

Israel and the United States: Facing Dramatic Decisions

Written by Zaki Shalom

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ZAKI SHALOM, AUG 1 2012

The Campaign to Stop the Nuclearization of Iran

In recent years, international activity regarding the nuclearization of Iran has principally comprised of the following methods:

1. Diplomatic contacts with the Iranian regime to persuade it to accept the framework for a deal acceptable to the West in general, and the United States in particular, regarding the future of Iran's nuclear activity.
2. Implementation of sanctions of varying levels of intensity to damage Iran's economy.
3. A variety of covert activities attributed to Israel and the United States.

In recent months, there have been three rounds of talks with Iran: the first in Istanbul, the second in Baghdad, and the third in Moscow. All three rounds ended in total failure, and there was not one report of a single breakthrough. The Iranian regime has shown that it is not at all deterred by its interlocutors, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany); on the contrary, statements issued by the Iranians reflect self-confidence and skepticism regarding the ability of the international community (including the United States) to inflict intolerable damage on the regime.[1]

President Obama's efforts to obtain broad international agreement for actions against Iran has necessarily led him to soften his stance considerably over recent months, especially when compared to his views at the AIPAC conference held in March 2012. A recent expression of this moderate stance was sounded at the G-8 conference in the United States in mid-May 2012. The presidential election campaign has also driven the President to pursue an environment free of shockwaves – even if this calm is illusory – as this is likely to improve his chances of gaining the American people's mandate for a second term in office.[2]

The common assessment in Israel is that continuation of this course at the current level of intensity is liable to result in Iran's attainment of nuclear capabilities in the foreseeable future. Against this background, Prime Minister Netanyahu has expressed clear disappointment with the positions the Obama administration has presented to Iran in the dialogue. The implied but unmistakable message is that these positions are interpreted by Iran as an expression of weakness and will only further entrench Tehran's rigid stances in its negotiations with the international powers. In any case, Israel cannot accept any compromise positions that do not result in Iran's halting its nuclear activities.[3]

Israel's Position

Prime Minister Netanyahu has presented three explicit conditions that the P5+1 must demand of Iran. Iran must:

1. stop all nuclear material enrichment;
2. move all enriched material outside its borders; and
3. dismantle the underground nuclear facility in Qom.

The Prime Minister stressed that only explicit Iranian commitments to fulfill all of these demands, along with explicit verification that these commitments are met can stop the Iranian nuclear program.[4]

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Israel's assessment of the situation is different from the one perceived by the United States. Israel feels that Iran's progress towards nuclear weapons places Israel in real existential danger. Israel also estimates that time is liable to severely limit – to a dangerous degree – Israel's ability to undertake a military strike against Iran, as well as curb the degree to which it may maneuver politically. Operationally, Israel estimates that Iran is approaching the zone of immunity, which will make it very difficult – or perhaps impossible – for Israel to use its ability to operate effectively against Iran.

Israel is aware that the current period until the American presidential elections is a convenient time to tackle the issue of Iranian nuclearization. It assumes that at present the administration will make every effort to appease Israel and avoid criticism of it so that President Obama will not risk losing the Jewish vote. Israel is justifiably worried that after the elections in the United States the rules of the game between it and the administration will change radically. The post-election American administration, whether Democratic or Republican, will be able to apply much greater pressure regarding a possible strike against Iran.

Under these circumstances, Israel is approaching a fateful juncture, where it will have to choose between two alternatives:

1. "Strategic" acceptance of a continuation of the current course, perhaps with more intensive activity on the tactical level to delay Iran's nuclear project. This route will compel Israel to accept the possibility that Iran will realize its objective of attaining nuclear capabilities in the foreseeable future. If this happens, Israel's credibility and deterrence, along with its regional and international standing, will be seriously damaged.
2. Independent military action against Iran, despite the inherent risks of doing so.

The public declarations by Israel's political leaders, especially the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister, leave no room for doubt about Israel's determination to opt for the second choice. Nonetheless, various political constraints, doubts of the success of a military strike, and concerns about counter-responses might ultimately force Israel to avoid the military option.

A Dramatic Change in the Obama Administration's Policy Might Prevent a Comprehensive Campaign against Iran

The current situation includes only one element that could prevent the need for an independent Israeli military action against Iran, and that is President Obama. In order to minimize the possibility of Israeli action against Iran, the Obama administration must recognize the following:

1. The Iranian leadership considers the Iranian nuclear program to be a supreme national interest. The ayatollahs' regime is prepared to pay a steep price for Iran's attainment of nuclear capabilities. Therefore it must be clear that only massive pressure on Iran, accompanied by threatening activity on the ground, will give the Iranian leaders the justification they need to stop the process or at least adopt positions satisfactory to the United States.
2. Actions taken against Iran to date have not worked. A continuation of the same framework will likewise presumably fail to put an end to the country's nuclear project in the future.
3. So far the Iranian regime does not attribute a high degree of credibility to the American administration's threats to use military force should other means to reach an arrangement fail.
4. A military operation against Iran, whether American or Israeli, entails far-reaching risks. Nonetheless, the dangers inherent in a nuclear Iran are inestimably greater than those of a military action designed to prevent this scenario.

