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European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

7 June 2018

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08.06.2018

Israel's Netanyahu tours Europe to advocate action against Iran

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu completed a tour of three major European capitals—Berlin, Paris and London—to push for an all-out offensive against Iran.

His message to Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Theresa May was that the nuclear deal with Iran is effectively dead and buried, and that the task now is to oppose Iranian influence in Syria and throughout the Middle East.

Netanyahu spoke with the full backing of Washington. His visit takes place just weeks after President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear accord signed in July 2015 by the US, Germany, France, Britain, Russia and China. The US not only announced that it would re-impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran and introduce further unspecified sanctions, but also demanded that the European Union (EU) sever its trade relations with Iran—worth \$25 billion in 2017—or face secondary sanctions, making it clear that the EU was no less a target than Iran.

The European powers are furious because Trump's moves cut across their attempts to exploit Iran economically. They fear that the move presages a war with Iran that would destabilise the entire Middle East and lead to soaring oil prices and a further mass influx of refugees. They have called for the treaty to be preserved and vowed to defend their business interests.

US-EU tensions are already growing over US demands that the European powers increase their military spending, its pull-out from the climate agreement, the imposition of tariffs

against EU steel and aluminium and its threats to impose a 35 percent tariff on the import of European cars.

However, their position is weak, faced with a globally linked economy tied to dollar-denominated trade and investment—and both they and Netanyahu know it. Major European companies have already started curtailing their activities in Iran, while the European Investment Bank has balked at EU proposals that it should support investment by European firms.

Netanyahu said he was not seeking to persuade Merkel, Macron or May to withdraw from the deal, “because I think it will be dissolved by weight of economic forces.”

He focused instead on claims of Iranian aggression, warnings over Tehran’s growing influence in the region—including Gaza—and unsubstantiated allegations that it is still in pursuit of nuclear weapons.

In Berlin, Netanyahu sought to stoke racist tensions against refugees, warning that Iran was trying to wage a religious war in Syria. Speaking at a joint press conference with Merkel, he said, “This will inflame a religious war, and the consequences will be many more refugees, and you know exactly where they’ll come,” adding that “Iran must leave Syria. All of Syria.”

Following his meeting with Merkel, Netanyahu went directly to see the US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, apparently at the ambassador’s invitation.

Grenell, a former US spokesman at the United Nations, had earlier told right-wing website Breitbart News, “I absolutely want to empower other conservatives throughout Europe, other leaders.”

His statement was criticised by politicians across the German political spectrum, who warned him against interfering in domestic politics

In Paris, Netanyahu warned that a nuclear-armed Iran was “the greatest threat to the world” and claimed Tehran had lied to the world about its weapons programme. He was met wherever he went with angry demonstrations protesting Israel’s murder of at least 120 Palestinians and the wounding of tens of thousands more during the nine weeks of the Great March of Return in Gaza.

For all their differences with Trump and their evident distaste for Netanyahu, the European leaders did not seek to distance themselves from his demands because they know he speaks for Washington—against which they have been unable to formulate a coherent and effective response.

Israel is becoming increasingly integrated into Washington's military activities, sending dozens of paratroopers for the first time to Eastern Europe to take part in the US-led NATO Saber Strike 18 drill, in which 18,000 troops from 19 countries are participating.

In the run-up to the talks, Netanyahu again exposed himself as a liar and provocative charlatan. Two days ago, Israel's intelligence service Shin Bet claimed that it had foiled an alleged Syrian-led terrorist cell targeting US consulate buildings, a Canadian delegation and Netanyahu, although it admitted that the operatives had never met, no money was transferred and no arms were purchased.

In another stunt on April 30, Netanyahu said Israel had obtained documents proving Iran had been covertly gathering nuclear weapons know-how. All these documents related to the period before 2003 and presented no new information.

While the European leaders expressed their concern over Israel's massacre of peaceful protesters in Gaza, Netanyahu argued that Iran funded Hamas, the bourgeois Islamist group that controls Gaza, and Islamic Jihad, which he alleged had incited the anti-Israel demonstrations.

Merkel stressed that Germany supported Israel's right to security, saying, "We have the same goal that Iran must never get a nuclear weapon and the difference between us is how to do that."

Germany would "exert our influence in such a way that Iran is pushed out of this region" and would take a "very close look at Iran's activities in the region and seek to contain it."

While Macron criticised Trump's decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, saying it had led to "people dying" and did not promote peace, he both stressed the importance of the nuclear accord and called for an additional agreement aimed at limiting Tehran's ballistic-missile programme and activities in the region.

The following day, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said that Tehran's announcement that it would increase its uranium enrichment capacity if the nuclear deal collapsed sailed close to the "red line," although he conceded that "the initiative taken ... remains totally within the framework of the Vienna (nuclear) deal."

May made pro-forma criticisms of Israel's massacre in Gaza, before adding, "Along with France and Germany, the UK continues to believe that [the 2015 nuclear accord] is the best route to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

"We will remain committed to it as long as Iran meets its obligations. But we do recognise that there are other issues that need to be addressed in relation to Iran—its destabilising

regional activity in countries like Syria and Yemen and also the proliferation of ballistic missiles.”

Increasingly isolated after the referendum vote to leave the EU, the UK has become ever more dependent on securing favourable trade and military relations with the US. London is seeking to carve out a prominent position in supporting the US-backed insurgency against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and the increasingly bellicose moves against Russia. This also sets it on a collision course with Iran.

Last year, the Royal Air Force (RAF) carried out joint exercises with the Israel Air Force (IAF), the first time such an exercise was made public. In November, HMS Ocean, the fleet flagship of the Royal Navy, docked in Haifa as part of a visit marking Israel’s active partnership with NATO. Last April, the RAF joined Poland, Austria, Greece, Italy and Canada in the IAF’s traditional flyover for Israel’s 70th anniversary celebrations.

Britain has targeted Israel as one of 10 countries with which it is trying to sign new bilateral free trade and investment agreements. Bilateral trade of goods rose from \$7.2 billion in 2016 to \$9.1 billion in 2017, plus an additional \$1.6 billion for trade in services in 2015. Following the referendum, Israeli investment in the UK rose from £114 million to £154 million.

The May government has, along with the Trump administration, downgraded the Palestinian issue, and last month, abstained in the vote at the UN Human Rights Council to establish a commission of inquiry into Israel’s criminal actions in Gaza.