

COMMENTARY

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The Tragic Tear in US-Israel Relations

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There is no doubt that Prime Minister Netanyahu's acceptance of House Speaker John Boehner's invitation to address a joint session of Congress on Iran is extraordinarily damaging to Israel-US relations. The damage, however, transcends the bilateral relations as it reverberates and impacts adversely on Israel's relations with scores of other countries. Netanyahu and his messenger boy, Ron Dermer (Israel's Ambassador to Washington), thought they had cleverly outmanoeuvred the White House by concocting such a cynical ploy, but they will soon realize – if they haven't already – that they have sunk into such disrepute that it will haunt them for the rest of their political careers.

Many Congressional Democrats are incensed by Netanyahu's diplomatic transgression. They have decided to drop new legislation to impose additional sanctions on Iran until after the March 24 deadline, when an agreement will have to be achieved in principle between Iran and the P5+1. By his own short-sightedness, Netanyahu risked the bipartisan Congressional support of Israel and ended up with precisely the opposite of what he wished to achieve.

Irrespective of whom the President is and which political party he is from, Americans have high esteem for the Executive Office of the President. Netanyahu has not only snubbed Obama, but dishonoured the office that holds such awesome constitutional powers, which is apparently beyond the grasp of an arrogant caretaker prime minister.

No leader with any self-respect would have dared to do what Netanyahu has brazenly done. Even if Netanyahu ends up cancelling the visit, the damage to Israel has already been done, while inflicting extreme harm to the US' strategic interests.

The repercussions of Netanyahu's ill-conceived and poorly-executed scheme are numerous, which only a reckless person could fail to consider.

The erosion in the bilateral relationship between Israel and the US will only harden the position of Israel's staunch enemies, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, who will seek to exploit it. Indeed, the greater the tension between Israel and its sole defender, the greater the resistance will be from Israel's enemies, as they see no reason to relent or be flexible.

America's European allies, including the UK, France, and many of the Scandinavian countries, who have serious disagreements with Israel's policies on the settlements and the continuing occupation, have not taken serious punitive actions against Israel, only because of American urging not to do so. They will now feel more emboldened to go after Israel in the international arena—giving support to BDS and seeking other punitive measures as they see fit.

For the Arab states who believe that the US is in Israel's pocket, Netanyahu's defiance of the White House only confirms their belief, especially as they will likely witness several standing ovations (albeit undeserving and contrived) from the floor of the House of Representatives during Netanyahu's speech.

This will not only further undermine US interests in the Middle East, but will also erode America's influence on the leading Arab countries that can pressure the Palestinians to make important concessions to Israel, especially in the peace process.

As Senator John McCain of Arizona, speaking on CNN's "State of the Union," said about the state of US-Israeli relations, "It's the worst that I've ever seen in my lifetime, and that in itself is a tragedy."

There are those typically arrogant Israelis who have no clue how critical the US' political, military, and economic support is to Israel's very survival, and who take America's support for granted.

Even if Israel could manage without American financial aid and somehow survive without military support, it cannot endure without America's crucial political backing, which is no longer a given because of Netanyahu's six years of defiance and deceit.

I want every Israeli to think for one moment what will happen if the US votes in favour, or even abstains, the next time the Palestinians push for a UNSC resolution to establish a state based on the 1967 borders—which they will be encouraged to reintroduce in the wake of the US-Israeli crisis.

Within a few days, more than one hundred countries would recognize it. Israel would become an occupier of another state, subject to massive international sanctions. Many countries would

withdraw their ambassadors, further isolating Israel and making it a pariah state. Scores of its officials would be threatened with facing the International Criminal Court for human rights violations.

There are those Israeli fools who suggest that Netanyahu is absolutely correct that Obama is a paper tiger and will not do anything against Iran. Suppose this is true—who will do something about Iran? Netanyahu? He has been bluffing for years, and even if he wasn't bluffing, can Israel do it on its own and pray that the US comes to its rescue?

Notwithstanding the continuing American public support of Israel, other than refusing to meet Netanyahu, the President should take punitive action to convey to the Israelis that their leaders cannot commit such political lapses with impunity.

At a minimum, the White House should declare Ambassador Dermer, who should have known better as a former political consultant for the Republicans, persona non grata for his conniving and deliberate breach of diplomatic protocol to prevent such sad episodes from ever happening again for Israel's own sake.

Netanyahu must remember that Obama knows that if Tehran comes any closer to reaching the breakout point in its nuclear weapons program, the US will shoulder the responsibility because only the US can do something about it.

Considering the turmoil sweeping the Middle East and the danger Israel faces, any Israeli leader must safeguard Israel's relations with the US because its national security depends on the US' commitment.

Although relations between Israelis and Americans, as people-to-people, is strong and more enduring than the transient relations between the two heads of state, a misguided leader such as Netanyahu has, nevertheless, inflicted probably irreparable damage to the ties between the two countries, which only sober and wise Israeli leaders can mend.

The Israelis must deny Netanyahu another term in office because should he win, his victory will demonstrate that they are following a blind shepherd who is systematically destroying Israel's vital relations with the US at a time when Israel is in dire need of America's unmitigated backing.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. **Web Link:** <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/tragic-tear-us-israel-relations/>

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