



INSS Insight No. 261, May 26, 2011

From Bar-Ilan to Capitol Hill: PM Netanyahu's Political Survival

Oded Eran

Prime Minister Netanyahu's address to the May 24, 2011 joint session of the United States Congress was the third in a series of speeches in which he presented his position on the Palestinian issue. The first was given at Bar-Ilan University in June 2009; the second was delivered on May 16, 2011 before the Knesset. The differences between the three fundamental addresses, as slight as they may seem, indicate a cautious and measured development and represent an attempt to confront two kinds of pressures – internal and those coming from the international community. Internally, Prime Minister Netanyahu must deal with pressures coming on the one hand from moderates in his Cabinet such as Ehud Barak, his junior but important partner in the delicate Israeli political balance, and on the other hand, from the right wing represented by Yisrael Beiteinu and the more nationalistic camp within the Likud itself.

The life expectancy of Israeli governments is two years. Netanyahu, who has already passed this mark, stands a reasonable chance of serving a full term in office and reaching the elections in November 2013 as Prime Minister. The basic operating assumption in analyzing Netanyahu's speeches must be that his political survivability is a primary objective among his considerations.

Netanyahu's interactions with President Obama in the past week must also be seen in light of his attempt to balance between internal political pressures and external needs. The immediate petulant response to Obama's statement that the territorial solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must be based on the 1967 lines, along with agreed-upon land swaps, was formulated primarily for internal consumption. In his address to the joint session of Congress, Netanyahu made an effort to repair his relations with Obama, praising him and quoting Obama's own words, though not of course regarding the 1967 lines. The question that remains open is if in his speech to Congress Netanyahu gave Obama enough wherewithal to preempt the debate and resolution at the General Assembly in September. One should also read Netanyahu's speech to the Congress in light of politicians' natural tendency to adopt a wait-and-see approach until the political map becomes clearer. The developments in the Arab world do not explain Netanyahu's past

hesitancy, but they must be considered in analyzing his present positions. In other words, the uncertainty and fluidity of Middle East politics may partially account for Netanyahu's current tentativeness, although Netanyahu could nonetheless have added components to his speech without endangering his political survivability.

On the other hand, internationally Prime Minister Netanyahu needs the support of President Obama and central leaders in Europe, who are pressuring him to adopt a moderate policy. This would help them prevent the almost inevitable discussion and resolution at this coming September's annual General Assembly meeting on the recognition of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

In the June 2009 speech at Bar-Ilan, Netanyahu made his willingness to accept the two-states-for-two-peoples principle contingent on Palestinian recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, and on the demilitarized nature of the Palestinian state, including Israeli control of the airspace.

In his speech before the Knesset, Netanyahu expanded and added to the Bar-Ilan formula: the solution of the Palestinian refugee problem would be found outside Israel's borders and the Jewish settlement blocs would remain under Israeli sovereignty. On the issue of security, Netanyahu added a new element to the Bar-Ilan speech, namely the long term presence of the IDF along the Jordan River.

The speech on Capitol Hill likewise included some new points, inserted notwithstanding criticism from his supporters on the right after his speech in the Knesset. Netanyahu repeated before the Congress his formula on the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, spelling out that a number of them would remain east of the Israeli-Palestinian border after the signing of an agreement. Netanyahu came close to the formula suggested by some in the Labor Party (in its pre-split incarnation) and Kadima whereby the size of the Palestinian state would be identical to the size of the pre-1967 West Bank. Netanyahu declared, "We will be very generous on the size of a future Palestinian state."

An interesting innovation regarding Jerusalem was added to the speech before Congress, one that will raise questions and demands for clarification. After repeating the traditional Israeli stance, Netanyahu added: "I know that this is a difficult issue for Palestinians. But I believe with creativity and goodwill a solution can be found." This should not be read as recognition of parts of East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state, rather as an acknowledgment of the sensitivity of the issue and the willingness to seek creative solutions. This is most definitely an innovative statement compared to Netanyahu's previous laconic stance on Jerusalem.

Benjamin Netanyahu again proved that he is a politician who craves survival. The formulae he used in his address to the joint session of Congress will allow him to survive beyond the normal life expectancy of Israeli governments. The attempt of his party's right

wing to handcuff him has failed. In an article in the New York Times just before Netanyahu's visit to Washington, MK Danny Danon of the Likud proposed that Israel annex Judea and Samaria should the Palestinians go to the UN. There is no doubt that Danon and those who share his position are bitterly disappointed by Netanyahu's speech in which he made it clear that Israel and the Palestinians share the land even though it is the ancestral home of the Jewish people. The Israeli left is also disappointed because Netanyahu avoided talking about the 1967 lines as the basis for negotiations and the need to divide Jerusalem. However, Netanyahu was not addressing either of those camps, and they are not the ones who would bring him down in his second term in office. The one who should be worried is the Knesset opposition leader and head of the Kadima party, Tzipi Livni. Since the Bar-Ilan speech, Netanyahu has steadily adopted the positions of the Israel consensus. This threatens Livni's status as the representative of the silent majority that is willing to accept a Palestinian state and make compromises, including the evacuation of Jewish settlements, but still doubts the sincerity of the Palestinians' intentions.

At the G-8 summit in France, heads of state will discuss much weightier issues than the crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The Israeli Prime Minister did not provide them with a magic formula to prevent the discussion in the General Assembly this coming September. Perhaps it provided them with an excuse not to support the resolution that will be submitted. One must not assume, therefore, that Netanyahu is not worried by what might happen at the UN as a result of the resolution that might be adopted. It does, however, mean that Netanyahu, as a politician, is looking ahead at three Septembers – 2011, 2012, and 2013 – in which he may still serve as the Prime Minister of Israel.

