continue to see Israel as its irreplaceable ally in the Middle East and not be tempted to come to terms with Iran. In fact, as Rabin’s director of Mossad recalled two decades later, Israeli intelligence

still considered Iran to rank much lower than Iraq and other threats to Israel during Rabin's tenure, because Iran was still preoccupied with Iraq and would have no missile that could reach Israel for many years.

Mossad has also repudiated Netanyahu's political manipulation of the Iran threat. Since 2012, at least Israeli intelligence has agreed with U.S. intelligence that Iran has not made any decision to try to acquire nuclear weapons. And a series of Mossad chiefs have taken the unprecedented step openly rejecting Netanyahu's use of the term "existential threat."

Mossad Dismisses 'Existential Danger'

Tamir Pardo, the current chief of Mossad, has said that a nuclear Iran would not necessarily pose an existential threat to Israel even if it did acquire nuclear weapons. His predecessor Meir Dagan, who has made no secret of his disdain for Netanyahu's handling of policy toward Iran as dangerously reckless, said flatly in 2012, that "Israel faces no existential threat," and another previous Mossad chief, Ephraim Halevy, has also criticized Netanyahu for talking about an "existential threat" from Iran.

Interestingly, Netanyahu stopped using the term in his AIPAC and congressional speeches, while continuing to make the claim that Iran has genocidal intentions toward Israel.

Netanyahu's dishonesty on the subject of Iran is best documented by the fact that he was so persuaded by Mossad's briefing on the subject when he first became prime minister in 1996 that he appointed the Mossad briefer, Uzi Arad, as his national security adviser and abandoned the Labor government's exaggerated depiction of the threat from Iran's nuclear and missile program. For six months the Israeli government stopped claiming that Iran was threatening Israel.

What induced Netanyahu to start selling the snake oil of Iran as menace to Israel was not any new evidence of Iranian interest in nuclear weapons or hostility toward Israel. It was the fear of a rapprochement between the Clinton administration and the newly elected Khatami government and the hope of depriving Iran of what was assumed to be Russian assistance for building missiles that could reach Israel.

Netanyahu was alarmed by the signals from both Tehran and Washington in the summer of 1997 indicating interest in reducing tensions between the two countries. That would have represented a real threat to Israel's political and strategic interests, and he was determined to cut it short. Netanyahu's response was to start to begin sending messages to Iran through other governments that Israel would carry out pre-emptive strikes against Iranian missile development

sites unless it stopped its ballistic missile program.

It was a reckless tactic that would not cause Iran to stop working on missiles, but could well provoke a much tougher Iranian public posture toward Israel. That, in turn, would allow Netanyahu to put pressure on the Clinton administration to steer clear of any warming relations with Iran.

Netanyahu's indirect threats did cause Iran to focus much more on the potential threat from Israel in its missile program, making Iran and Israel strategic adversaries for the first time. Netanyahu bears personal responsibility for having created a conflict with Iran that had never existed before. But it is not the conflict that he has been alleging all these years.

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Equal Justice for Petraeus and Snowden?

The Justice Department's decision to let ex-CIA Director Petraeus off with a hand slap for giving his mistress highly sensitive secrets raises questions about the harsh punishments meted out to lower-level leakers/truth-tellers – and the threat of a long prison term for NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, writes Trevor Timm.

By Trevor Timm

The sweetheart deal the Justice Department gave to former CIA Director [David Petraeus](#) for leaking top secret information compared to the stiff jail sentences other low-level leakers have received under the Obama administration has led to renewed calls for leniency for NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. And no one makes the case better than famed whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg.

Ellsberg, the first person ever charged under the Espionage Act or any other statute for leaking the Pentagon Papers to Congress and 17 newspapers, told me on Thursday: "The factual charges against [Edward Snowden] are not more serious, as violations of the classification regulations and non-disclosure agreements, than those Petraeus has admitted to, which are actually quite spectacular."

It's hard to overstate the shocking nature of the government's case against Petraeus. The information that he gave Paula Broadwell, his friendly biographer

with whom he was then having an extramarital affair, was among the most sensitive in the U.S. government.

