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## The True Purpose of Netanyahu's Trip to Washington

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who faces a difficult election in only two weeks, came to Washington pretending to be deeply alarmed by Iran's potential for developing a nuclear weapon and saying he is determined to ensure that President Barack Obama's negotiations with Tehran result in a "better deal" than the one now anticipated (without detailing how that could be done).

In fact, Netanyahu had three unstated goals. His first and most important was to shore up his own flagging political fortunes in Israel. Second, he wanted to forestall any further pressure from Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and congressional Democrats for a peace deal with the Palestinians, having successfully torpedoed the 2013-14 round of talks. Third, he wanted to forestall a thaw in US-Iran relations, which is apparent both in the nuclear talks and on the ground in Iraq, where Washington, Baghdad and Tehran are now de facto allies against ISIL.

Politicians first and foremost typically want to get re-elected. While Netanyahu's prospects look good, they are not completely assured. His ratings took a hit after his disastrous attack on Gaza last summer, which appears to have accomplished none of its stated goals and which led to a rash of diplomatic defeats for Israel in Europe. He faces the most credible center-left challenge in years, with former right-wing icon Tzipi Livni now allied with the Labor Party. Despite strong economic growth in the fourth quarter, Israel faces problems similar to those in the United

States, in that the new wealth goes to a thin sliver of billionaires. Increased poverty (a third of Israelis are now poor), long waits for health care, high rents and a growing wealth gap bedevil Israeli domestic policy, and Netanyahu is on the side of the billionaires who bankroll his campaigns, not that of workers and students. A tried-and-true tactic of the political right has long been to play up foreign threats or to divide the working class by appeals to racism, as a way of diverting attention from domestic problems. Moreover, Netanyahu hopes to gain in stature from the welcome he knew he would get in Congress. Speaking in Washington on the supposed threat of Iran was the ultimate in trolling the Israeli left.

Netanyahu uses that alleged threat in a desperate attempt to disguise his increasing resemblance to South Africa's P.W. Botha, the "Great Crocodile," who consigned black Africans to Bantustans as a means of denying them political participation in South African politics—just as Israel has permanently herded Palestinians into disconnected zones in the West Bank or cooped them up in a huge outdoor prison in Gaza. The resemblance, however, is becoming impossible to disregard. Netanyahu's right-wing coalition is dedicated to annexing the West Bank of the Jordan, and many of its members now openly say that they will never allow a Palestinian state. Many Israeli companies have extensive investments in the West Bank, and they fund what Columbia University's Rashid Khalidi has termed the "setter-industrial complex," a prime constituency for Netanyahu.

The down side of this far-right-wing version of the one-state solution is that it leaves several million Palestinians stateless, without basic human rights or stable property rights. Palestinians in Gaza cannot export most of what they produce because of punitive Israeli policies (these are not for security reasons: Israel can't be threatened by exports). West Bank farmers increasingly see their olive orchards cut down by militant Israeli squatters, and their land is often simply taken without compensation. Right-wing Israeli dreams that Palestinians will disappear into Egypt or Jordan are fairy tales. Their policies are instead producing a dreary version of South African apartheid of the 1960s and '70s.

The Obama administration made a desperate attempt to broker a deal between Netanyahu and Palestine, receiving nothing but insults, slights and humiliation from the Israeli cabinet. Those negotiations predictably crashed and burned by spring of 2014. Israeli intransigence is grating in particular on Europe, with which Israel conducts a third of its trade. Just in the past few months, Sweden recognized Palestine, and a number of European parliaments, including those of Britain, France and Italy, have underlined their impatience with Israeli intransigence by threatening to recognize Palestine if Israel does not cease its continual expropriation of West Bank territory and does not stop flooding its own citizens into occupied territory (a serious violation of the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the Rome Statute of 2002). The world is increasingly unwilling to buy the truculent Netanyahu's story of victimhood, when he leads the militarily dominant country in the Middle East, has his own nuclear arsenal and is oppressing millions of stateless Palestinians.

