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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, March 4*

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# News Excerpts

March 4, 2015

## Ha'aretz

### **Netanyahu: I Presented a Practical Alternative to Bad Iran Deal**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived back in Israel on Wednesday morning, hours after delivering his controversial speech on the Iranian nuclear threat to a joint session of the Congress. Upon landing, Netanyahu told reporters that his speech provided the international community with an opportunity to hear what Israel has to say about the 'bad deal' that is currently being negotiated with Iran. "In my speech to Congress," the prime minister said, "The alternative that I put forward to Congress also proposes that sanctions against Iran not be lifted automatically until such time as it stops spreading terrorism across the globe, stops its aggression against its neighbors and stop threatening to destroy Israel."

## Reuters

### **Netanyahu Draws Rebuke from Obama Over Speech to Congress**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the United States on Tuesday that it was negotiating a bad deal with Iran that could spark a "nuclear nightmare," drawing a rebuke from President Barack Obama and exposing a deepening U.S.-Israeli rift. They delivered dueling messages within hours of each other. Netanyahu made his case against Obama's Iran diplomacy in a speech to Congress that aligned himself with the president's Republican foes. Obama responded in the Oval Office, declaring in a frustrated tone that Netanyahu offered "nothing new."

See also, ["Netanyahu responds to Obama: We did indeed present practical alternative to Iran deal" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Politico

### **Pelosi: Netanyahu Speech Insulting to the intelligence of the US**

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi dismissed a speech Tuesday by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as full of "condescension" and an "insult to the intelligence of the United States." The California Democrat was visibly upset during Netanyahu's address on the House floor, in which the Israeli leader urged Congress to take a more aggressive line against Iran as part of ongoing negotiations over Tehran's nuclear facilities. Pelosi and other congressional Democrats were critical of the brash language Netanyahu used to describe those negotiations.

## Ma'ariv

### **Herzog: "This is Damaging, The Rift with the US Will Grow"**

A short while after Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu finished speaking in Congress, Zionist Camp Chairman Yitzhak Herzog responded in a speech at the Gaza periphery communities. "The painful truth is that after the applause Netanyahu remains alone," Herzog said, "Israel remains isolated and the negotiations with Iran will continue without Israeli involvement." "I prefer to be in the Negev and not in Washington, since the security issues in the Gaza periphery communities, in Kiryat Shmona, in Manara and in Jerusalem worry me no less than the Iranian nuclear threat, which of course I am not discounting," Herzog noted.

See also, ["Livni: Netanyahu, Adelson destroying Israel-U.S. ties" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## **Zarif appears to reject conditions in latest nuclear talks w/ Kerry**

US Secretary of State John Kerry continued talks yesterday with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Zarif as the two sides looked to make further progress on a nuclear agreement. Kerry and Zarif met yesterday and Monday in Montreux, Switzerland. Although neither side revealed the substance of their talks, Kerry commented "We're working away, productively," while Zarif said "We are moving and we are talking to be able to make progress." However, according to Reuters, Zarif told an Iranian news agency late yesterday that American demands were unacceptable.

See also, ["Kerry heads to Saudi Arabia to consult on Iran talks" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

### Reuters

## **Palestinian Leadership Gathers to Review Ties with Israel**

Palestinian leaders began a two-day meeting on Wednesday at which they could decide to suspend security coordination with Israel, a move that would have a profound impact on stability in the occupied West Bank. Relations between the two sides have grown dangerously brittle since the collapse of U.S.-brokered peace talks in 2014, with no immediate prospect of any resumption in negotiations. Suspending coordination would have an immediate impact on stability in cities such as Hebron, Bethlehem, Nablus and Jenin, where tensions frequently flare and anti-occupation marches after Friday prayers are common.

### Yedioth Ahronoth

## **Palestinian City, Rawabi, to be Populated in mid-May**

Seven years after announcing his intent to build the first planned Palestinian city, five years after obtaining funding from Qatar and after hundreds of workers dug the foundations, and two years after the sale of thousands of apartments, the developer, Bashar el-Masri, is preparing for people to move in. "I'm happy," he told *Yedioth Ahronoth* yesterday, "and I don't cry over the political-bureaucratic milk that was spilled on the long way here." On Thursday evening, he learned from the Israeli media that Israel was withdrawing its long-standing opposition and approving a water pipe to Rawabi—basically lifting the last hurdle. Masri: "We are now planning to lay the pipe and the first populating of Rawabi will begin in mid-May."

