

NETANYAHU'S CONGRESS SPEECH. WHAT'S THE NEXT IN ISRAEL-US RELATIONS?

Adina-Elena Cincu

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The decision of the Republican House Speaker, John Boehner to invite Israeli Prime-Minister to give a speech in Congress without first notifying the White House, an extremely unusual decision, was interpreted especially by the Democrats and the White House officials as a concerted effort to undermine Barack Obama's ability to negotiate a comprehensive nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The fact that Boehner extended the invitation without consulting the White House and after strongly criticizing Barack Obama for not paying sufficient attention to the „grave threats radical Islam and Iran pose to the american security and way of life” (*BBC News*), and that Benjamin Netanyahu accepted its invitation caused a major political controversy in the US.

During a joint session of the US Congress, the Israeli prime-minister expressed his deep concerns regarding the risks of a potentially „bad deal” (*New York Times*) the Obama administration and the other five international powers, France, UK, Russia, China, Germany might agree with Iran regarding its nuclear program. Netanyahu firmly rejects any cooperation with Iran on its nuclear program, suggesting instead an alternative way to this cooperative framework of talks, an alternative that would include toughening the sanctions, thus obtaining what Israeli leaders have strongly promoted during the last decade: the delay of the development of Iranian nuclear ambitions. Such a drastic opposition to the peaceful enrichment of uranium clearly stipulated within the Non-Proliferation Treaty to which Iran is part, it would have only enhanced political divisions and made the negotiation process a lot more difficult. The deal being currently negotiated between the global powers and Teheran seeks to expand and regulate Iran's nuclear program in order to protect against the possibility of nuclear weapons development, a goal that the Islamic Republic of Iran has strongly disavowed.

Barack Obama refused to meet with Israeli prime-minister during his visit in Washington, accusing the position expressed in his speech as nothing new, thus reaffirming the belief that in what regards the concerted efforts of the international community of reaching a comprehensive deal with Iran regarding its nuclear intentions, the Israeli political and security establishment still remains deeply rigid and not offering any „viable alternatives”. Netanyahu did not bring any new arguments about Iran's nuclear program that have not been heard before from the Israeli political elites, he has not proposed new ideas and approaches, nor did he sketch the image of how a good deal with Iran would look like, „all rhetoric, no action”.

Netanyahu insisted instead on reaching a deal „that would link the lifting of those restrictions to Iran's ceasing its sponsorship of terrorism around the world, its aggression against its neighbors and its calls for Israeli destruction”(Times of Israel). The Israeli political establishment firmly believes that current negotiations with Iran that could end up with signing a deal that will allow an easing of the international sanctions imposed on the Iranian state will only have a strong negative impact on the regional security in the Middle East and in the entire world, if it is not clearly accompanied by clear and stringent safeguards that will impede the

developing of nuclear weapons by Iran. The main reason why the US and its allies don't want Iran to develop a nuclear weapon is that Iran, through the voice of its ex-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad vehemently opposed to the idea of Israeli statehood and vowed to destroy it, repeatedly ignoring UN demands for it to curtail nuclear development needed to build weapons of mass destruction. Allowing Iran to develop nuclear capabilities without a strong international supervision and involvement, is still believed to be a grave danger, independent of the new foreign approach exposed by the current Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, of his willingness to negotiate and cooperate in order to find a peaceful, comprehensive and just solution to the nuclear program. Netanyahu underlined that allowing Iran to keep its nuclear infrastructure, and relying on the international organizations to monitor would not lead to a safer world but to a „*nuclear arms race in the most dangerous part of the planet*”. Instead, American officials still believe that alternatives to seeking a formal deal with Iran were much worse, because taking military action or imposing harder sanctions will not stop or impede its nuclear program, maybe just set it back for a period of time.

Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu came to office within a month each other six years ago and the relationship was never a close one. The American president's hopes of reaching a comprehensive final peace deal for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East, came up against Israel's security and political establishment's decision to continue its settlement politics. When Israel responded to rocket attacks last summer by moving its troops in Gaza, Obama only offered qualified support, warning about the deep concern regarding the loss of innocent life. The distrust between the two leaders grew even further when Obama backed down from his threat of bombing Syria over its use of chemical weapons and at that moment Netanyahu clearly underlined that even if Israel has to stand alone, Israel will stand against genocidal enemies, thus exposing the willingness to strongly oppose even its most important partner. Netanyahu has been locked in a public tussle with Barack Obama for almost his entire administration and now he has increased his criticism aware that the international negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear program are about to be sealed by a deal. Aaron David Miller, a Middle East scholar at Wilson Center described the relationship between Obama and Netanyahu as „*an ongoing series of soap opera episodes*”, the numerous clashes of opinion and divergent approaches resulting mostly from two very different strategic visions, especially when they're talking about what Iran's nuclear program represents for the regional and global security.

Netanyahu went to Congress because he knew the vital role it might have in sealing a nuclear deal with Iran, by approving either a bill that will impose more sanctions or demanding mandatory approval of any agreement. Republicans unsuccessfully tried to promote a bill through Congress in 2014 that would have imposed additional sanctions on Iran in the middle of the political negotiations, approach strongly rejected by Obama and the Democrats that believed that this kind of view will only bolster hardliners in Iran and will push the Iranian leaders away from a peaceful negotiated deal to its nuclear program.

An interesting debate ignited when the Israeli leader cited „*encouraging responses from both Democrats and Republicans*” who Netanyahu said that understood that the current proposal of the international community represents a bad deal, that would only encourage Iran to continue pursuing its nuclear non-peaceful purposes, thus appreciating his proposal as a better alternative. What is obvious in the US is that the most important constituency that makes sure that Obama does not sign an agreement with Iran regarding its nuclear ambitions, is the Republican-controlled Congress in Washington, Republicans who from start expressed their appreciation by

applauding the Israeli Prime-Minister when he arrived in the House of Representatives. What is important to underline still is that support for Israel's security concerns and national interest has traditionally been strong in both major parties in the US, being considered a bipartisan pillar of US foreign policy, thus underlining a broad kind of consensus that any future nuclear deal with Iran will only be permissible if it will comprehensively take into account Israel's security legitimate concerns and interests as they have been articulated from Tel-Aviv.

The speech the Israeli prime-minister held in the American Congress must be analyzed in the larger context of the current internal political dynamics in Israel. Thus, his speech came four weeks before a 31 March target for a framework deal and two weeks before the March 17 general elections that will be held in Israel and where the current prime-minister is hoping to win a third consecutive term in office. Netanyahu's speech and its decision to bypass Barack Obama were perceived by many administration officials as being used by the Israeli leader as a political payoff, for winning domestic support for his re-election. Netanyahu was leaning heavily on a strong national security platform in order to be re-elected as prime-minister and keep his party in power. Susan Rice, the White House National Security Adviser even declared that the invitation Boehner made to Netanyahu, just two weeks before the parliamentary elections in Israel was purely motivated by political partisanship, blaming this decision as potentially „*destructive*” to the fabric of the strong US-Israel traditional relationship. Thus this movement was perceived as an attempt to legitimize the stronger critics that rose to Barack Obama's administration, being seen as a direct affront to the president's international and domestic interests. Netanyahu's address and presence in the Congress was seen as a political movement, his speech being considered by president's Obama former campaign manager as not so much about Iran, but more about an „*existential threat*” to his own electoral prospects. This situation is a very rare one because there is no precedent situation in which an Israeli prime-minister sided with the American president's opposition on a highly strategic theme. It is estimated that the level of mistrust between the two leaders has reached its all-time high it is even argued that Netanyahu cannot be considered a trustworthy ally, irrespective of any diplomatic efforts that will be made for the reconsolidation of the Israeli-US partnership. Netanyahu's speech that underlined force and sanctions as the best way to communicate with Iran, can also be perceived as strongly divergent from Barack Obama's collective diplomacy approach to international crisis and makes future cooperation prospects in this kind of strategic affairs extremely sensitive and difficult.

Netanyahu continues to use his classical rhetoric that in what regards Israel's security, the government should oppose any agreement with Iran, which is considered to represent a real danger to the very existence of the Israeli state, proposing thus a strongly united and coherent alliance of the international states in the face of what it regards as a danger not only to the region but to the entire globe. In 2012, Israeli Prime-Minister delivered a speech in front of the UN General Assembly in which claimed that Iran was only one year away from building a nuclear weapon, but as leaked documents showed, the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad disagreed, underlining that Teheran was not diverting nuclear materials for non-peaceful purposes.

