

# COMMENTARY

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## **Netanyahu's Speech Adds Injury to Insult**

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Following Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to a joint session of Congress, the question being asked is whether the speech will adversely or positively impact the negotiations between the P5 +1 and Iran, led by the US. The simple answer is neither. From everything we have seen and know, the Obama administration remains committed to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and any agreed-upon deal must meet that objective. The notion that President Obama will settle on a bad deal only to score a major foreign policy success is obscene. No one knows better than Obama that under any circumstance, the US will bear the responsibility and suffer the consequences of any bad deal.

Netanyahu only confirmed the US' ultimate responsibility when he stated so 'valiantly' that "Even if Israel has to stand alone, Israel will stand," quickly adding, "But I know that Israel does not stand alone. I know that America stands with Israel."

If this is the case, where does Netanyahu's bravado come from? As long as the US remains the ultimate guarantor of Israel's security, no prime minister can afford to insult the President of the US by accusing him of potentially striking a bad deal when the provisions of such a deal have not been concluded in the first place.

Netanyahu has legitimate cause to sound the alarm about the threat Iran poses. His speech, however, will do little to improve the substance of any agreement. What is more injurious is his insinuation that Obama will accede to a "bad deal" even though it will be to Israel's detriment.

To refer to any deal in terms of bad or good is simplistic and suggests little understanding of the reality in the context of how such a deal can be struck.

There is no perfect deal. Any complicated deal requires extensive negotiations and entails significant concessions by both sides. I would happily subscribe to the principal requirements of the deal Netanyahu boldly advocates, if it had the smallest chance of materializing.

Such a deal would require Iran to dismantle all of its nuclear facilities, destroy its capability to enrich uranium, scrap its intercontinental missile program, end its aggression against its neighbours, stop supporting terrorism around the world, and cease to threaten Israel's existence.

Should Iran refuse to accept these terms, Netanyahu's recipe is simply to impose more crippling sanctions to bring Tehran to its knees. He assumes that since the sanctions compelled Iran to come to the negotiating table, a new set of crippling sanctions will force it to abandon its nuclear program altogether.

This is where Netanyahu is woefully mistaken; he has not (nor does he seem to care to) carefully assessed Iran's perception of itself, the regime's religious convictions, its geopolitical situation, past experience with the West, competing centres of power, national pride and sense of vulnerability. If he did consider all that and some, he would have come to a different conclusion.

Iran will never accept these terms and will never crawl to get relief from any old or new sanctions, regardless of how much pain and suffering it will further endure.

The choice then is between making an imperfect deal that stands a good chance of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, or no deal that would certainly leave Iran free to pursue its nuclear program.

This would leave the US and Israel with only one option—to strike Iran's nuclear facilities—which will unquestionably instigate a regional conflagration with horrifying implications, which Netanyahu, it seems, is unable to imagine.

Since the US will ultimately have to take the lead in striking Iran and bear the consequences, doesn't Obama have the moral responsibility to try the diplomatic route first?

Netanyahu is correct in suggesting that the traces of Iran's mischief are visible throughout the Middle East, including its financing of jihadist groups and other violent extremists like Hamas and Hezbollah, its meddling in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and having a direct hand in the killing of Americans and other foreign nationals.

Precisely because of that, every effort should be made to reach an agreement which, at a minimum, tempers Iran's flagrant destructive regional activities under constant American pressure and prevents it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Other than criticizing the would-be deal, Netanyahu didn't offer any other practical option that would prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Instead of demanding the untenable, Netanyahu should focus on the attainable and work with the President to tighten up the deal rather than further damaging Israel's vital relations with the US and undermining the President's unparalleled efforts to rein in Iran's nuclear program.

To that end, Netanyahu should support the President to ensuring the following, albeit most of these provisions still are on the negotiating table:

The new agreement should remain effective, preferably for 20 years but at least 15 years.

The lifting of sanctions should be gradual and tied to Iran's compliance with every provision of the agreement and implemented in phases, based on predetermined reciprocal arrangement.

The most rigorous monitoring regime is put in place leaving no room for Iran to cheat, including unfettered, unrestrictive, and unannounced inspections that cover every nuclear facility.

Iran must stop its research and development of intercontinental missiles.

The Fordo plant near the city of Qom and the Arak heavy water facilities must be disabled and remain so under strict international monitoring.

The specific number of centrifuges left in the Natanz nuclear plant must predetermine the quantity and quality of enriched uranium for medical and other peaceful use.

The US should aim for the development of a regional defence strategy—a nuclear umbrella—that would cover Israel and all of America's Arab allies in the region to deter Iran from threatening any state in the area.

Iran must end its existential threats against Israel while the Israeli government would commit to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is one of Tehran's main contentions against Israel.

Finally, Netanyahu should appeal to the Iranian people and distinguish them from their autocratic government in an effort to change the Iranian people's perception of Israel by clearly stating that Israel has no animosity toward the Iranians and that Israel would be gratified to restore the historic ties between Jews and Persians.

Netanyahu should remember that regardless of how determined the Mullahs are to acquire nuclear weapons, staying in power is more important, especially if the deal strengthens their hold on power and they are assured that the US is not seeking regime change.

Iran is a significant regional power capable of playing a destructive or constructive role. The prospective deal could open the door for Iran to become a positive player, which is certainly preferable than having no deal that forces Iran to resort to any unsavoury measure to serve its national interests.

It is sad that instead of making a significant contribution to the negotiations with Iran, Netanyahu came to the US to play politics. He gambled with US-Israel relations, only to earn some political points back home two weeks before the elections.

He pretends to be Israel's savior when all he seeks is to save his political career.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/netanyahus-speech-adds-injury-to-insult/>

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