### Ha'aretz

## **Israel Hayom Boosts Print Run Ahead of Election**

Israel Hayom, the freebie daily newspaper controlled by Sheldon Adelson – the U.S. billionaire and backer of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – has expanded the press run of its weekend edition by some 70% as the March 17 election approaches. The newspaper printed 550,000 copies of its Friday paper last week, a far bigger number than the 470,000 it had said it would print, and 70% more than the 400,000 it had been printing before. Its weekday print run remains unchanged at 325,000. Israel Hayom said it was printing more copies in its race with *Yedioth Ahronoth*, a paid-for daily and traditionally Israel's biggest newspaper, to increase circulation and win over more advertisers and higher rates. Media sources estimate that the stepped-up press run of 150,000 extra copies is costing Israel Hayom between 3 million and 4 million shekels (\$750,000 to \$1 million) a month.

See also, ["Shas leader says party wants Netanyahu as PM" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Netanyahu Changed Nothing**

By Daniel Kurtzer

- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has come to the United States, spoken his piece and returned home to Israel to finish campaigning for the March 17 elections. Netanyahu's visit to Washington was neither the triumph he expected nor the disaster forecast by opponents of the visit. Indeed, the visit shed no new light on the supposedly central issue of the day: the state of play in the Iran negotiations.
- Netanyahu's big bet on reversing the course of the Iran negotiations apparently did not succeed, although it is still unclear — as it was when Netanyahu first conceived this trip — whether the talks will reach fruition. What is clear is that Netanyahu changed few minds, either in Congress or among the public. Everyone is skeptical of Iran and its intentions, and everyone wants a tightly-knit set of obligations and safeguards that try to ensure that Iran will not be able to build a nuclear weapon. However, the divide remains as to where to draw the line.
- Netanyahu also provided no alternative proposal. Continued pressure and sanctions sound alluring, except for the fact that if the United States causes the negotiations to fail, Russia and China will push to unravel the international sanctions. The current sanctions – which work because they have bite – were only agreed to by the U.N. Security Council after the Obama administration decided to negotiate while Iran appeared to refuse to compromise. Without a good faith effort by the United States to conclude the negotiations, sanctions will simply slip away.
- The alternative to sanctions is military action, which has always been Netanyahu's preferred course of action, even if he did not specify it during his public remarks in Washington. There are those who believe that unilateral Israeli military action would set back the Iranian nuclear program for several years, albeit at the cost of increased terrorism. But if a negotiated agreement, designed to last for ten years, is not sufficiently attractive to Netanyahu, why would a setback of fewer than ten years be more attractive?
- A military strike will destroy some physical facilities, but it certainly won't impact Iranian knowhow, and it might just impel the Iranians to unify ranks behind a serious, clandestine breakout program. Is this what Netanyahu has in mind?
- Despite Netanyahu's protestations of affinity for the United States and his assertion that his speech meant no disrespect for President Obama, the fact is that in agreeing to speak before Congress without the president's knowledge or invitation Netanyahu demonstrated substantial disrespect for Obama personally and for the institution of the U.S. presidency. While some argue that the fabric of American-Israeli ties will remain strong notwithstanding the tensions at the top, it defies reason for an Israeli prime minister to undermine a sitting president who has almost two years left in office and to court a Republican-held Congress when the U.S.-Israel relationship has been so carefully built by a bipartisan coalition over the years .
- We are left wondering what Netanyahu's thinking is – either he cares only about his own political future and is ready to risk his country's relationship with its most important ally for

**this self-serving gain, or he has another plan that he hasn't explained – and which is not apparent because on the face of it would not pass the smell test. Perhaps he just feels that the relationship will weather his shenanigans so they are worth pulling; in the middle of the run-up to Netanyahu's visit, the press reported Israel's request for another \$300 million in military assistance. Is Netanyahu blind to the irony of this, or has his arrogance reached a point where he assumes Israel will ask and the United States will simply say yes?**

- **It is also not clear what role Ron Dermer, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, played in conceiving this visit. What is clear is that Dermer's ability to function as the Israeli ambassador is now severely weakened, perhaps even fatally so. Israeli prime ministers often have a personal emissary in Washington, a close confidant apart from the ambassador whose role is to convey the prime minister's personal views rather than the formal position of the Israeli government.**
- **Dermer has conflated these two functions, acting more as a personal envoy than as an ambassador. In doing so, he has lost touch with a large segment of Americans – including a majority of the Jewish community that votes for the Democrats. Ambassadors are an expendable lot – I know from experience – and Dermer has now outlived his usefulness as Israel's envoy to the United States.**
- **The unknown and perhaps unknowable part of this drama is the behind the scenes role likely played by Netanyahu's prime U.S. funder and supporter, casino mogul Sheldon Adelson. Adelson's money maneuvers in American politics are a matter of public record, and those activities – along with the perverse role played by other big money people – have corrupted U.S. politics. The Israelis should learn from our mistakes – be forewarned about the American money now flowing freely to Israeli politicians and parties, and it is naïve to believe that this money comes without strings. Given Adelson's reported antipathy toward Obama personally, it is entirely conceivable that the Boehner-Netanyahu gambit was in fact stimulated or at least supported wholeheartedly by Adelson. If true, this would be bad news for both countries.**
- **Perhaps after all is said and done, Netanyahu's visit to America helped shed light on some important fissures taking place that need to be mended quickly. The visit was – in reality – an effort by politicians in both the United States and Israel to shake up their respective domestic politics. But in the end what we are left with is outstanding questions about the U.S.-Israeli relationship. I hope it will remain strong. It should remain strong. But we need to find a way to get domestic politics out of the equation – on both sides – and revive our history of shared support.**

