

**Middle East Notes**  
**Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns**  
**March 5, 2015**



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This issue of Middle East News was prepared before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to Congress on March 3; articles and comments on this speech will be included in a special Middle East Notes to be circulated on March 11. This issue focuses on pre-speech opposition to Netanyahu stating that he speaks for the "entire Jewish people," initial surprise and dismay by AIPAC leadership to the news of the invitation to speak to Congress, the media drowning out of any news on the Israel/Palestine conflict, the dire situation for the nearly two million people of Gaza living in a "giant prison," the absence of "symmetry" in the Israeli/Palestinian violence with the overwhelming power on the Israeli side and the majority of victims on the Palestinian side, the stain on the upcoming Israeli elections caused by the land grab through settlements, and other issues.

***Commentary:*** *Reaction and response to the invitation to the Israeli prime minister to speak to a joint session of Congress has given considerable media coverage to the strain in relationships between Obama and Netanyahu, and to the political implications of this strain for the leaders of the U.S. and Israel. Many members of Congress and U.S. Jews are being pressured to choose between their president and the prime minister of another country. The present focus of concern continues to be what Iran might be doing or planning to do with its nuclear program rather than what Israel is actually doing with U.S. support, to the Palestinian people, through occupation and continuing settlement expansion.*

- Bradley Burston writes in Ha'aretz that as prime minister, dealing with the specter of a nuclear Iran, is one of Benjamin Netanyahu's primary responsibilities. He's shirking it.
- Rebecca Vilkomerson clarifies that Prime Minister Netanyahu does not speak for all U.S. Jews.
- Ben Caspit writes in Al-Monitor that the news of Netanyahu's speech before Congress struck AIPAC heads like a thunderbolt; this speech might be his last major card to play before the March 17 elections, which is why he is determined to deliver it despite objections at home and by AIPAC.
- Mitchell Plitnick notes in Foreign Policy that the ongoing spat between Netanyahu and Obama has drowned out an important issue. The entire question of the Israel-Palestine conflict seems to be out of sight and out of mind in Washington and the mainstream media.
- Haggai Matar reports in +972 that nearly two million Gazans are living in a state of poverty and shortages, with few options of leaving and even fewer options for work, and that these two million people live in a giant prison, while Israelis cannot even begin to fathom how terrible the situation is.
- Jim Wallis writes in Sojourners Magazine that there is no "symmetry" in the violence of the Middle East today. It is simply an undeniable fact that the overwhelming power is on the Israeli side and the majority of victims are on the Palestinian side.
- Nicholas Kristof writes in The New York Times that Israeli settlements mar the upcoming Israeli elections, and the future of the country itself.
- Other articles of interest

## **1) Think Netanyahu's speech is really about Iran? Think again.**

**Bradley Burston, Ha'aretz, March 2, 2015**

As prime minister, dealing with the specter of a nuclear Iran is one of Benjamin Netanyahu's primary responsibilities. He's shirking it.

His stated goal is to mobilize Congress to foil what he predicted would be a bad deal between the great powers and Tehran. But the consequence of bitter feuding with the Obama White House has been a dramatic loss of critical support for the prime minister's position among House and Senate Democrats, by any standard the key to overriding presidential vetoes on crucial Iran-oriented legislation.

In fact, indications are that Tehran is nothing but pleased by the fracas over the address and the rift between Israel's leader and the White House.

"Netanyahu's comments at the U.S. Congress," Hamid Aboutalebi, a senior policy advisor to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday "will further widen the existing gaps [between Israel and its supporters] in different arenas, and finally will benefit Iran."

Is the speech, as Netanyahu insists, truly and solely about an Iranian atomic bomb? Or has a different threat come to take precedence as the real reason for the address - the prospect of losing an election. Two elections, in fact.

Either way, the speech is intended to be a game changer. But the game in question increasingly appears to be that of helping Netanyahu to re-election in 2015, and helping elect the standard bearer of the Republican Party as President of the United States the year after.

The impression of playing electoral politics has grown sharper of late, as Netanyahu has been slipping in opinion polls, and many of those who share his view on Iran believe the speech has been badly counter-productive.

## **2) Netanyahu does not speak for all American Jews**

**Rebecca Vilkomerson, Religion News, Washington Post, February 20, 2015**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing unexpectedly strong pressure to withdraw from a planned March 3 speech to a joint session of Congress. The invitation from House Speaker John Boehner bypassed President Obama entirely. Intended to sway U.S. policy on Iran and support Netanyahu's re-election bid, the invitation is eliciting unprecedented opposition.