Nevertheless, Netanyahu is perfectly aware of the importance of maintaining good relations with its American traditional ally and continues to reaffirm the strength of this partnership with the US, irrespective of the differences of opinion they have and will probably still have: „*Israel-US friendship will weather the current disagreement as well to grow even stronger in the future-because we share the same dreams...because the values that unite us are much stronger than the differences that divide us*”

Still, the speech Netanyahu held in front of the Congress was largely considered a critical political slap in the face for the American President, Barack Obama, creating a weird situation in which the Israeli leader, who has met so many times with Obama, tried to derail the president's efforts to achieve a nuclear deal with Iran, a step that would have been of monumental and unprecedented importance. Although Netanyahu stated that the relationship between his country and the United States was „*stronger than ever*” and not in crisis, the common perception was that the visit of the Israeli prime-minister politicized the normally close partnership. Thus perceived as an act outside the usual channels of US foreign policy, the speech determined a strong divide within the political specter of the US. His speech was seen as a proof of disrespect to Obama and to the office he holds. As Richard Haas, president of Council on Foreign Relations stated that „*the combination of the depth and duration of the estrangement of the leaders against this backdrop of an unraveling region makes this address of Netanyahu not just unprecedented, but also strongly dangerous*”. On the other side it can also be affirmed that this bold action of Netanyahu could have been directed also at the American lawmakers, the prime-minister reminding the Congress about the necessity of stopping Barack Obama from signing any deal with Iran that wouldn't take into full account Israel's considered legitimate concerns. In the end, president Obama, vice-president Joe Biden and 57 democrats lawmakers decided not to join the Congress, signaling in a certain way that at least for now, Israel may have become a partisan issue.

Netanyahu's address to Congress has strained his already tense relationship with the White House officials and it became a bruising political showdown. Although Netanyahu's message created a great deal of anger among the Democrats and appeared to affect the bipartisan nature of the US support for Israel in Congress, the situation hasn't been considered a veritable political crisis. Thus through his speech, by the strong public campaign of opposing the international negotiations with Iran and by continuing the settlement policy in West Bank, the Gaza war in 2014, Israeli relations with the White House have soured. Israel will continue to vehemently oppose the idea of signing a nuclear deal with Iran, considered the main enemy to the Israeli state interests, to a peaceful regional co-existence and ultimately to its own state survival, fearing that a nuclear deal can only represent the beginning of restoring a more cooperative US-Iran relationship.

The US-Israel partnership is too big to fail, and indeed efforts will be made, but the last years of clashes are not going to go away and it will take important diplomatic steps to mend the political ties. What is important to remember is that Israel still has important support in the US and in the Congress, and that although a speech like the one Netanyahu delivered might seem divisive to the US-Israel ties, wide spread support for Israel is unlikely to diminish in the near future. Although the American opposition will continue to oppose the settlement building policy in West Bank and Obama will promote a negotiation process with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, involving the Arab League in order to find a comprehensive solution to the decades old Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is a high probability that this won't affect US military assistance or diplomatic support offered to Israel. Thus this kind of „*disruptions*” and substantial disagreement is possible to continue on Iran's nuclear deal, but they will not affect the old stable foundation of US-Israel relations or destroy this strategic partnership, it will not target the very strategic axis between US and Israel but it strongly undermines the necessary strategic coordination.

It is important to see how US-Israeli relations will evolve after the election of the next Israeli government but what is for sure is that Washington is going to continue its efforts of promoting peace and stability in this region of the Middle East, while at the same time will coordinate its politics with Israel. On the other side, according to Meir Dagan, the former head of the Mossad, Netanyahu`s position cannot alter the West`s position on the Iranian issue but can bring the US-Israel partnership to an extreme point, with an unbearable price extracted in the future from Israel. US commitment to a strong alliance with Israel will continue to be reaffirmed by the American leaders, who will keep underlining the identity of security interests between US-Israel that transcends politics, thus the partnership between the two countries will still be considered one that cannot and will not be tarnished or broken, in the words of US Ambassador, Samantha Power.