

## Beware the threat of Iran's Shi'ite extremists, warns Netanyahu



Foreign Minister Julie Bishop meets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Sydney.

Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 12:00AM February 27, 2017

The Sunni extremist terrorists of al-Qa'ida and Islamic State could be replaced by Shi'ite extremist groups manipulated by Iran, who would be just as dangerous to the world, according to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In an exclusive interview as he prepared to leave Australia after a four-day visit, he said an Iran with nuclear weapons would threaten Australia as well as the Middle East, and called for greater military-to-military co-operation between Jerusalem and Canberra. "When I look at Syria and Iraq, I think that the danger of ISIS has been greatly reduced," he said, "but the possibility now looms that the militant Sunnis of ISIS and al-Qa'ida may be replaced by the militant Shi'ites of Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah." Mr Netanyahu is confident that the new Trump administration in Washington will take tougher action against Iran.

He says the US is considering "as we speak" a range of new sanctions against Iran.

He remains a critic of the nuclear deal that the Obama administration enacted with Iran. "If the deal can't be changed, it should be cancelled," he said. "The problem with the deal is that it guarantees that in 10 or 15 years, Iran will have the capacity for a breakout not of one or two bombs but up to 100 bombs. To have such a rogue nation with such vast atomic power will threaten the peace and stability of the entire world. Iran's cause is the domination of, first, the world of Islam, and then the world, by its revivalist Shi'ite doctrine."

Mr Netanyahu's call for closer military co-operation between Australia and Israel is one of the few areas where the two nations have not grown closer. Canberra sources suggest that while the Australian Defence Force has no objection to closer co-operation with Israel in principle, it fears this

could damage or jeopardise the relationships it has in the Arab Gulf world, which allow Australia to deploy forces in Iraq and Syria.

Mr Netanyahu denied point black that he had torpedoed a peace plan devised by former secretary of state John Kerry, which would have involved Arab recognition of Israel as a Jewish state in return for substantial Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

The Israeli leader put the talks he had with Egypt's President Abdel El-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein in a completely different context. He told The Australian he had initiated the meeting. "This is one of the initiatives I had undertaken," Mr Netanyahu said. "The fact that it didn't succeed, yet, does not discourage me because we're engaged in many, many other initiatives." "These are in the hope of getting broader normalisation between Israel and the Arab countries and from there to seek the advancement of peace between us and our Palestinian neighbours. This is what we call the outside-in path to peace."

Looking back on his four days in Australia, longer than he spent on his recent trip to the US and the third time he has visited Australia, though the first as Prime Minister, Mr Netanyahu said he saw great progress in a joint approach between Israel and Australia to the two greatest global dynamics at work today. "There is a great convulsion in the world today," Mr Netanyahu said, "a great hope and a great challenge. The hope is the advent of the information age. The advantage will clearly tilt towards innovation nations. We're both geared towards innovation. "This will define our competitive advantage in the global economy. We can do a great deal more together, and that's been strengthened by this week.

"The second main fact of our times is the challenge to modernity by the forces of savage medievalism, represented by the forces of militant Islam. Co-operation on counter-terrorism has been strengthened this week as well." Mr Netanyahu said his country's recent diplomatic advances in Asia had been driven by its success as a start-up, hi-tech nation. "It's a direct function of our capacities in technology and innovation," he said. "Israel's small in size but it's a world leader in many areas, for example, cyber-security and now in automobile technology, especially driverless cars, in digital health, in sophisticated agriculture and in many other areas. "All areas of life, and all economic areas, are becoming rapidly technologised. The distinction between hi-tech and low-tech is disappearing rapidly.

"The other area that attracts countries to Israel is intelligence and counter-terrorism. All countries need civilian technology and all countries need defences against terrorism."

Mr Netanyahu rejected the idea that Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which he says take up only 3 or 4 per cent of West Bank territory, are a roadblock to peace. "This is not what drives the conflict," he said. "The Arab and Palestinian opposition to the state of Israel preceded the settlements by half a century. When we dismantled the settlements from Gaza, it didn't make a whit of difference — they continued to attack us from those areas we handed over. "The settlement issue is a problem to be resolved, but it's not the (main). It doesn't really gobble up land the way people describe — that's another misrepresentation. So they've taken a minor issue and turned the conflict on its head.

"The question is not whether the Palestinians will get a state but whether that state will recognise Israel or will continue to try to seek Israel's destruction. "No one in their right mind would say to the Palestinians: here, have a state which will reduce Israel to a width of 10 miles and have them continue to seek our annihilation, to continue to seek the flooding of Israel with millions of descendants of refugees and use the territory of a Palestinian state as the launching ground for thousands of rockets and endless terrorist attacks on the Jewish state."

Mr Netanyahu had the warmest praise for Australia, and for Malcolm Turnbull. He also praised the bipartisan nature of the support that he described as “valuable and important to sustain”. This could be read as a message to the friends of Israel in Australia not to give up on the Labor Party, despite attacks on Israel last week from several retired Labor politicians.

Mr Netanyahu said he had received a very warm reception in Australia, including several hours on Manly Beach interacting with, he said, more than a thousand Australians, of whom only two made critical comments. “This tells me there’s a natural sympathy in a country that identifies similarities with Israel. We’re both immigrant nations. We’re both champions of democracy and champions of diversity,” he said. “Beyond that, we have both shown a capacity to stand up and defend our way of life.

“We in Israel have a special bond with Australia.”