Netanyahu, in defending the visit, has indicated that he is coming to Congress to speak as the representative of the "entire Jewish people." American Jews are largely appalled by the notion that Netanyahu, or any other Israeli politician — one that we did not elect and do not choose to be represented by — claims to speak for us. The math is clear: While 69 percent of American Jews (population 6.8 million) voted for President Obama in 2012, only 23 percent of Israel's Jews (population 6.1 million) voted for Netanyahu.

This isn't the first time that Netanyahu has claimed the mantle of the representative of the Jews, nor is it the first time that Jews around the world have been affronted by the idea that the prime minister of Israel would claim to speak for them. What makes this moment unique, however, is the unprecedented cracks in the bipartisan consensus that usually sustains unquestioning support for Israel. ...

Trends indicate a growing discomfort with Israeli actions among many Americans, including people of color and young Jews. Elected Democratic officials may increasingly find support among their base for taking a clear stand against warmongering and Israel's assumed unconditional support by the U.S. Skipping the speech is turning out not just to be good policy, but good politics.

### **3) AIPAC objects to Netanyahu's Congress address**

**Ben Caspit, Al-Monitor, February 26, 2015**

... The basic, underlying postulate of AIPAC from the day of its inception in 1951 has been simple: to represent and work on behalf of every single Israeli government, without preference for Right or Left. With regard to the US political system, AIPAC sanctifies the principle of bipartisan support for Israel. It will never focus only on one of the two major American parties; it will never try to divide and conquer; and it will never favor a Republican legislator over a Democratic counterpart or the reverse. The secret of Israel's power in Washington over the years lies mainly in this principle, which has transformed Israel into a form of consensus on Capitol Hill, against which very few dare rebel or deviate from.

The invitation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak before both houses of Congress March 3 was secretly cooked up by House Speaker John Boehner (Republican) and Israel's ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer (who some consider ambassador to Las Vegas because of his relationship with casino mogul Sheldon Adelson). The news struck AIPAC heads like a thunderbolt. They had not been briefed about it before or after. They didn't know about it, and they didn't believe such a thing could happen to them. "This is AIPAC's Day of Atonement," one of the heads of the organization told me in a private conversation after the invitation was publicized. "This is the lowest point we have ever reached." ...

AIPAC prepared a detailed presentation that was given to Netanyahu with all the negative repercussions they believe would result from the controversial invitation to Congress and the cumulative damage. On Feb. 25 behind closed doors, one of the heads of AIPAC said, to paraphrase: All the things we warned him of, are materializing. We foresaw the domino effect that took place, the boycott by more and more Democratic Congress members, the significant deterioration in relations with Democratic legislators, the talks about boycotting the AIPAC convention (that is also being held at the beginning of March) by the administration. We protested, we warned. And who wasn't impressed? Netanyahu. He's coming. ...

On the other hand, the one making the decisions, at least until elections on March 17, is Netanyahu. He is resolved to go to Congress. He is resolved to speak. He is well aware of his not-so-great standing in Israeli polls. He knows that public opinion is currently shifting against him. He faces two harsh reports from the state comptroller and a police investigation (potentially a criminal matter) on possible misconduct in the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem. The only thing he has left is the speech. Bibi will put everything he's got into this speech. ...

#### 4) Will U.S. Mideast policy take a new turn?

Mitchell Plitnick, LobeLog-Foreign Policy, February 20, 2015

... Unsurprisingly, Israelis are skittish about any U.S. interference in their internal politics. Leaving aside the irony of that sentiment in light of recent events, Israelis do still understand that they need U.S. support. They also understand, based on the polling data, that their own government's policies are putting the United States in an increasingly difficult position. Furthermore, they are open to Washington pursuing certain actions, particularly regarding settlements.

From these data, Duss and Cohen gauge what might be both practical and politically feasible and make the following recommendations:

- Make clear that while the United States remains committed to Israel's genuine security requirements and right to defend itself, it will cease to expend significant diplomatic capital to protect Israel from international actions against Israeli policies that are contrary to U.S. positions, such as settlement expansion.
- Once again publicly refer to settlements as "illegal" rather than the current "illegitimate." While the final disposition of the settlements will be determined by negotiations, until that time it remains the legal opinion of the U.S. State Department that they are a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and this should be stated clearly by U.S. spokespersons.
- Offer support for a United Nations Security Council resolution that condemns Israel's policy of settlement construction, particularly those outside the major settlement blocs.
- Work with its partners to produce a UN Security Council resolution setting clear terms of reference for negotiations, similar to those articulated by President Obama himself in his May 2011 speech at the State Department.
- Announce plans to more closely scrutinize the tax-exempt status of U.S. organizations that support the settlement enterprise in East Jerusalem and the West Bank to ensure that these activities do not violate U.S. laws and guidelines for charitable contributions and tax-exempt purposes.
- Publicly present the framework of a final status agreement that would lead to the creation of two states for two peoples along the lines of the Clinton Parameters. This framework would take into account Israel's legitimate security concerns and would include recognition of Israel by the Arab League, per the Arab Peace Initiative.

