



Begin-Sadat Center Research Fellows Analysis of PM Netanyahu's BIU Speech, October 6, 2013

Calling a Spade a Spade

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It is time that politicians start relating to the reality of the Middle East as it is, without whitewashing the facts. This is exactly what Prime Minister Netanyahu did in his speech on Sunday, October 6, at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University. This was an implicit answer to the speech of the American president, Barack Obama, who hopes that there is a way to come to terms with the Ayatollahs regarding their nuclear military program. Netanyahu is much more realistic about Iran and its real and dangerous intentions vis-à-vis Israel, the Middle East and the rest of the world. Nobody can ignore the facts which lead to the only conclusion: Iran is developing nuclear weapons, and therefore the world should strengthen sanctions against them, not soften them.

Netanyahu dedicated a significant part of his speech to describing some historical facts which people try to ignore: the role of the Mufti Haj Amin al-Huseini, the Palestinian leader during the 1930s and 1940s, who took an active part in the extermination of European Jewry. This is the reason – according to Netanyahu – why we, Jews, should demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as the state of the Jewish people, the people whom their leader tried to exterminate. Israelis and others, who dream about a peaceful Palestinian state alongside Israel, should never ignore current and historical facts, of which Netanyahu reminded us all, by calling a spade a spade.

A Strident Netanyahu Places the Onus on the Palestinians

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In a strident speech last night at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies, Prime Minister Netanyahu laid out his narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict, according to which Palestinian refusal to recognize Jewish national rights is the core of the conflict. The Prime Minister also spoke about the Iranian nuclear program, but somewhat surprisingly his speech focused more on the Palestinian issue. In any case, by talking about Iran and the Palestinians, Netanyahu addressed the two issues that President Obama recently defined as the priorities of the United States Middle East policy.

Taking the Iranian issue first, Netanyahu has clearly embarked on a campaign to counter President Rouhani's charm offensive. Bluntly, he stated that he does not believe Rouhani's claim that Iran is not seeking nuclear weapons, pointing out that Iran's advanced centrifuges and its development of plutonium can have no application, other than military. Although he noted that the US and Israel share the objective of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, it is clear that there remains serious differences of opinion on this issue between the allies.

Israel's timeline for Iran to reach a military nuclear capability is considerably shorter than US estimates. This is because Israel is focused on preventing Iran from becoming a threshold nuclear power, reaching the point where it can choose to break out and build a nuclear bomb within a matter of weeks at the time of its choosing. In contrast, the US is focused on preventing Iran from building a nuclear bomb per se. Israel is concerned that this is cutting it too fine and that the Iranians will follow the North Korean precedent and find a way to breakout when the US is distracted. Israeli concerns have only increased in the wake of the Obama administration's handling of the crisis over Syrian use of chemical weapons.

Specifically, with American-Iranian negotiations looking likely to commence soon, Israel is concerned that Iran will string out talks while continuing to advance towards its objective or that the US and Iran will reach an agreement that in effect would allow Iran to become a nuclear threshold state. Against this background, Netanyahu again laid out Israel's position on the issue. Going beyond the US position, he emphasized that the Iranians must not only freeze their nuclear program, they must dismantle it. Their program must be pushed back, not merely frozen in place and he advocated keeping the pressure on Iran. Netanyahu, in essence, is playing the role of the 'bad cop' and there is no doubt that if there is even a slim chance of reaching a good agreement with Iran, keeping up the pressure on the regime is vital.

Keeping up the pressure on Iran requires that world opinion recognize the true nature of the Iranian regime. Recently, President Rouhani has won plaudits by apparently accepting that the Holocaust occurred, in contrast to his predecessor. However, Rouhani also trotted out the canard that Israel manipulates the Holocaust to justify the oppression of the Palestinians. Netanyahu felt bound to deconstruct this 'moderate' narrative whose core motifs are Palestinian victimhood and Israeli oppression. For this reason the Prime Minister delved into history to emphasize that Palestinian rejectionism predates, not only the capture of the Territories in 1967, but also the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. And for this reason, he stressed the active complicity of the Palestinian leader Haj Amin Al Hussein in the Holocaust.

Deconstructing such narratives is not merely a history lesson; rather it is of political significance in the court of world opinion. Narratives allocate blame, and whoever is to blame the onus is on them to make concessions; and placing the onus on one party legitimizes the application of pressure on that party.

Returning to the present day, recently the Palestinians have been complaining that Israel has not put forward territorial concessions in negotiations, consequently Netanyahu sought to put the onus on them by highlighting their unwillingness to recognize Jewish national rights within any boundaries.

Yet while the speech was strident, it was not extreme. True, Netanyahu did not reach out to the Palestinians, but he did explicitly credit the Palestinian Authority, as opposed to Hamas, for not being involved in terrorism and he reiterated his willingness to accept a two-state solution. Interestingly, Netanyahu referred explicitly to a Palestinian *nation*-state, something he did not do in his 2009 speech, where he accepted the creation of a Palestinian state for the first time. This actually brings him closer to the language used by Tzipi Livni – two states for two peoples. Given that Netanyahu was arguing that Palestinian acceptance of an Israeli state is insufficient, this rhetorical move was vital to retaining the credibility of his core claim to recognition of Jewish *national* rights. Still, it is language which the Israeli Right rejects in principle, so slipping this phrase into an otherwise strident speech hints at Netanyahu's attempt to occupy the center ground.

Similarly, the positions which the Prime Minister presented were positions which the vast majority of Israelis agree with. Back in 2003, it was the Israeli Left who insisted on Palestinian recognition of Jewish self-determination in the Geneva draft peace agreement. It is also accepted by the Obama administration. In addition, Netanyahu's insistence on the Palestinians giving up the so-called 'right of return' for Palestinian refugees and their descendants to Israel has wall-to-wall support in Israel.

Implicitly then, the Prime Minister's message was the same as ever: 'If they give, they will receive; if they do not give, they will not receive'.