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Silent Arrogance: Netanyahu at the UN

by Mitchell Plitnick

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his appearance at the United Nations General Assembly today, one day after a speech by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Nothing of substance is going to change as a result of these speeches. But Netanyahu's in particular offered a good picture of the current state of affairs and why they are what they are.

Netanyahu's speech was clearly aimed not at the international audience he was addressing, but at constituent audiences in Israel and the United States. Indeed, his very cadence was rehearsed to

allow for bursts of applause of the kind he's grown accustomed to in Congress. After a few of those silent pauses, a small portion of the audience recognized the need to fill them with polite applause, but for the most part, Netanyahu's speech was received with stony silence.

If there was anything remarkable about the speech, it was Netanyahu's hostile, condescending tone. Already, his "44-second pause" has become infamous. This pause, after Netanyahu accused the United Nations of tolerating genocidal threats from Iran, was accompanied by Netanyahu's scowl at the entire assembly.

The moment was emblematic of Netanyahu's scolding approach. The message he intended to convey to those gathered in the room and watching was highlighted when he discussed the "unshakeable" bond between Israel and the United States. Netanyahu was telling the world that as long as he has America, he really doesn't care what the rest of the world thinks.

In the wake of the very public arguments between the Netanyahu government and the Obama Administration over the agreement on Iran's nuclear program, many observers have been speculating about the future of the US-Israel relationship and if it is as "unshakeable" as Netanyahu contends it is. The contours of where that relationship might go from here were also apparent in another piece of Netanyahu's UN Speech.

"President Obama and I have both said that our differences over the nuclear deal are a disagreement within the family," Netanyahu declared. "But we have no disagreement about the need to work together to secure our common future."

There should be no doubt among anyone trying to promote an end to the Israel-Palestine conflict that the experience of the Obama Administration proves that, however rocky the politics may be, the United States will not falter in ensuring that Israel remains the dominant military power in the region. Despite repeated episodes of friction and tension between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, American largesse in military support of Israel has only increased.

But even if we adopt Netanyahu's family analogy, it's worth keeping in mind that, while family members will generally keep each other safe, they don't necessarily always support every endeavor of the other family members.

That notion was highlighted by a revelation in Politico the very morning of Bibi's speech at the UN. The report says that Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid has twice requested that the President publicly state that the United States would veto any UN Security Council Resolution calling for a Palestinian state and that both times, the President has declined to agree to such an action.

The possibility of such a UN resolution is real, and if the Obama Administration is open to allowing it to pass, that would mark a significant shift in U.S. posture at the UN. Most pointedly, it brings to mind the 2011 incident where the United States vetoed a resolution on settlements that was virtually identical to America's stated policy.

Some might see this as an effect of the mutual dislike between Obama and Netanyahu, but in reality it is more than that. No doubt, when Obama's term in office ends, his successor is likely to be at least somewhat more to Israel's liking. But there are real differences in policy in play here, and those differences are not limited to Iran.

In explaining why Obama was not more responsive to Reid's requests, National Security Council spokesperson, Ned Price reminded us that the United States supports a two-state solution. He pointed out that Palestinian efforts in the international arena were not welcomed by the administration, but the implication was clear: the Obama Administration was not going to promise to veto a resolution that might serve to save the dimming possibility of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

That is a policy that could well continue into the next administration, and it puts political daylight between the US and Israel.

That daylight might matter in the near future. Netanyahu repeated his stock line about being willing to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas "with no precondition," the day after Abbas made his empty statement about the Palestinians no longer abiding by "previous signed agreements." While Abbas did not actually annul a single agreement with Israel, Netanyahu will certainly want to use this as yet another obstacle in the way of any action toward ending Israel's occupation. Obama seems intent, however, on preserving some hope for a two-state solution.

Netanyahu's belligerence to everyone but America in his speech was palpable. He made no effort to hide his disdain. While there will be some humor to be gleaned from his glaring 44-second pause and his trumpeting of cherry tomatoes as an Israeli accomplishment, the speech will only increase Israel's isolation on the world stage. It will also make it even more embarrassing for the United States to continue to shield Israel from the consequences not only of its policies but also of Netanyahu's hubris.

Thumbing his nose at the entire international community will play well in Israel and among Israel's more militant supporters in the United States. But it will sharpen the divide between those who want to secure Israel by utterly defeating the Palestinians and those who want to see Israel's occupation end with peace and security for all.

The latter group includes the Obama Administration and most American Jews. Netanyahu has made it clear that he is an ideological opponent of that group. It's time to accept him at his word on that and stop pretending he can be won over.