Netanyahu and the Republicans

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s planned speech to Congress on Iran has been widely criticized, in Israel and in the United States. The unimportant criticism focuses on the way the event was concocted: House Speaker John Boehner and Ron Dermer, the Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., planned it in secret for weeks, then sprang it on the State Department and White House (which gave Dermer an opening to blame the Speaker’s office “for not notifying” the Administration). President Obama has declined to meet with Netanyahu; Secretary of State John Kerry has not condescended to meet with Dermer. The speech is scheduled for March 3rd, two weeks before the Israeli election, and will coincide with the yearly mega-conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), where Netanyahu, as in past years, will be received as a champion.

The more important criticism of Boehner’s invitation rests on a fiction: that Netanyahu, the leader of an embattled ally, must depend on bipartisan American support for his country to confront its regional enemies. Netanyahu, in this story, has been reckless in making common cause with Republicans, a move that has inadvertently strengthened Obama’s hand in opposing a new Iran-sanctions bill. Democratic senators who had indicated support for the bill—which its largely Republican sponsors had hoped to pass over Obama’s objections, while negotiations with Iran are still ongoing—are now rallying to the President. Obama now almost certainly has enough votes to prevent an override of his veto, should it come to that. Vice-President Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Minority Leader of the House, are hinting that they and many other Democrats may not even show up for Netanyahu’s speech. The moral of this story, presumably, is that the U.S. and Israel have distinct interests when it comes to Iran, and that both Netanyahu and his Republican hosts have erred in trying to blur them. Above all, they should not have defied a sitting President, who has the constitutional authority to manage foreign policy.

Some of the commentators you’d most expect to support Netanyahu have expressed shock at the planned speech (although they sound a little like Captain Renault discovering gambling at Rick’s Café). Fox News’s Chris Wallace complained, “For Netanyahu to come here and side with Boehner against Obama on Iran seems to me like very dicey politics.” Jeffrey Goldberg, who made the case for the imminence of Iranian nuclear capacity, is now skeptical: “His recent actions suggest he doesn’t quite know what he’s doing.” Other new Netanyahu critics believe that he does. Dan Margalit, most often a Netanyahu cheerleader at the tabloid Israel Hayom, told Israel’s Channel 10 that Netanyahu’s “trip is not being taken for the sake of the interests of the state of Israel—rather for the needs of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud, for the Likud election campaign.” According to these observers, Netanyahu is injecting partisanship into what should be a bipartisan issue in both Israel and the United States, and is doing harm to Israel by showing the American Presidency disrespect.

There is a measure of truth to this story, but it obscures a more significant reality. In their wars of ideas and political networks, Netanyahu’s Likud and his American supporters are an integral part of the Republican Party’s camp, and Israel is too involved in the American political landscape
and defense establishment for Netanyahu to be considered as distant as a foreign leader.

Netanyahu and Obama are at odds not only diplomatically, in their positions on Iran, but in their affiliated political parties and overarching strategic visions. Dermer once worked for the Republican strategist Frank Luntz; before moving to Israel, he helped to design the Contract With America. Netanyahu has been a member of the Republicans’ neoconservative circle since the Reagan years; when I interviewed him in 1998, during his first term as Prime Minister, he took up the first ten minutes reading me a column by Charles Krauthammer.

Before the 2012 U.S. election, Netanyahu received Mitt Romney in Jerusalem in a series of encounters arranged by his adviser Dan Senor, once a spokesman for George W. Bush’s Iraq czar, L. Paul Bremer, and the co-author of a gushing book about Israel’s entrepreneurial economy. These encounters were clearly calculated to undermine the President’s reelection efforts. Netanyahu, moreover, openly solicits financial support from Sheldon Adelson, who is estimated to have donated at least a hundred million dollars to Romney’s electoral efforts, and who has spent tens of millions subsidizing the freely distributed Israel Hayom, which boosts Netanyahu and tears down his opponents. Netanyahu may fancy himself a Winston Churchill, warning the U.S. about Hitler’s threat to Britain. Instead, all this makes you wonder if he isn’t more like Texas Governor Rick Perry, warning about the threat posed to his state by the President’s executive order on immigration.

AIPAC has historically prided itself on fostering bipartisanship, and its conference in March will feature Democratic and Administration officials eager to remain in its good graces. (AIPAC members distribute roughly twenty-five million dollars in campaign contributions.) But, as Connie Bruck reported in the magazine last fall, its ability to present support for Netanyahu’s government as a bipartisan issue has been compromised. Polls by J Street, an advocacy group founded, in 2008, as a liberal counterbalance to AIPAC, have shown that seventy per cent of American Jews persist in voting Democratic, and that about an equal number would be open to Obama pressuring Israel, as well as Palestinians, to reach an agreement. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told me that when he advanced negotiations with Mahmoud Abbas, AIPAC worked to undermine him. AIPAC is now sponsoring an effort to cut funding to the Palestinian Authority, on the grounds that Abbas’s efforts to force Hamas to join a unity government make him complicit with the group.