*Daniel Kurtzer served as the United States ambassador to Israel from 2001-2005 and as ambassador to Egypt from 1997-2001.*

## **Netanyahu's Zero-Sum Game on Iran**

By David Ignatius

- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lobbied powerfully against a nuclear agreement with Iran in a well-crafted speech to Congress on Tuesday. The problem is that he has now created a zero-sum game with the Obama administration, in which either the president or the prime minister seems likely to come out a loser.
- Playing for huge stakes two weeks ahead of the Israeli elections, Netanyahu gave what may prove to be the defining speech of his career. He opened graciously with praise for President Obama, which made his critique of the administration's diplomacy all the stronger. Netanyahu warned that the planned agreement would create a "nuclear tinderbox" in the Middle East and "inevitably lead to war."
- Netanyahu's speech deepened his divide with the White House, where the boisterous cheers for the Israeli prime minister on the House floor must have sounded like a rebuke. The speech has also created a new dynamic that may put the Middle East even closer to the knife's edge.
- Consider the possible outcomes as the Iran negotiations head toward a March 24 deadline: Netanyahu could "win" and convince Congress to derail the biggest foreign-policy initiative of Obama's presidency. Or Obama could "win" and push ahead to conclude what Netanyahu characterized as "a very bad deal." Either outcome would traumatize U.S.-Israeli relations and portend a poisonous final two years for Obama's presidency.
- Two other hard landings are possible after Netanyahu's high-wire performance. Iran could balk at further concessions, walk away from negotiations and accelerate its nuclear program — forcing the United States and Israel to consider military action. Or Netanyahu, having bet his political future on the visit to Washington, could lose in the Israeli elections on March 17. That defeat may be less likely after Netanyahu's deft presentation.
- What's least likely is that Tehran will bend enough to agree to Netanyahu's formula.
- Netanyahu's speech didn't offer many new ideas, but a White House senior official's dismissal of it as "all rhetoric, no action" was overstated. Although the Israeli leader clearly rejects the deal Obama is contemplating, he argued that if the United States is determined to proceed, it should insist that the agreement not terminate until Iran has abandoned its aggression in the region, halted its terrorism and accepted Israel's existence.
- Obama hopes for just such an evolution toward post-revolutionary sanity in Tehran over the decade-long duration of the planned agreement, and Netanyahu is right that it would be good to put this in writing. But that would almost certainly be a deal-breaker for Tehran.
- Netanyahu invoked the poet Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" in arguing that at the approaching fork, there is one safe route. But both paths appear likely to have dangerous obstructions.

- **The most obvious problem with an Iran agreement is that it would create a new breach with Israel. Washington and its allies would worry that Israel might take unilateral military action against what Netanyahu has described as an existential threat. A deal would also bring inevitable allegations that Iran was cheating. This could trigger new rounds of sanctions legislation by Congress that could, in turn, lead Iran to argue that Washington was renegeing — and result in the pact unraveling.**
- **An agreement would also, as Netanyahu warned, mean a new era of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey sought to achieve the same “nuclear threshold” status the pact would give Iran. When the sunset of the agreement approaches roughly 10 years hence, and Iran is freed from limits, the race toward nuclear capability would accelerate across the region. As bad as the situation in the Mideast is now, it could get much worse.**
- **The other path is the one where U.S. diplomacy fails. This could result from a hardening of the U.S. or Iranian positions, from new sanctions legislated by Congress or from simply the inability to bridge existing gaps. Here, again, greater tension is likely — with the United States and Iranian forces at dangerously close quarters in the fight against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria.**
- **What Netanyahu did Tuesday was raise the bar for Obama. Any deal that the administration signs will have to address the concerns Netanyahu voiced. Given what’s at stake in the Middle East, that’s probably a good thing. As administration officials said at the outset of negotiations, no deal is better than a bad one.**
- **The Israeli prime minister’s speech, for all its divisive political consequences, served to sharpen the focus on what a good deal would look like.**