



## Blinded by the Right

The GOP's blatantly partisan love for Bibi obscures a dangerous reality: that unwavering support for Israel actually hurts wider U.S. interests in the Middle East.

BY MICHAEL A. COHEN | MAY 24, 2011



In 2003, Democrats upset about President George W. Bush's plans to invade Iraq invited French President Jacques Chirac, an opponent of the war, to address a joint meeting of Congress. It was blatant political play, an attempt by the opposition to work with a foreign leader in offering a counterargument to the president's invasion plans and limit his ability to carry through with his decision to go to war in the Middle East. Chirac was feted across Washington by liberal think tanks and pro-French lobbying groups as American politicians and Democratic activists fell over themselves to be identified with a strong anti-war leader.

This, of course, did not happen. The idea that Congress would openly side with a foreign leader against the president of the United States seems too far-fetched to believe. Remarkably, however, something not dissimilar happened in Washington Tuesday, May 24, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to a joint meeting of Congress (a speech interrupted more than 25 times by a rapturous standing ovation). While these types of congressional addresses are rare, this particular event is even a bit more unusual: The speech's intention

-- with the full assistance and backing of the Republican leadership in Congress and implicit support of Democrats -- was to give Netanyahu a public forum to offer a rebuttal to President Barack Obama's recent proposals for moving forward with the Arab-Israeli peace process.

As the *New York Times* **reported** last week, the invitation was initially requested by Netanyahu of the GOP leadership before the president's Middle East speech plans had even been formalized: It was "widely interpreted as an attempt to get out in front of Mr. Obama, by presenting an Israeli peace proposal that, while short of what the Palestinians want, would box in the president." In turn, **Obama's May 19 speech** was scheduled purposely so that the president could get out ahead of Bibi's remarks.

It's one thing for Republicans to oppose the president's position on Arab-Israeli peace. In the hours after Obama's Middle East speech, Republican presidential contenders like Tim Pawlenty and Mitt Romney did just that, arguing that the president had proverbially thrown Israel "under the bus." (Never mind that Obama simply reiterated long-standing U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli peace process.) They were joined -- in a bipartisan manner -- by prominent Democrats, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, in offering pushback on the president's words.

It is certainly appropriate for members of Congress to disagree with the president's foreign-policy agenda. But it's something else altogether to be appearing to work in concert with the leader of another country in trying to put the president on the defensive -- and seeking to score a **partisan political advantage** in the process. By openly siding with Netanyahu against Obama and making Arab-Israeli peace a partisan issue, Republicans in Congress are at serious risk of crossing a dangerous line and in the process undermining U.S. interests in the Middle East.

This behavior follows a concerning pattern. Last November, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, after a meeting with Netanyahu, suggested that a Republican Congress would serve as a check on the Obama administration when it came to Israel policy (a position he later sought to walk back). In the fall of 2009, Cantor criticized the Obama administration for its rebuke of the Israeli government over the **eviction** of Palestinian families in East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. Most surprising of all, the attack was lodged from Jerusalem, where Cantor was heading a 25-person GOP delegation -- an unusual violation of the unspoken rule that members of Congress should refrain from criticizing the U.S. government while on foreign soil. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee took a similar position this February while traveling in Israel. He **called** the Obama administration's opposition to Israeli settlements (a position long held by Democratic and Republican presidents) equivalent to "racism" and "apartheid."

Last week, as Netanyahu lectured Obama at a frosty White House news conference and issued statements on what he "expected to hear" from the president about his commitment to Israeli security, Republican lawmakers barely batted an eye at behavior that by any other foreign leader would spark outrage from their caucus -- and instead aimed their attacks at Obama.

This seems at pace with the GOP's default position on Israel. This February, writing in the pages of *National*

*Review*, Romney **stated** that "Israel must now contend with the fact that its principal backer in the world, the United States, is seeking to ingratiate itself with Arab opinion at its expense." It's a view that no doubt would have been met with astonishment in Arab capitals, where America's image remains largely **negative**. One can't help but wonder whether the tail isn't wagging the dog -- after all, is there a reason that the United States *shouldn't* seek to ingratiate itself with Arab public opinion? There is an implicit assumption here that no matter what Israel says or does the United States must continue to be blindly supportive -- an odd stance for an American politician to take, particularly when Israel's actions occasionally run counter to larger U.S. interests.

Although one cannot ignore the fact that strongly held empathy for Israel is, in part, motivating this position, there is of course a healthy dose of domestic politicking at work. Democrats have long relied on Jewish support -- both electorally and financially. Republicans, though less reliant on Jewish voters, have successfully made support for Israel a litmus test for Democrats to prove their national security mettle. Moreover, with strong backing for Israel among the party's conservative base, defending Israeli behavior has become a surefire way for Republicans to politically cater to social conservatives and evangelical voters. In fact, Israel probably enjoys more clear-cut support for its policies among social conservatives than it does among American Jews! (And Netanyahu, in particular, didn't just fall into this love fest: He has long supported and helped spearhead the alliance between the Israeli right wing and American religious conservatives.)

All this is a very far cry from George H.W. Bush's open conflict with Israel and the American Jewish community in 1991 over loan guarantees for Israeli settlements. That the perception continues to exist that Bush's aggressive stance cost him severely in the 1992 presidential election no doubt haunts the Republican Party -- and any American politician inclined to put public pressure on Israeli leaders.

But ultimately there is more than politics at stake here. At a critical moment in the political transformation of the Middle East, America's steadfast and unyielding support for Israel -- underwritten by both parties in Congress -- risks undermining America's long-term interests in the region. Last year, Gen. David Petraeus **commented** in congressional testimony that "Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples [in the region]." His statement provoked controversy in Washington, but ask any seasoned Middle East observer and you'd be hard-pressed to find one who disagrees with the general's assessment. It is not Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya which is the greatest source of anti-American attitudes in the Arab world -- it is the continued lack of resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the view of many in the region that the United States has its thumb on the scale in favor of Israel.

None of this is to suggest that Washington should turn its back on the Jewish state. But this is also a time when a more evenhanded position on the conflict is desperately needed -- particularly as the United States will need to deal with a new government in Cairo that will likely be less supportive of Israel, a wave of unsteady democratic reforms spreading across the Mideast, and a U.N. General Assembly that appears ready to endorse Palestinian statehood this fall. These events will have serious repercussions not just for Israel but for U.S. policy in the region. Obama at least seems to realize this fact and has -- albeit tepidly -- challenged a recalcitrant Israel to get

serious about peace. Yet Congress seems intent on restraining his leverage, effectively holding U.S. actions hostage to the whims of partisan politics -- and in the process working in concert with a foreign leader to do it. At some point, it raises the legitimate question of who is looking out not for Israel's interests, but America's.

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