Acting on these assessments will require the administration to adopt a radical change in its position, if in fact it is intent on fulfilling its public and private commitments to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear capabilities. In addition to clear, unequivocal demands on the issue of Iranian nuclearization, the administration must recognize that these demands will command the serious attention of the Iranian leadership only if accompanied by actions of a military nature, though still short of war. Such actions will make America's determination clear to Iran's leaders.[5]

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Anyone who worries – appropriately – about the implications of a military operation, Israeli or American, against Iran must understand that only combined political, economic, and short-of-war military actions viewed by the Iranian regime as credible and endangering Iran's interests can prevent the need for a comprehensive military campaign against Iran.

In conjunction with political dialogue and the imposition of sanctions, the United States may also utilize a range of means at varying degrees of intensity to act against Iran. Among them:

1. Heavy pressure on the major consumers of Iranian oil, first and foremost China, which imports close to one-quarter of all of Iran's oil exports, followed by India, South Korea, Japan, and Italy – all close allies of the United States. The Obama administration must guarantee these countries a reliable alternative to Iranian oil, in part by demanding that the large oil producers such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states make up the difference.
2. At the same time, the United States must make it clear to these nations that it is determined to prevent a nuclear Iran at any cost and that during a confrontation with Iran, Iran's oil facilities might sustain severe damage. In such a scenario, the flow of oil to these nations would be disrupted, and therefore it is advisable that they already seek reliable alternatives to Iranian oil.
3. More intensive pressure on Assad-led Syria. The regime of President Assad, Iran's closest ally, is under serious threat due to the civil war currently raging in Syria. Determined American action against Syria supported by the international community would present Iran with a serious dilemma: Should it meet its commitments to Syria as an ally and get dragged into a potential confrontation with the United States, or should it avoid involvement, thus risking loss of credibility and deterrence?
4. President Obama's administration might advise administration personnel to avoid voicing reservations in public about a military confrontation, liable to be interpreted by Iran as expressions of weakness. Overall, statements underscoring the difficulties of a military operation and the destructive results to the West in general and the United States in particular should be kept to a minimum.
5. Enhancing political and security cooperation between the United States and its regional allies, primarily Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states: Such a process could be implemented through a wide range of activities at varying degrees of intensity, such as announcing the supply of new weapons to these nations, strengthening civil defense capabilities in these nations with American weapons and troops to operate them, holding limited or large scale military maneuvers, and holding political and security meetings in the region and in Washington at all echelons (from government officials and military personnel, to visits by heads of state in Washington, to visits by President Obama to the region).
6. Strengthening America's military presence in the Gulf, especially naval vessels – aircraft carriers, destroyers, minesweepers, and so on – and fighter jets. Such a presence would in and of itself be a manifestation of the overwhelming military power of the United States and could serve as a deterrent vis-à-vis Iran.

At any point, the United States could also demonstrate its presence in the region in a more tangible and even violent way. Nonetheless, the United States would have to examine the legitimacy of such steps very carefully on the basis of international law and consider how they would be received in American and Western public opinion.

Israel, the United States, and the Military Option

Israel thoroughly understands the United States' desire to avoid another military confrontation in the Middle East after its withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. Israel also understands President Obama's reservations regarding moves that are liable to generate profound shockwaves that will be felt on the international arena and the American economy. On the other hand, the Obama administration must recognize that Israel's absolute top priority is ensuring its own security and the security of its citizens, and it is determined to act militarily against Iran if it has no choice.

President Obama's administration must understand that an Israeli military operation against Iran, even without any American cooperation, is liable to drag the United States into the battlefield against its will. Iran would likely not be

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able to avoid a counter-response against American targets or against America's close allies in the region should Israel take action against it. This would mean that irrespective of its preferences, the United States could be dragged into a war against Iran with no real control over events.

In addition, the administration should assume that shortly after hostilities begin, Congress will adopt resolutions demanding that the President support Israel. Combined with supportive public opinion, this will leave the administration with no option but to support Israel.

The reality we are faced with is difficult and demands that fateful decisions must be taken. It dictates the need for courageous leadership and the kind of political understanding demonstrated by leaders such as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and David Ben-Gurion. This could also be President Obama's finest hour.

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[1] Following a meeting with Mitt Romney in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated: "We have to be honest and say that all the sanctions and diplomacy so far have not set back the Iranian program by one iota." SARA MURRAY, Romney Talks Tough He Defends Israel's Right to Prevent Iran Nuclear Weapon, Wall Street Journal, July 30, 2012. <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/obama-speeches/speech/1047/>

[2] Obama delivers remarks before a working session with G-8 leaders, Speech Transcript, The Washington Post, May 19, 2012, <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/obama-speeches/sheech/1047/>

[3] Following a meeting with Mitt Romney in Jerusalem Prime Minister Netanyahu implicitly criticized U.S policy towards Iran. He stated: " I believe that we need a strong and credible military threat coupled with the sanctions to have a chance to change that situation." SARA MURRAY, Romney Talks Tough He Defends Israel's Right to Prevent Iran Nuclear Weapon, Wall Street Journal, July 30, 2012. <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/obama-speeches/speech/1047/>

[4] INSS Conference Summary, Part 1 Address by Prime Minister Netanyahu, May 29, 2012. [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1338380061.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1338380061.pdf).

[5] On president Obama commitment to prevent Iran from being a nuclear power see: Mark Halperin. Obama: Prevention, Not Containment, March 5, 2012, <http://thepage.time.com/2012/03/05/obama-prevention-not-containment/>

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