



## **World Citizen: Netanyahu's Speech Divides Washington—and Israel**

Frida Ghitis

# World Citizen: Netanyahu's Speech Divides Washington—and Israel

Frida Ghitis

March 5, 2015

When the idea first emerged of giving a speech before the U.S. Congress on the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his political advisers must have thought the platform would give him a strong boost in Israel's upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for March 17. The hero's welcome they expected Netanyahu to receive would all but ensure success in his quest for another term in the prime minister's office.

Electoral politics, to be sure, were not the only or even the principal reason for Netanyahu's decision to deliver his controversial address. Netanyahu genuinely sees himself as a man with a historic mission to safeguard Israel and prevent another Holocaust of the Jewish people. Anyone who thinks the decision to speak in Washington was all about politics does not understand him.

Still, millenary historic considerations aside, Netanyahu's actions are hardly free from political considerations. To the contrary, if the prime minister is to save his people, he would argue, he must remain their top leader. And that requires winning elections.

The speech in Washington aimed to warn the U.S. and the world about the dangers of a weak deal with Iran in the ongoing nuclear negotiations. In the process, it was reasonable for Netanyahu to expect the event would secure a boost two weeks ahead of the election. That was particularly important because the polls show Netanyahu's Likud facing a sturdy challenge from his more dovish political rivals.

But anyone who thought the Washington performance would clinch victory failed to foresee the diplomatic and political firestorm it ignited. Israeli voters have an uncommonly keen understanding of American politics, and they are painfully aware of the importance of

ties with the U.S. to their country's security. As a result, what looked like a sure bet for Netanyahu turned into a complicated, nerve-racking mess for voters.

The speech, and particularly the lead-up to it, heightened anxieties among voters in Israel and among supporters of Israel in the U.S. More troubling for Netanyahu, it sparked an unprecedented wave of criticism from security experts at home, potentially eroding any electoral advantages from the address.

Initially, the electoral calculus went something like this: Netanyahu would walk into the U.S. Congress to deafening applause from both sides of the aisle. He would deliver a predictably powerful speech, which would not only have an impact in the U.S., but would show the people of Israel that he is a fearless leader, respected in the heart of the world's most powerful country. Sure, he would rattle U.S. President Barack Obama, but he might nudge the Iran debate just enough to produce a stronger agreement with Iran, one that would make Israel safer. In the process, Israeli voters would see how their prime minister's oratorical prowess and grasp of American politics made their country secure. After watching such a performance Israeli voters would say, How could we go on with any other prime minister? Who could possibly replace Bibi?

That was the plan, at least for a certain segment of the electorate. Sure, leftist voters would never support Netanyahu. But those on the right, enticed by a slew of rightist parties competing with Likud, would line up behind Netanyahu. The speech would do enough to cement the loyalty of wavering Likudniks, while possibly peeling away some support from parties to the right of Likud and perhaps even from some undecided voters in the middle.

The plan had every chance of working because, despite the strong performance of his rivals in the polls, all Likud needs to come ahead in the elections is to eke out just a few more seats than it is currently projected to take.

The polls have consistently shown a tight race. [In one taken about a week ago](#), Likud would capture 24 seats, just two more than the Zionist Union, a bloc formed by Labor's Isaac Herzog and former Justice

Minister Tzipi Livni.

But another poll released Tuesday, the day of the speech, showed the Zionist Union in first place, with 24 seats ahead of Likud's 21. Whether the Zionist Union, with its centrist and left-of-center support, could form a majority coalition in the 120-seat Knesset, the Israeli parliament, is another matter. But for now, coming in first is what counts.

Netanyahu is eyeing the Zionist Union with the greatest concern. But just as important, he is keeping a close watch on Bayt Hayehudi (Jewish Home), the rightist party led by Naftali Bennett, his former chief of staff and current rival for leadership of the right.

Bennett, currently economy minister, was in the U.S. providing rhetorical backing to Netanyahu in the days leading up to speech. But he worries Netanyahu. Bayt Hayehudi is in third place in many of the polls, with about 14 seats. If the speech could take a few votes from Bennett, it might just clinch first place for Likud.

The speech itself went well. The U.S. Congress roared with applause, and there were more than two dozen standing ovations. But it was what came before that undermined the plan to turn the event into an electoral apotheosis.

Israelis were stunned to hear their former ambassador to the U.S., Michael Oren, [advise Netanyahu to cancel the speech](#). Oren told Israeli television that the speech was causing a dangerous rift with the White House and would be counterproductive in the effort to stop Iran's nuclear weapons pursuit, which he called "Israel's two existential needs."

Then came an even more damning criticism. A coalition of 180 former military and intelligence officials [urged Netanyahu to scrap the speech](#) to avoid hurting Israel's security, too.

On Tuesday, when the speech aired on Israeli television, election authorities ordered a five-minute delay so they could erase blatantly political material. But there was no need. The political messages had already been broadcast in newspaper columns and sidewalk cafes.

Netanyahu delivered a strong speech, as everyone expected. But the

impact of the entire episode sowed doubts about his wisdom. To die-hard Netanyahu supporters, the prime minister demonstrated his fearlessness in the face of criticism from the powerful. To doubters, he rekindled concerns about his arrogance and brazenness.

After it was over, experts said the impact, whatever the polls show in the days ahead, [is likely to be erased](#) in the two weeks left until the election. □

*Frida Ghitis is an independent commentator on world affairs and a World Politics Review contributing editor. Her weekly WPR column, [World Citizen](#), appears every Thursday. Follow her on Twitter at [@fridaghitis](#).*

*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses a joint meeting of Congress, Washington, D.C., March 3, 2015 (Official photo from the office of Speaker of the House John Boehner by Caleb Smith).*

**Want to know more?** [Subscribe to World Politics Review](#) to get new articles daily.