These ideas are sure to strike many as modest, even as they send chills up the spines of some of the Netanyahu government's most strident supporters, especially among the small, but influential minority of right-wing U.S. Jews and the larger cadre of so-called "Christian Zionists." Only a few short years ago, they would also have been dismissed as wholly unrealistic. Things have changed. ...

It has long been my belief that if the United States should take such recommended actions, this would be more than sufficient to convince the majority of Israelis, in and out of government, to push for a change in their policies regarding the occupation and Palestinian rights. Despite Israel's sharp right turn, I still believe that. There has never been a better time to put it to the test.

## **5) Do Israelis have any idea how bad it is in Gaza?**

**Haggai Matar, +972, February 17, 2015**

... “I’m extremely concerned that if you leave Gaza in the state it’s currently in, you’ll have another eruption, and violence, and then we’re back in a further catastrophe, so we’ve got to stop that,” warned Quartet envoy Tony Blair during a visit to the Gaza Strip on Sunday. It was his first trip to the Gaza since the last war, and Blair spent his time meeting with ministers and surveying the progress – or lack thereof – toward rehabilitating the Strip.

The scope of destruction in Gaza remains enormous. According to the UN, over 96,000 homes were either damaged or destroyed by Israeli air strikes. The donor states that have pledged to transfer money have yet to do so, re-building is going nowhere, many are still seeking refuge in UNRWA schools and the winter storms have only increased the damage to the homes and neighborhoods that survived.

The Israeli blockade, which prevents exports, economic development and importing building materials not previously approved by Israel, and which includes firing at fishermen, continues to choke the Strip. Furthermore, the Egyptian government has only tightened the blockade on its end over the past months. Egypt has destroyed all the tunnels into Sinai, keeps the Rafah crossing closed on a regular basis, and has destroyed large parts of Rafah in order to create buffer zone between the city and its Gaza counterpart. And all this after the Egyptian government banned Hamas’ military wing, calling it a “terrorist organization.”

Israel’s Operation Protective Edge, which killed over 2,000 people, including hundreds of children and entire families, lead not only to destruction, but also to a breakdown in Palestinian reconciliation. Fatah and Hamas continue to find reasons not to make reconciliation a reality: Fatah refuses to pay the salaries of Hamas members (partially because Israel has frozen the tax revenues it owes the Palestinian Authority), Hamas is blaming the situation in Gaza on the unity government and attacks on members of Fatah are becoming routine.

According to an in-depth analysis by Ma’an News Agency’s Ramzy Baroud, the outcome out of these processes is leading to Hamas being pushed out the political circles of the southern Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar) and back into arms of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, from which Hamas broke off two years ago. Like Blair said, this can only mean a return to the circle of violence. And as Yonatan Mendel wrote recently, no single major Israeli candidate is offering an alternative to this path of destruction. Nearly two million Gazans are living in a state of poverty and shortages, with dilapidated infrastructure, few options of leaving and even fewer options for work. Nearly two million people who live in a giant prison, and we cannot even begin to understand how terrible their situation is.

## **6) Choosing the side of justice**

**Jim Wallis, Sojourners magazine, March 2015**

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict has claimed countless lives, caused unimaginable trauma, and devastated families and communities for decades. As Christians, we should lament this ongoing tragedy and commit ourselves to the cause of peace. However, we must also confess to and repent of the fact that American Christians have often been an obstacle to peace in the region.

On one side of the conflict, many evangelicals have historically been uncritical supporters of Israel. This support often stems from dispensationalism—the belief that a Jewish state must exist in the Middle East in order for Christ to return. Because the continued existence and thriving of the Israeli state is viewed by these Christian Zionists as nothing less than God’s will, they have historically been unwilling to criticize or even question Israel’s behavior. This reflexive and one-sided support for the Israeli government and military has made it much more difficult for the U.S. to be considered an honest broker in the peace process.

In contrast to evangelicals, some mainline Protestants and other liberal Christians have also been a problem to peace by taking an unrelentingly negative attitude toward Israel. Some Christians from this camp have gone so far as to argue that the premise upon which the modern state of Israel was founded is unjust and illegitimate. Given the present reality of Israel’s existence—not to mention the horrors of the Holocaust—coming to the table with that position is not helpful to having a productive conversation about creating peace in the region. Furthermore, when Israel’s critics downplay or fail to acknowledge Israel’s very real security concerns, it diminishes the validity of their critique of Israel’s actions. ...

