

# The Illogic of Netanyahu's Speech

Last week, the U.S. Congress, especially the Republican majority, treated Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu as if he were the true commander in chief, a cringe-worthy moment for many Americans, but one that distracted from the illogic of what Netanyahu said, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

There was so much that was improper about one political party giving a foreign leader a privileged platform in the U.S. Congress for the purpose of undermining U.S. foreign policy, and so much understandable criticism of this improper action, that what now sounds like a responsible and "sober" thing to say, as Shai Feldman presents himself as saying, is that we should not get distracted by all the commotion over how Benjamin Netanyahu came to give his speech, even though there may be grounds for criticizing his strategy in giving the speech, but instead should take seriously the substance of what he said.

This posture sounds so reasonable that one can plausibly imagine Netanyahu and his American acolytes welcoming controversy over the unrespectable way in which the speech came about so that the substance of the speech would, by comparison, sound more respectable than it really was.

We should not be deceived by any such framing strategy. No matter how successfully we can put out of our minds the impropriety of giving any foreign leader this platform for this kind of purpose and the underhanded way the platform was given, the most sober possible appraisal of the speech is that it was (besides being in some respects a skillful oration) a scaremongering, internally inconsistent rant aimed at tying the hands of the makers of U.S. foreign policy.

President Barack Obama was stating the obvious when he remarked that Netanyahu offered no alternative to what the United States and its five foreign partners have been endeavoring to do for the past year and a half in negotiating an agreement to keep Iran's nuclear program peaceful.

Feldman states that a reading of the speech shows that "Israel's Prime Minister did not travel to Washington to prevent any deal with Iran." Of course Netanyahu didn't say that was his purpose; if he had said that, he would have been blatantly and stupidly presenting himself as an incorrigible obstructionist.

It makes much more tactical sense for him to sustain the impression that with the right terms he would accept an agreement with Iran, somewhat like how he has tried to sustain the impression that with the right terms he would accept an

agreement creating a Palestinian state. But the only plausible interpretation of Netanyahu's behavior throughout on this issue is that preventing any agreement with Tehran is precisely his objective.

Actions speak louder than words in understanding what he is trying to do, especially the action of trying hard to kill the best, and probably for the foreseeable future the only, opportunity to place restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program.

So what is supposedly the alternative formula that Netanyahu would accept? According to Netanyahu, and to Feldman, it's a "better deal." That's it; don't expect anything more specific. Of course everyone would like a "better deal"; what do you suppose the U.S. Secretary of State has been spending an enormous amount of time and effort trying to achieve in those long negotiations?

Whatever are the terms that Netanyahu supposedly would bless, all we know is that they would *not* be whatever terms emerge from the current negotiations. And given the Prime Minister's history of goalpost-moving, we have good reason to expect that no agreement, no matter what the terms, would ever get his support.

When he was displaying his cartoon bomb at the United Nations, stopping Iran's medium-level enrichment of uranium was supposedly the main concern, but he later denounced a preliminary agreement with Iran that achieved, along with other measures, exactly that objective. Once a one-year "breakout" time sounded like it would be acceptable to Netanyahu in comparison with the couple of months without an agreement, but now that the Obama administration appears to be sticking firmly to that one-year figure Netanyahu seems to want more (but just how much more we are left to wonder).

Formerly the sine qua non of any agreement of Iran was to halt the advance of the nuclear program, but now that the negotiators seem on the brink of achieving a deal on that supposedly overriding issue, Netanyahu is talking more (as Feldman himself notes) about bringing in other issues involving other forms of Iranian behavior. And so on.

According to Netanyahu, achieving a "better deal" is a simple matter of pressuring Iran with more sanctions. But the entire history of the nuclear issue and of Iran's other behavior, along with the realities of human nature, strongly suggest that this notion is a fantasy. We have direct, compelling experience of failure with this; when the sanctions screws were applied to Iran after the United States rejected the last previous opportunity to strike a deal on the subject with Tehran, the result was substantial expansion of the Iranian nuclear program over the subsequent decade.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi accurately commented that Netanyahu's lecturing about threats from Iran and about nuclear proliferation was an "insult to the intelligence of the United States." It would be an insult to the intelligence of Benjamin Netanyahu to suggest that he doesn't understand fully that there is not some "better deal" that somehow would materialize and that rejection of whatever agreement emerges from the current negotiations would mean having no agreement at all.

