For Netanyahu, Iran Is Personal

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Published in:
The Huffington Post

2013

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
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For the most part in recent years, the debate on Israeli-Iranian enmity in general and Israel's threats to take military action against Iran's nuclear program in particular has been framed around such "structural" or "big" issues as the regional balance of power, Israeli history, state survival, national interests, and hegemonic dominance in the greater Middle East. While each of the factors sheds light on a unique aspect of the controversy, a closer look at the personal dimensions to the increasing conflict may provide a more nuanced perspective in understanding the escalating tension.

In the prime time of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's career as the Iranian president from 2005 to 2013, many academics and politicians alike were highlighting his thirst for grandeur, messianic beliefs and apocalyptic worldview as a major driver behind the hostility, rendering the whole problem yet more difficult to resolve. In the past, for instance, it was his call for an all-out attack on Israeli planes in the skies of Iran that signified the start of what would become a "zero-sum situation vis-à-vis Iran. Like in poker, all-in means that you either win all or lose all. So, if Iran, which he firmly believes is dashing for the bomb, is forcefully stopped, he will be a national winner and probably secure himself a heroic place in Israeli history. If he fails to take action, however, and Iran is allowed to cross Israel's red lines, Netanyahu will go down (http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/netanyahu-strike-iran.html) in history as the biggest loser ever in Israeli politics.
The whole issue of Iran's nuclear program, with its alleged weaponization activities, has therefore personal importance for Netanyahu too. Throughout his political career, he has always been driven by feelings of unrecognized grandiosity. His father, Benzion Netanyahu, was ostracized by Israel's labor establishment and forced to pursue his academic career abroad. His wife Sara has been on the record saying her husband "is the very best prime minister ever to serve in Israel." Though Winston Churchill is his role model, Netanyahu has nothing of his stature in Israel, and, of course, even less so abroad, where he is often accused of not acting "Churchillian" and for missing "Churchillian moments."

In Israel and abroad, it is widely believed that Netanyahu is seeking his place in the history books with his campaign to halt Iran's nuclear venture. Obsessive attempts on his part to personalize such a matter, which has enormous implications for Israel's national security and interests, partly explains why the Israeli military is suspicious of his policy line and more often than not expresses opposition to an attack on the Islamic Republic. While few in Israel doubt the gravity of the threat of a potential Iranian bomb, many worry about Netanyahu's true motives behind a forceful action to take it out. The former iron triangle of the Israeli military, namely former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, former head of Mossad Meir Dagan, and former director of Shin Bet Yuval Diskin, all opposed an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities during their incumbency because they could not trust Netanyahu's intentions and the disinterestedness of his attitude towards the issue. Stressing that Netanyahu is "possessed" by Iran, Diskin, for example, has quoted Bibi as saying that "his mission on Iran is on a much grander scale." The previous Israeli strikes on Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities, the whole issue of Iran's nuclear program, with its alleged weaponization activities, has therefore personal importance for Netanyahu too. Throughout his political career, he has always been driven by feelings of unrecognized grandiosity. His father, Benzion Netanyahu, was ostracized by Israel's labor establishment and forced to pursue his academic career abroad. His wife Sara has been on the record saying her husband "is the very best prime minister ever to serve in Israel." Though Winston Churchill is his role model, Netanyahu has nothing of his stature in Israel, and, of course, even less so abroad, where he is often accused of not acting "Churchillian" and for missing "Churchillian moments."

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This article is co-authored with Maysam Behravesh who is a Ph.D. candidate in political science at Lund University, Sweden.