First, we need to reject the distortions propagated by elements at both extremes of the conflict. And then we need to look at the situation with clear eyes and speak the truth in love, no matter how hard it is to do.

One of those truths is the fact that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are perhaps the largest obstacle to a lasting peace in the region. These are aggressive forays into Palestinian territory, and their presence looms over the chances for peace in the Middle East, just as the ultramodern hilltop settlements themselves loom over the poor Palestinian villages in the valleys below them.

Another truth is that there is indeed Palestinian violence against Israelis. Shootings, suicide bombings, and rocket attacks have been carried out by terrorists against Israeli civilians. The existence of horrific violence against innocent Israelis cannot be disputed. And such violence can never be justified. But if we are to be honest and fair, we need to speak clearly to the balance of power in this conflict. There is no “symmetry” in the violence of the Middle East today. It is simply an undeniable fact that the overwhelming power is on the Israeli side and the majority of victims are on the Palestinian side. The Israelis respond to the tragic deaths of their civilians at the hands of terrorists by shelling Palestinians in massive, disproportionate retaliation. The casualties are enormous, and the majority of them are civilians. Violence against civilians is a definition of terrorism, and it must be named and condemned on all sides. ...

## **7) [The human stain](#)**

**Nicholas Kristof, *The New York Times*, February 26, 2015**

SINJIL, West Bank — The Israeli elections scheduled for March 17 should constitute a triumph, a celebration of democracy and a proud reminder that the nation in which Arab citizens have the most meaningful vote is, yes, Israel.

Yet Israeli settlements here on the West Bank mar the elections, and the future of the country itself. The 350,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank— not even counting those in Arab East Jerusalem — impede any Middle East peace and stain Israel's image.

But let's be clear: The reason to oppose settlements is not just that they are bad for Israel and America, but also that this nibbling of Arab land is just plain wrong. It's a land grab. The result is a "brutal occupation force," in the words of the late Avraham Shalom, a former chief of the Israeli internal security force, Shin Bet. ...

There are, of course, far worse human rights abuses in the Middle East; indeed, Israeli journalists, lawyers, historians and aid groups are often exquisitely fair to Palestinians. Yet the occupation is particularly offensive to me because it is conducted by the United States' ally, underwritten with our tax dollars, supported by tax-deductible contributions to settlement groups, and carried out by American bulldozers and weaponry, and presided over by a prime minister who is scheduled to speak to Congress next week.

At a time when Saudi Arabia is flogging dissidents, Egypt is sentencing them to death, and Syria is bombing them, Israel should stand as a model. Unfortunately, it squanders political capital and antagonizes even its friends with its naked land grab in the West Bank. That's something that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu might discuss in his address to Congress.

**Other articles of interest:**

- [Democrats should boycott Netanyahu's speech](#), Michael A. Cohen, The Boston Globe, February 27, 2015
- [Netanyahu should admit decision to address Congress was a mistake](#), Dennis Ross, Ha'aretz, February 18, 2015
- [The State of Two States, Week of February 15](#)
- [The State of Two States, Week of February 22](#)
- [U.S. helped Israel with H-bomb; 1980s report declassified](#), Eliana Aponte, Reuters, February 15, 2015
- [The tragedy of Elie Wiesel](#), Peter Beinart, Ha'aretz, February 18, 2015
- [Unwelcome mat: White House tries to counter Netanyahu visit](#), Matthew Lee & Julie Page, Associated Press, February 20, 2015
- [Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin for February 20, 2015](#)
- [Churches for Middle East Peace Bulletin for February 27, 2015](#)
- [No, Mr. Netanyahu! We won't let you drag the U.S. into war with Iran!](#) Michael Lerner, Huffington Post, February 23, 2015
- [Anti-what?](#) Uri Avnery, Gush-Shalom, February 21, 2015
- [Pro-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, pro-Jesus](#), Ryan Rodrick Beiler, Sojourners Magazine, March 2015
- [Aida refugee camp flooded by excess settlement water](#), International Middle East Media Center News & Agencies, February 22, 2015
- [Israel's Hebron handiwork: Its most heinous endeavour since 1948](#), Amira Hass, Ha'aretz, February 25, 2015
- [Israeli fanatics burn section of Jerusalem church](#), International Middle East Media Center News & Agencies, February 26, 2015
- [Today, the U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship stands at a crossroads](#), Foundation for Middle East Peace, February 19, 2015