According to the indictment, Petraeus gave Broadwell eight black books containing “classified information regarding the identities of covert officers, war strategy, intelligence capabilities and mechanisms, diplomatic discussions, quotes and deliberative discussions from high-level National Security Council meetings and [his personal] discussions with the president of the United States.”

Much of this was Top Secret, and some was SCI (Sensitive Compartmented Information) higher than Top Secret and he admitted in his plea to lying to the FBI about his leaks, knowing that doing so was a crime in itself.

Despite the gravity of Petraeus’ actions, he agreed to a single misdemeanor guilty plea for improperly “retaining” classified information, and prosecutors agreed to recommend a sentence of two years probation and no jail time.

Compare that to the actions of Chelsea Manning, who is serving 35 years for leaking classified information. As Ellsberg noted: “Chelsea Manning had access to SCI every day where she worked in Iraq. She chose to disclose none of it, nothing higher than Secret”.

Or there’s John Kiriakou, the former CIA officer, who passed on to an investigator the names of two covert agents whose names were also never published. He received thirty months in jail and a felony conviction 2013. (As CIA director, Petraeus praised Kiriakou’s conviction just days before lying to the FBI about his own leak.) And Ellsberg himself faced 115 years for his leaks: “The Pentagon Papers I disclosed were all Top Secret. I’d been cleared for SCI too, but disclosed none of it, unlike Petraeus.”

Jeffrey Sterling, a former CIA officer, was also just convicted of leaking classified information to New York Times journalist James Risen last month, “having first revealed it to Congress, as I did”, according to Ellsberg. Sterling was convicted of felony counts under the Espionage Act, and faces sentencing at the end of April.

Ellsberg says Sterling’s “violations of security regulations were in no way more serious than what Petraeus has now admitted to,” and that, while it’s too late to do anything about his conviction, the judge should take the Petraeus plea bargain into account at his sentencing.

“If disclosing the identities of covert agents to an unauthorized person and storing them in several unauthorized locations deserves a charge with a maximum sentence of one year,” Ellsberg said, “then Edward Snowden should face not more

than that same one count.”

Snowden’s U.S. lawyer Ben Wizner made a similar point on Thursday to US News and World Report. “If Petraeus deserves exceptional treatment because of his service to the nation,” he said, “then surely the same exception should be offered to Edward Snowden, whose actions have led to a historic global debate that will strengthen free societies.”

Ellsberg told me: “Although I’m in no way authorized to negotiate on his behalf only his lawyers can do that I feel certain Snowden would come back tomorrow if he got the same deal as Petraeus. What he said to me when I visited him in Russia a few months ago is he wanted one or two years at most.”

Snowden’s main concern? “He doesn’t want to discourage other whistleblowers by accepting more prison time than that, compared to the option of exile,” according to Ellsberg.

Critics have long claimed there’s a two-tiered system of justice for leakers: low-level officials get prosecuted like spies under the Espionage Act, while the powerful like Petraeus can leak with abandon and don’t have to worry about any charges at all. In getting caught at all, Petraeus is an exception to the practice of not bringing any charges against high-level leakers – only because his leaks came to the attention of the FBI inadvertently, and they involved a large volume of exceptionally sensitive information.

The CIA directors that immediately preceded and followed Petraeus leaked top secret classified information to reporters: Leon Panetta leaked secret details of the Osama bin Laden raid to the “Zero Dark Thirty” filmmakers; and John Brennan told reporters about a double agent that disrupted a bomb plot in Yemen. While another low-level official went to jail for that story, John Brennan not only was spared from punishment, but eventually was rewarded with a promotion.

A third CIA director provides an even more direct precedent to the Petraeus case: after he resigned as director in 1996, John M Deutch was found to have stored on his uncleared personal home computer which he used for internet access information as sensitive as Petraeus’s, including covert agent identities. He was given misdemeanor plea bargain exactly like Petraeus’s, which he was about to sign when he was preemptively pardoned by President Clinton.

The government had the chance to hold Petraeus out as an example on the same felony Espionage Act charges they’ve leveled (unfairly) against every conscientious whistleblower they’ve indicted. Their answer? Leaking should no longer be a felony. Let’s make sure we hold them to that, and not only for CIA Directors.

Note: Daniel Ellsberg sits on the board of directors of Freedom of the Press Foundation along with Edward Snowden, where the author works.

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