Netanyahu's third goal was to forestall a decrease in tensions between the United States and Iran. The Israeli military enjoys hegemony over nearby Arab conventional armies. The one regional force that has impeded this hegemony is the small Shi'ite guerrilla group Hezbollah, which doubles as a political party that now dominates Lebanese politics. Israel's 2006 war on Hezbollah was a failure—not in the sense that the Israeli army in any way lost, but in the sense that it did not prevail. Hezbollah had hideouts and caves in southern Lebanon about which the Israeli

military was ignorant, and was able to let Israeli tanks go by, then hit them with armor-piercing munitions. Hezbollah rockets forced a fourth of the Israeli population to move out of their homes and seek shelter elsewhere. If the Israeli right wing still dreamed of annexing water-rich southern Lebanon (which Israel occupied from 1982 to 2000), the 2006 war signaled that it was not a plausible aspiration.

Hezbollah would not be what it is without the backing of Shiite Iran, which Netanyahu's faction of Israeli leaders sees as the primary long-term threat to Israel. Netanyahu in his speech depicted Iran as a "conquering" state, even though Iran has not conventionally invaded another country in modern history. It is true that the Shiite parties in Baghdad have allied with Iran, but then Netanyahu had himself argued for the overthrow of the Sunni government of Saddam Hussein, so one does not feel much sympathy for his angst in this regard. Netanyahu even managed to count Iran's help to Baghdad against ISIL—which de facto makes Iran an ally of convenience with the United States in that struggle—as a form of anti-Western aggression.

The prime minister also depicted Iran as a conquering country in Yemen, which is silly. There, the Zaidi Shiite Houthi movement has taken over the north. It is not a cat's paw of Iran, however, and has local roots in Zaid resentment of Saudi interference in their country. Iran's backing for Bashar al-Assad in Damascus is well known, but it is not a "conquest," and Netanyahu himself is thought to prefer Assad to the rebels (most of which by now are allied with Al Qaeda or ISIL). In short, Netanyahu's depiction of Iran as rampaging through the region as a conquering army is a complete fantasy.

It shouldn't be necessary to refute Netanyahu's illogical arguments on the Iranian civilian nuclear enrichment program. Contrary to what the prime minister asserted, it has not been weaponized, and the former Israeli defense minister and Israeli intelligence have admitted that Iran has no nuclear weapons program. Nuclear weapons are in any case defensive, not offensive, and Iran could not deploy a bomb (if it had one, which it doesn't) against Israel because the Israelis would retaliate by wiping Iran off the map.

Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has pledged no first strike against another country, and has strictly forbidden the making, stockpiling or deployment of nuclear weapons as contrary to Islamic law. He could be lying, but in the terms of Shiite Islam, believing he is prevaricating is like believing that the Pope has a condom factory in the basement of the Vatican. Obama in any case proposes not trusting the Iranians but closely monitoring them. No country under active UN inspection has ever developed a nuclear weapon.

The Iran phantasm is like a Swiss army knife for Netanyahu, full of useful little tools. He deflects European human rights concerns with it. He uses the threat of Iran as a way of cementing his behind-the-scenes relations with Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. He reckons that fear of Iran is stronger than concern for the Palestinians in those Arab capitals. He also uses the alleged Iran menace as a way of appealing to Republican hawks in the United States. For Obama to solve the Iran problem and begin to dismantle sanctions on Tehran, and for the United States and NATO to begin to see Iran as useful in the struggle against ISIL, would reconfigure the geopolitics of the Middle East in ways that challenge Netanyahu's current policies and leave his Swiss army knife blunted.

Then, without the shadow of this Iran boogeyman as a distraction, Netanyahu would stand before the world without his emperor's clothes, revealed as the Great Apartheid Crocodile redux, as the bag man for corrupt billionaires and the enabler of Israeli poverty, as the serial abuser of the civilian population of Gaza, as the cynic who hasn't lifted a finger against ISIL, as the man with the launch codes for several hundred nuclear warheads who rails against another regional power's civilian nuclear electricity plants as a virtual apocalypse.