Feldman turns to another theme that anti-agreement forces have increasingly seized upon of late, and he tries to make Netanyahu sound reasonable about that, too. This is the certainty that an agreement will have "sunset" provisions such that Iran would not be kept in international purgatory forever.

Feldman's excuse for Netanyahu believing that Iran *should* be kept in purgatory forever is that "Iran remains committed to Israel's destruction." Any discussion of policy toward Iran that claims to be sober would be well-advised to dispose of that trope.

Iran is not committed to Israel's destruction, although it has had leaders who have used language that in the retelling and mistranslation gets so construed. Even if Iranian leaders did want to destroy Israel they realize it would be impossible for them to do so. They also realize that any attempt to do so would lead Israel to wreak far greater destruction on them in return.

With or without the tropes, the whole anti-agreement line of argument resting on sunset provisions is no more logical coming out of Netanyahu's mouth than it has been coming out of others. The principal reasons the argument doesn't make sense are nicely reviewed in John Allen Gay's dismantling of a similar line of argument from Ray Takeyh, who posited a strange scenario of the Iranian supreme leader planning to lie in ambush for a decade before springing a nuclear weapon on the world.

One of the most glaring illogicalities of the whole anti-sunset idea is that to use this as an excuse for opposing the product of the current negotiations is to say that, while assuming the worst about Iranian intentions, we would rather face the consequences of an unrestrained Iranian nuclear program today than face it after it has been under ten years of restrictions. Besides, sunset provisions are standard diplomatic stuff, even in agreements that have been reached with Evil Empires.

Feldman talks about the need to "test" Iranian behavior over time. That is exactly what any nuclear deal, with a sunset provision, would entail. Whatever the time period involved, at the end of it Iran would face all the same disincentives, involving economic sanctions and maybe even military attack,

against violating its continuing obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

In fact, if prospect theory is valid, the Iranians would feel even greater disincentive than they do now, given that such behavior would mean losing whatever economic gains they had gotten in the meantime in the form of sanctions relief.

Feldman, quoting Netanyahu, makes it sound as if there would be some open-minded “testing” of Iranian behavior, but they are not talking about observance of the provisions of a nuclear accord, and about how a decade or so of Iranian observance of the terms of the agreement would be a huge piece of evidence confirming Iran’s commitment to a future without owning nuclear weapons.

They are instead, in more goalpost-moving, talking about other Iranian behavior they say they don’t like, and declaring that Iran should be required among other things to (in Feldman’s words) “abandon ... its commitment to Israel’s destruction.” How exactly is Iran supposed to do that, especially if it is not committed to that objective in the first place? And how do you write something like that into an agreement?

Unmentioned in Feldman’s piece are the glaring inconsistencies in Netanyahu’s speech. Roger Cohen notes one of them, in which in one breath Netanyahu portrays Iran as a regional juggernaut that is “gobbling” up other countries and in a different breath says it is a “very vulnerable regime” on the brink of folding.

“Well,” asks Cohen, “which is it?” One might also note inconsistency in portrayal of Iranian leaders as, on one hand, irrational, undeterrable religious fanatics who don’t think like the rest of us and could never be trusted with dangerous weapons and, on the other hand, as people who, if faced with economic sanctions being cranked up a few more notches, would carefully count the hit to their foreign exchange earnings and make more concessions at the negotiating table. Again, which is it?

Feldman concludes with criticism of Netanyahu’s political approach that has endangered Israel’s relations with parts of the American political elite. But for U.S. citizens concerned about U.S. interests that is not the main problem in anything Netanyahu has done.

The main problem is with a foreign government trying to prevent the United States from pursuing U.S. interests and international security with all the diplomatic and other tools available to it.

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University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

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