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Too Far

Even Israeli Hawks Are Angry at Netanyahu

Jonathan Alter / March 1, 2015

A group of military commanders and political observers are furious that Bibi would play politics with Israel's most important strategic asset: its relationship with the United States.

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivers his apocalyptic message to Congress on Iranian nukes on Tuesday, he will seem the personification of the Israeli hawk.

But back home in Israel, where I've been reporting for the last two weeks, there's a strong sense even among hard-liners that Netanyahu has blown Israeli foreign policy and is making his nation weaker by imperiling its relationship with its most critical patron, the United States.

As Netanyahu's plane was in the air Sunday en route to Washington, a group called Commanders for Israel's Security, made up of 180 retired generals and national security officials—including three former heads of Mossad—denounced the prime minister's trip. "The present policy constitutes a destruction of the alliance with the U.S.," said retired Major General Amnon Reshef, a hero of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, who co-founded the group.

On the eve of the visit, Michael Oren, a distinguished historian who was an ambassador to the United States under Netanyahu but has since broken with him, denounced the trip as a "cynical political move."

None of this has stopped Bibi from playing the fear card in the run-up to the March 17 Israeli election.

In one clever Facebook ad (Under Israeli law, all ads can only be posted videos, not on TV, until the very end of the campaign), the prime minister rings the doorbell of a startled couple about to go out for the evening and tells them he's the only candidate they can trust to babysit their children.

Whether or not Bibi wins—and one of his closest advisers admitted to me that it will be very close—he has sent U.S.-Israeli relations to their lowest point since President Dwight Eisenhower threatened sanctions against Israel during the 1956 Suez crisis. (The conflicts with Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and later Jim Baker were small by comparison). Worse, Netanyahu has lessened the very influence over the Iranian nuclear negotiations that he so dramatically seeks.

This is about more than the recent flap over Netanyahu's trip, which began when the current Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., American-born Ron Dermer, a former GOP operative, infuriated President Obama and the Democrats by arranging for Boehner to invite Netanyahu to speak before a joint session of Congress without informing the White House.

The military backlash goes back at least to last October, when Commanders for Israel's Security was founded out of concern that Netanyahu's government is weakening the State of Israel.

While the retired generals and spymasters belong to various Israeli political parties, they are all squarely in the Anyone But Bibi camp in the upcoming election. Netanyahu's Likud Party has no comparable list of national security heavyweights on its side.

The main hawkish rap on Bibi is that he has been an ineffective leader. After years of claiming he would take down Hamas, he had an opportunity last summer after the attacks on Israel from Gaza and failed. The commanders believe his embrace of King Abdullah of Jordan on confronting ISIS was ham-handed and largely unproductive. Most important, his failure to deal with what Israelis call "The Situation"—the military occupation of the West Bank—has made Israel an outcast nation rather than the "start-up nation" it aspires to be.

"Very few generals here are on the right," Ephraim Sneh, a retired general and former senior Cabinet minister, told me last week. Sneh, who was part of the team in Uganda that freed 102 hostages in the famous 1976 "Raid on Entebbe" (where Netanyahu's older brother, Jonathan, was killed), isn't shy about expressing his views on Bibi: "He succeeds in deceiving most of the people most of the time."

Sneh is a strong supporter of Isaac Herzog, Netanyahu's main opponent in the election, but he's better known as a hard-liner on Iran who has been on record since 1998 supporting a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. He thinks Netanyahu is sabotaging what he claims to be his own get-tough policy.

"We don't differ with the government on the demands [on Iran], but we totally reject how Bibi is handling it," Sneh says."Bibi sacrificed good relations with the U.S. to keep the status quo on the Palestinians. He poked the [Obama] Administration in the eye on settlements just to appease right-wingers. He made the security of Israel hostage to the settlers."

Commanders for Israel's Security, who represent a collective 6,000 years of military experience, believes that other Arab states are eager to cooperate with Israel on

confronting Iran and ISIS but won't do so as long as the occupation of the West Bank continues.

While those Arabs states don't actually care much about the Palestinians—and would no doubt find another reason to criticize Israel after the occupation of the West Bank ends—they can't announce publicly that they are cooperating with Israel against Iran and ISIS without major progress toward a two-state solution.

"If we don't have an agreement with the Palestinians on dividing the territories, we cannot build a regional front against Iran and against radicals in general," says Sneh, who believes the fight against Islamic extremism over the next several years constitutes a "Fourth World War." (The Cold War was number three).

So why hasn't Netanyahu kept his national security priorities straight? "Netanyahu never had the guts to secure a Jewish democratic Israel," says **Gilead Sher**, who was Israel's top negotiator in 2000 when Prime Minister Ehud Barak and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat came tantalizingly close to a peace deal with the help of President Bill Clinton.