AIPAC itself isn’t fully responsible for its conservative tilt, J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami told me. “What you have here is a group of partisan operatives, only loosely affiliated with AIPAC,” Ben-Ami said. “They are pulling threads that bind the Republicans and the Likud together.” “By simply echoing successive Likud governments that call for toughness and that engage in anti-Palestinian rhetoric,” AIPAC has ended up “in opposition to Obama and a good part of the Democratic Party, lining up with Republican policies, regardless of partisan intent.”

Netanyahu’s invitation to speak before Congress has precipitated a crisis with the White House, but the clarity it offers comes as a relief. The strategic conflict is not between American and Israeli interests but rather between rival conceptions of how the two countries should exert and coordinate their respective national powers, the United States globally, and Israel regionally. Each conception has organized advocates in each country—roughly, the Likud with Republicans
and Israeli center-left parties with Democrats. One leftist Israeli party is petitioning the election commission to prevent Netanyahu’s speech from being broadcast.

Obama has kept Netanyahu from bombing Iran, but their differences have hardly been resolved. Increasingly, these conform to party lines. Obama and Kerry take what Steven Simon, the former senior director for Middle East and North Africa affairs in the Obama White House, has called a classically realist approach to global affairs. “Obama was both willing to deal with Egyptian President Morsi and also refused to label his overthrow as a coup, subordinating his concerns about Egyptian domestic political arrangements to a strategic concern for regional stability,” Simon told me. Similarly, the realist move for Israel, with regard to the Palestinian territories, would be to strike a deal that reduces the risk of their being inflamed by neighboring conflicts. Obama, Kerry, and many Democrats are joined in these views not only by Labor Party and centrist leaders but also by former Mossad leaders Efraim Halevy, Meir Dagan, and Amiram Levin, and by Yuval Diskin and Yaakov Perry, former heads of the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency.

Simon adds that Obama’s realism is reflected in his management of the Iranian threat, which isn’t popular in Netanyahu’s circle but is certainly understood by many Israelis. All Israelis are insistent that Iran’s proxy Hezbollah not threaten Israeli positions on the Golan Heights. But, on the question of how to respond to Iran’s nuclear program, there are differences of degree. Realists generally suppose that the value of nuclear weapons lies in deterring their use by others; they don’t consider them useful for much else, although, Simon added, “One cannot be sure that Iranian officials will think them valueless during the period when they adjust to having them.” In fact, Iran may be emboldened to act rashly, believing that its nuclear capability gives it some sort of immunity against a punishing conventional response from Israel, which could spin out of control. Obama’s repeated assertions that the U.S. would not permit Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon reflect this concern.

Obama seems sincerely determined to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear capacity, which would trigger a regional arms race. Unlike Netanyahu and the Republicans, however, he wants to play out the negotiations without undermining his interlocutors’ standing with Iranian hardliners. He knows that the other side has hardliners—that is, an internal politics to which he needs to be sensitive. He obviously supposes, but cannot be so undiplomatic as to say, that the best way to lower the flame under Iran’s nuclear program, and eventually to undermine the regime’s Islamist xenophobia, is to penetrate the country with Western investment (as happened in China in the seventies). Netanyahu says that he is adamantly against Iran gaining a “threshold” capability. Obama, reasonably, is less concerned. He knows that he has the military means to prevent an Iranian bomb, even at the eleventh hour. Why bring things to the point of war before it becomes absolutely necessary?

“I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says, unless you adopt an unwavering, pro-Likud approach to Israel, that you are anti-Israel—and that can’t be the measure of our friendship,” Obama told a Cleveland audience in 2008. He has not said anything so sharp since then. What’s stopping him now? The Netanyahu speech has brought the Likud alliance with the Republicans into the open, and to his doorstep. Why shouldn’t the Obama
Administration and the Democratic leadership make their alliance with Netanyahu’s opponents just as plain?

The Israeli election is six weeks away, tight as a drum, and will be decided by unaffiliated and not very subtle voters. As I wrote in December, Netanyahu is stoking swing voters’ fear of Arab enmity. His chief opponents, Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni, are provoking their concern about global isolation and wrecked relations with Washington. Hezbollah and Hamas are inadvertently helping Netanyahu. Are not Obama, Kerry, and the Democrats—by holding to the fiction of bipartisanship, and refusing to embrace European initiatives to pressure Netanyahu’s benighted government—unnecessarily doing the same?

Bernard Avishai is the author of “The Tragedy of Zionism” and “The Hebrew Republic.” He is a visiting professor of government at Dartmouth College and an adjunct professor of business at the Hebrew University.