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A Third Muslim-World War?

Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu would do anything to protect Israel—as long as he doesn't have to believe in peace.

By **Christopher Dickey** | Newsweek Web Exclusive
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Back when Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu was elected Israel's prime minister for the first time, in 1996, a Jordanian political scientist with a grim sense of humor said the only way to describe him was like a villain out of an old Western: "He's a lyin', cheatin', deceitin' son of a bitch!"

The Obama administration, without using quite such colorful language, might be inclined to agree. As Aluf Benn, the respected diplomatic correspondent for Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper wrote in [these columns](#) recently, when U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Israel last week, he "had come to offer not just friendship, but support (and protection) against Iran—Israel's greatest bogeyman—in exchange for a few concessions from Netanyahu. Instead, he got a finger in the eye."

The announcement of government-approved plans to build 1,600 new Israeli homes in largely Arab East Jerusalem was a direct challenge to Biden's efforts to move peace talks forward. The Palestinians, who want East Jerusalem as the capital of their state, accuse the Israelis of using such projects to create "facts on the ground" that vastly complicate future negotiations—and, indeed, that is precisely the intent of many Israelis who support the building program.

But the problem as Benn presented it was more complex than that: a combination of brinkmanship and blackmail in which Netanyahu's government makes veiled threats to attack Iran, or not, depending on how much pressure it feels on the Palestinian issue.

U.S. military planners have little doubt that an Israeli air campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities would provoke Iranian retaliation against Saudi Arabia and other major oil producers allied with the United States. American efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which border Iran, would come under threat. And there would be no way that any U.S. administration, after so many decades pledging undying support for Israel, could make a convincing claim in Muslim eyes that it was not complicit in the attack.

One of the cardinal rules of realism in international politics—and Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton both pride themselves on their realism—is "never allow a weak ally to make decisions for you."

Political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau wrote in his classic *Politics Among Nations* that great powers "lose their freedom of action by identifying their own national interests completely with those of a weak ally." And for all its bluster, Israel is, at the end of the day, a tiny country with a population smaller than that of New York City. "Secure in the support of its powerful friend, the weak ally can choose the objectives and methods of its foreign policy to suit itself," Morgenthau warned. "The powerful nation then finds it must support interests not its own and that it is unable to compromise on issues that are vital not to itself, but only to its ally."

Netanyahu wants to make sure that his priorities are America's priorities on many issues. So he and his supporters argue that if they're forced to make concessions that would create an independent, viable, contiguous Palestinian state, Israel would feel so insecure that it would have to attack Iran to protect itself—no matter what the implications for Americans and their men and women in the field.

"On both sides they are talking in terms of life and death," Benn wrote in *Haaretz* a couple of days ago. "Netanyahu's backers charge [President Barack] Obama with sentencing Israel to death via the Iranian nuclear program and 'Auschwitz borders' from which rockets would be fired [by Palestinians] onto Tel Aviv and Ben-Gurion International Airport. For their part, the Americans warn that Israel's desire for settlements is endangering their soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Actually, the American warning is a little more pointed even than that, and it's not just from the politicians in the Obama administration, it's from the military. As reported by Mark Perry at *Foreign Policy*, back in January a briefing prepared for the American Joint Chiefs of Staff by senior officers at the U.S. Central Command under Gen. David Petraeus reported "a growing perception among Arab leaders that the U.S. was incapable of standing up to Israel," that the leaders of the many Arab governments in CentCom's *area of responsibility* were "losing faith in American promises," and that "Israeli intransigence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was jeopardizing U.S. standing in the region."

Humiliation, weakness, and vulnerability go hand in hand, and Netanyahu seems intent on dishing up all three to the Obama administration lest he himself be made to look like "a sucker," according to Benn.

This sort of attitude isn't new. Netanyahu summed up his core thinking in his 1993 book, *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World*, when he said it was naive for Israelis to believe that "Arabs loathed war as much as they themselves." He derided Israelis who thought of peace as "a kind of blissful castle in the clouds, a Jewish never-never land in which the Jews will be able finally to find a respite from struggle and strife."

In Bibi's view, the fight will go on and on. "True, continuing struggle does not necessarily mean perpetual war, but it does mean an ongoing national exertion and the possibility of periodic bouts of international confrontation ... You cannot end the struggle for survival without ending life itself." So to protect itself, in Netanyahu's view, Israel has to be aggressive on all fronts, controlling the land, the sea, the sky, and above all the message—never giving an inch. To paraphrase the late Erich Segal, being Bibi means never having to say you're sorry.

So it is difficult, to say the least, to be Netanyahu's friend, and nobody knows that better than the Jordanians, who tried to build a solid peace with Israel during his last term as prime minister in the 1990s. "Today

everything is déjà vu," says Randa Habib, author of the forthcoming *Hussein and Abdullah: Inside the Jordanian Royal Family*.

Jordan had signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994 only to see the architect of that accord, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, gunned down by an Israeli terrorist in 1995. When Netanyahu won the elections that followed, Jordan's late King Hussein had hopes he could work with Bibi. Hussein tried to build confidence by receiving the Israeli prime minister in Amman in August 1996, only to have the Israelis begin digging a tunnel under Muslim holy places in Jerusalem a few days later. In February 1997, Hussein invited Netanyahu to Amman again, hoping to improve the atmosphere, but the next day the Israelis announced approval of a whole new Jewish neighborhood, Har Homa, to be built in East Jerusalem. In both cases the timing seemed planned not only to embarrass King Hussein, but to implicate and weaken him.

Finally, King Hussein wrote bluntly to Netanyahu: "You are destroying peace. I have no trust in you." In his response to the king, Netanyahu professed to be "amazed by your personal attack."

A few months later, Israeli agents tried to kill Hamas leader Khaled Meshal, who was then in Amman, by spraying an exotic poison in his ear. Unlike **the killers** of another Hamas official in Dubai in January this year, the ones in Jordan were caught. Hussein demanded the antidote from Netanyahu, as well as the release of another Hamas leader, and did not turn over the captured Mossad agents until he got them. The Canadian government protested the use of its passports by the assassins, another harbinger of the Dubai case. But in the end, like today, nothing happened. "The Israelis will get away with all this; they always get away with it," says Habib.

I am not so sure. Even a dozen years ago, the American public was largely passive about Middle East issues. Congressmen proclaimed undying support for Israel, and their constituents asked few questions. Now, with America involved in two wars in the Muslim world, that's not the case. The **1,000-plus comments** on Aluf Benn's NEWSWEEK column make that clear. But the decisive voices may belong to America's generals. Are they ready to have Bibi Netanyahu's vision of war-without-end dictate endless wars for American troops? The answer, almost certainly, is no.

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