Sher's point is that Netanyahu only looks like a strong prime minister. He reminded me that five prime ministers—Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, and Ehud Olmert—were all self-confident and tough enough leaders to take risks for a two-state solution. Despite nine years in office (a three-year stint in the 1990s and the last six years), Bibi is not among them.

While last summer's Gaza War has obviously set back peace efforts—at least for now—that doesn't excuse Netanyahu's decision to reject a long tradition of Israel staying out of American domestic politics.

It's not a coincidence that Bibi's biggest backer is Sheldon Adelson, who owns the largest (and free of charge) newspaper in Israel and uses it as a daily propaganda rag for Netanyahu. In 2012, when Adelson pumped $100 million into Mitt Romney's campaign, Netanyahu—apparently reading bad polls—all but endorsed Romney, despite the fact that three-quarters of American Jews—most of whom are strong supporters of Israel—voted for Obama.

Obama's reaction to Bibi's behavior has been: No good deed goes unpunished. Every time the president would do something positive for Israel—like vetoing a Security Council resolution—Netanyahu would find a way to stick a thumb in his eye, like violating his promise of a settlement freeze at the exact moment when Vice President Joe Biden was visiting Israel in 2010.

The personal tension between the leaders is unprecedented in the 67-year history of the State of Israel. It is also unwarranted by the facts. Bibi has privately trashed and publicly undermined an American president whose administration has provided more support for Israel (including critical spare parts for the Iron Dome missile defense system that protected the country from Hamas rockets) than any president since Richard Nixon. In 2013, Obama allowed Israel to become the first country other than the U.S. to operate the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the most advanced military aircraft in the world.

Some of Bibi's antics are almost comical. When the president was photographed talking to the prime minister on the phone with his feet up on his desk Lincoln-style, Netanyahu told associates that he had been intentionally insulted. This was preposterous. Arabs, not Jews, consider showing shoe soles an insult and Obama obviously intended no disrespect. Later, when Obama cut a meeting short to have dinner with his children (an inviolable family commitment when he's not on the road), Bibi again acted as if he had suffered a grievous blow at the hands of the president. Before the flap over the congressional address, the most visible sign of the tension between the two men came in May of 2011 when Netanyahu sat in the Oval Office and lectured Obama in a patronizing fashion about history in front of the press.

From that point on, Obama's dislike of Netanyahu was an open secret in Washington.

"The most important strategic asset for Israel is the special relationship with the United States. Full Stop," Sher says. "Intentionally ruining our relationship with our best ally in the world and most significant ally on this issue [Iran] is so counterproductive. What we have now is exactly the opposite of what we need."

Sher, a senior fellow and head of the Center for Applied Negotiations at the **Institute for National Security Studies** in Tel Aviv, says Israel's interests would have been better served by trying to fine-tune the Iran deal with the White House behind the scenes.

This was never likely, considering Netanyahu's attitude toward the most recent American peace initiative, which failed badly last year. One of his top foreign policy advisers, who didn't want to talk on the record, claimed to me that the prime minister was friendly with Secretary of State John Kerry and did everything he could to help his efforts.

This spin was greeted with snorts of derision by my sources in both Washington and Israel, where officials know that Kerry, like Obama, has given up on Bibi, who consistently undercut his negotiations.

While its impact on the election remains unclear, Netanyahu's failure to tend to the American relationship has become a big topic of conversation in Israel. "Every time Bibi meddles in American politics he gets it wrong," Alon Pinchas, the former consul-general in New York, told me. "When he was prime minister in the '90s, he hung out with Newt Gingrich and Ralph Reed. It's not smart to act like he's running to be the Republican President of West Jerusalem."

American Jews are caught in the middle in a way that leaves them deeply uncomfortable. "Bibi forcing American Jews to side with either him or Obama is surfacing the dual loyalty issue," Pinchas says.

The longtime mayor of Tel Aviv, Ron Huldai, assessed the stakes for me if the relationship deteriorates further. "Once the U.S. is not behind us, we'll see a boycott," he says. If that happens, Israel will be forced into steep concessions that could genuinely jeopardize its security.

How low can the U.S.-Israeli relationship go? National Security Adviser Susan Rice's recent description of Netanyahu's behavior as "destructive" signals that serious consequences could lie ahead. When Rice was the U.S. ambassador to the UN, she vetoed Security Council resolutions critical of Israel that consisted of nothing more than comments that the president and other American officials have made in the past.

Soon enough, the U.S. might decline to exercise its veto and chart a new, more balanced foreign policy in the Mideast, as it has recently in Cuba. With Obama safely re-elected and less concerned about the reaction, there's little that AIPAC or Adelson or Netanyahu could do about it.

Such are the consequences of an Israeli prime minister who talks tough but acts in ways that weaken his country.

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