

Unpacking Bibi's Iran Deal Strategy

For some of us the period since July 14, when the nuclear agreement with Iran was announced, has been immensely hectic. I and many of my friends have been reading, commenting, publicizing petitions to Congress, and generally doing our best to get the word out that most American Jews do not oppose the deal and that many (most, according to some reliable polls) support it. Some of us think that the deal is a triumph of diplomacy; others think there is simply no alternative. Obviously, lobbying has been intense and increasingly bitter on both sides.

As I write this on Saturday night, Sept. 5, it looks like the deal will pass, since more than 34 senators (all Democrats) have said they support it. Perhaps we will reach 41 senatorial supporters, which would prevent the Senate from disapproving it, and thus avoid a certain veto by President Obama. Republicans have vowed to do their best to prevent it from going into effect, and hope that if they win the presidency next year, the next president will annul US approval, as he or she will have the right to do.

This may be a good time to examine why Prime Minister Netanyahu broke all diplomatic precedents by actively opposing an American president on a major American debate, especially when it was probable that Obama would win. This question of "why?" has become a cottage industry in Israel, where even many who oppose the deal have condemned Bibi's heavy-handed strategy as calculated to seriously alienate the United States, Israel's primary ally. We who support the deal should keep in mind that we only won this round – assuming we did – because the congressional deck was for once stacked for us; constitutionally we only needed 1/3 of one house of Congress. The fact is that Bibi's and the Republicans' arguments – which are essentially the same – seem to resonate with about half the American people. Of course Bibi knew he would most probably lose, whatever he was telling people. Everyone knew that the numbers were against him.

So why did he invite a seemingly humiliating defeat for himself, but even more for AIPAC and the American Jewish establishment, many of whom reportedly warned him of the consequences and counseled him against going toe to toe with Obama and inviting a split in the American Jewish community?

In my view he went all out for the deal because he is playing for even bigger stakes, namely the presidency in 2016. His preference for Republicans has been made absolutely clear since at least the 2012 election, while Republican adulation for him was obvious when he addressed the US Congress in March, just ahead of the Israeli election. Many called that appearance a "mistake" in judgment because of its divisive and obviously partisan nature. I don't agree it was a mistake. Not that he never makes them – far from it; but this is too elementary. Rather, his behavior since July has provided strong evidence that he not only doesn't care about bipartisan support for Israel but, rather, is actively working to swing Jewish support to the Republicans while virtually writing off, even deliberately alienating, traditionally pro-Israel liberal Democrats.

In the 14 months until the presidential election, Bibi's support will be crucial in mobilizing a few super-rich Jews and millions of evangelicals for the Republican candidate. He has already fired them up in the Iran campaign. His popularity among most Republicans is immense. And we can assume that his message will be that to support Bibi is to support Israel – and of course to oppose him is to be anti-Israel, whether you are Jewish, Christian or whatever. Even more so than in the last two months, this will split the American Jewish community unprecedentedly and perhaps irrevocably, with most (not all) Orthodox Jews supporting him, along with much of the Jewish establishment, while liberal Jews will be painfully torn. My own, by no means disinterested, guess is that most liberal Jews will vote their values and oppose Bibi, and that the historic relationship between American Jews and the Democratic party will continue, but that support for Israel will become increasingly diffuse and partisan.

Thus, it really didn't matter to Bibi if he won or lost this battle. In some ways it's better for him that he lost, because whatever goes wrong with the agreement – and nothing is as smooth as we like to imagine – will be puffed up and blamed on Obama and the agreement's supporters. And we know the Republicans will try to sabotage the agreement every way they can, and blame the consequent damage on Obama, Democrats and liberals.

It's a risky gamble, of course. There are plenty of uncertainties. For example, Bibi certainly didn't envision Trump, and I'm sure he's not happy about him because he's unpredictable and doesn't subscribe to orthodoxies. But I don't think Trump will get the nomination, and he probably likes Bibi's Israel in any case. But I think Bibi's main goal is trying to remake the American role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and get its support for the most rightwing forces in Israel, which are openly supporting a Greater Israel, with no Palestinian state, and Israel in permanent control of all the land west of the Jordan River. Doing that would assure his legacy forever.

I am not alleging a conspiracy but simply a political deal. The evidence of Israeli-Republican cooperation is plain to see. Within the Jewish community, we have witnessed numerous instances of those who dissent from Bibi's policies being excluded from Jewish community forums. Given the bitterness engendered in the campaign for and against the Iran deal within the Jewish community, we can expect to see more of this in the coming year.

Of course, Bibi may well be overreaching – let's pray he is. There's a lot that can go wrong with this for him – but if the Republicans get in, they will owe Bibi bigtime. And that means Greater Israel will be a reality, Israeli and Palestinian supporters of a two-state solution will have nowhere to go, and what unity remains in the American Jewish community will likely be gone forever.