

# The Battle of the Titans

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**T**HIS IS NOT merely a fight between Israel and the US. Nor is it only a fight between the White House and Congress. It is also a battle between intellectual titans.

On the one side there are the two renowned professors, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer. On the other, the towering international intellectual Noam Chomsky.

It's all about whether the dog wags the tail or the tail wags the dog.

SIX YEARS ago the two professors shocked the US (and Israel) when they published a book, "*The Israel lobby and US Foreign Policy*", in which they asserted that the foreign policy of the United States of America, at least in the Middle East, is practically controlled by the State of Israel.

To paraphrase their analysis, Washington DC is in effect an Israeli colony. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives are Israeli occupied territories, much like Ramallah and Nablus.

This is diametrically opposed to the assertion of Noam Chomsky that Israel is a US pawn, used by American imperialism as an instrument to promote its interests.<sup>1</sup>

INTELLECTUAL THEORIES can seldom be put to a laboratory test. But this one can.

It is happening now. Between Israel and the US a crisis has developed, and it has come into the open.

It's about the putative Iranian nuclear bomb. President Barack Obama is determined to avert a military showdown. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is determined to prevent a compromise.

For Netanyahu, the Iranian nuclear effort has become a defining issue, even an obsession. He talks about it incessantly. He has declared that it is an "*existential*" threat to Israel, that it poses the possibility of a second Holocaust. Last year he made an exhibition of himself at the UN General Assembly meeting with his childish drawing of the bomb.

Cynics say that this is only a trick, a successful gimmick to divert the world's attention away from the Palestinian issue. And indeed, for years now the Israeli policy of occupation and settlements has been advancing quietly,

away from the limelight.

But in politics, one gimmick can serve several purposes at once. Netanyahu is serious about the Iranian bomb. The proof: on this issue he is ready to do something that no Israeli prime minister has ever dared to do before: endanger Israeli-American relations.

This is a momentous decision. Israel is dependent on the US in almost every respect. The US pays Israel a yearly tribute of at least three billion dollars, and in fact much more. It gives us state of the art military equipment. Its veto protects us from UN Security Council censure, whatever we do.

We have no other unconditional friend in the world, except, perhaps, the Fiji Islands.

If there is one thing on which practically all Israelis agree, it is this subject. A break with the US is unthinkable. The US-Israeli relationship is, to use a Hebrew expression much loved by Netanyahu, "*the rock of our existence*".

So what does he think he is doing?

NETANYAHU WAS brought up in the US. There he attended high school and university. There he started his career.

He does not need advisors on US affairs. He considers himself the smartest expert of all.

He is no fool. Neither is he an adventurer. He bases himself on solid assessments. He believes that he is able to win this fight.

You could say that he is an adherent of the Walt-Mearsheimer doctrine.

His present moves are based on the assessment that in a straight confrontation between Congress and the White House, Congress will win. Obama, already blooded by other issues, will be beaten, even destroyed.

True, Netanyahu was proved wrong the last time he tried something like this. During the last presidential elections, he openly supported Mitt Romney. The idea was that the Republicans were bound to win. The Jewish casino baron, Sheldon Adelson, poured money into their campaign, while at the same time maintaining an Israeli mass-circulation daily for the sole purpose of supporting Netanyahu.

<sup>1</sup>I commented at the time that both sides were right, and that this is a unique dog-tail relationship. I even quoted the old Jewish joke about the rabbi who tells a plaintiff that he is right, and then says the same to the defendant. "*But they can't both be right!*" remonstrates his wife. "*You are right, too!*" he answers.

Romney “couldn’t lose”—but he did. This should have been a lesson for Netanyahu, but he didn’t absorb it. He is now playing the same game, but for vastly higher stakes.

WE ARE now in the middle of the fight, and it is still too early to predict the outcome.

The Jewish pro-Israel lobby, AIPAC, supported by other Jewish and Evangelical organizations, is marshalling its forces on Capitol Hill. It’s an impressive show.

Senator after Senator, Congressman after Congressman comes forward to support the Israeli government against their own president. The same people who jumped up and down like string puppets when Netanyahu made his last speech before both houses of Congress, try to outdo each other in assertions of their undying loyalty to Israel.

This is now done in the open, in an exhibition of shamelessness. Several Senators and Congressmen declare publicly that they have been briefed by the Israeli intelligence services, and they trust them more than the intelligence agencies of the USA. Not one of them said the opposite.

This would have been unthinkable if any other country was involved, say Ireland or Italy, from which many Americans are descended. The “Jewish State” stands unique, a kind of inverse anti-Semitism.

Indeed, some Israeli commentators have joked that Netanyahu believes in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the famous—and infamous—tract fabricated by the secret police of the Czar. It purported to expose a sinister conspiracy of the Jews to rule the world. A hundred years later, controlling the US comes near to that.

The senators and representatives are no fools (not all of them, in any case). They have a clear purpose: to be re-elected. They know on which side their bread is buttered. AIPAC has demonstrated, in several test cases, that it can unseat any senator or congressman who does not toe the straight Israeli line. One sentence of implied criticism of Israeli policies suffices to doom a candidate.

Politicians prefer open shame and ridicule to political suicide. No kamikaze pilots in Congress.

This is not a new situation. It is at least several decades

old. What is new is that it is now out in the open, without embellishment.

IT IS difficult to know, as of now, how much the White House is cowed by this development.

Obama and his Secretary of State John Kerry know that American public opinion is dead set against any new war in the Middle East. Compromise with Iran is in the air. This is supported by almost all the world’s powers. Even the French tantrums, which have no clear purpose but to throw their supposed weight around, are not serious.

President Francois Hollande was received in Israel this week like the harbinger of the Messiah. If one closed one’s eyes, one could imagine that the happy old pre-de Gaulle days were back again, when France armed Israel, supplied it with its military atomic reactor and the two countries went on escapades together (the ill-fated 1956 Suez adventure.)

But if Obama & Kerry hold fast and stay their course on Iran, can Congress impose the opposite course? Could this turn into the most serious constitutional crisis in US history?

As a sideshow, Kerry is going on with his effort to impose on Netanyahu a peace he does not want. The Secretary of State did succeed in pushing Netanyahu into “final status negotiations” (nobody dared to utter the word peace, God forbid), but nobody in Israel or Palestine believes that anything will come out of this. Unless, of course, the White House puts the whole might of the US behind the effort—and that seems more than unlikely.

Kerry has allotted nine months to the endeavor, as if it were a normal pregnancy. But the chances of a baby emerging at the end of it are practically nil. During the first three months, the sides have not progressed a single step.

So who will win? Obama or Netanyahu? Chomsky or Walt/Mearsheimer?

As commentators love to say: Time Will Tell.

In the meantime, place your bets.