

Is Israel Driving the Threat of War?

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There is a lot of speculation in the U.S. press and among opponents of attacking Iran, that Israel is pushing for an attack on Iran and driving the war danger, while the Obama administration is seeking to restrain Israel and avoid war. And a lot of people feel that this is another instance of the “Israel lobby” having decisive influence in U.S. politics. (A number of anti-war groups will be protesting at the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) Convention in Washington March 4 – 6.

These perceptions have been fueled by a torrent of news reports. For instance, a February 8 New York Times analysis, “U.S. and Israel Split on Speed of Iran Threat,” a February 28 AP report that Israel has told the U.S. it would not inform them before striking Iran, and February 26 public statements by both General Martin Dempsey, chair of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and British Foreign Secretary William Hague urging Israel not to attack Iran.

Israel looms large because it plays a crucial role for the U.S. in preserving its control of the Middle East. Israel functions—not as the homeland of Jewish people—but as America’s “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” as a U.S. official once put it, and the most solidly reliable ally and military outpost in the region. Particularly in this period of upheaval and transition, Iran’s rising power and the other changes in the region do have the potential to undermine Israel’s position as a Western settler-colonial outpost in the heart of the Middle East.

This is why Barack Obama stated in his Super Bowl interview that in relation to Iran, “[W]e have closer military and intelligence consultation between our two countries than we’ve ever had. And my number one priority continues to be the security of the United States, but also the security of Israel, and we are going to make sure that we work in lockstep as we proceed to try to solve this, hopefully diplomatically.” Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak states, “The U.S. is what helps us to preserve the military advantage of Israel, more than ever before. This administration contributes to the security of Israel in an extraordinary way and does a lot to prevent a nuclear Iran.” (“Will Israel Attack Iran?” Ronen Bergman, *New York Times Magazine*, January 25, 2012)

This is why the U.S. has stood by Israel. But the U.S. is also “stuck with” Israel, whose perceived needs and interests are not always identical to those of the U.S. imperialists. There now appear to be sharp arguments taking place between the rulers of Israel and the U.S.—and within the ruling classes of these countries—over the exact state of Iran’s nuclear program, where exactly to draw the “red line,” the dangers and difficulties of any military strike, and how overall to advance the imperialists’ interests regionally and globally.

It is possible that the U.S. position on Iran’s nuclear program—based on its overall and strategic imperial considerations—could be shifting and diverging from Israel’s, with Israel drawing a “red line” at Iran having the capacity to make nuclear weapons, i.e., enriching

uranium (although that's not all that is involved in making a nuclear weapon), while the U.S. seems to be more ambiguous about this and sometimes stating its "red line" is Iran's actual pursuit of nuclear weapons. This has given rise to speculation that there could be a negotiated resolution to the crisis which would enable Iran to continue enriching uranium to 3.5 percent but under much tighter supervision/inspection and abandoning enrichment to 20 percent and probably being forced to open its research files, disclose suppliers, etc. (And recently Obama officials have also called the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) "rational actors" not madmen, and said they were unlikely to start a war with the U.S. or Israel. See: "Iran Is Ready to Talk," Dennis B. Ross, *New York Times*, February 14, 2012.)

This has apparently led to tensions with elements in the ruling classes of both the U.S. and Israel which, at least in public, have not adopted this position. "Our policy is that in one way or another, Iran's nuclear program must be stopped," Israel's Barak said. A letter to Obama, sponsored by Republicans John McCain and Lindsay Graham, independent Joe Lieberman and New York's two Democratic senators, and signed by 32 Senators in all, pledges to oppose "any proposal ... in which Iran is permitted to continue enrichment on its territory in any form."

And *The New York Times* reports that the debates between the U.S. and Israel are not over whether Iran needs to be dealt with, but exactly how and when, including "whether Iran's crucial nuclear facilities are about to become impregnable ... the circumstances under which Israel would judge it could no longer hold off from an attack because Iran's effort to produce a bomb would be invulnerable to any strike." ("U.S. and Israel Split on Speed of Iran Threat," February 8, 2012)

Less Than Meets the Eye?

Whatever debate is taking place between the U.S. and Israel—and their key secret deliberations are not often carried in the media—they are both proceeding from the reactionary interests of empire, and their unity remains much greater than their differences. In addition, there may be less than meets the eye here, with elements of a division of labor as much as a division of opinion.

Obama gave a lengthy interview to Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* during which he more directly and forcefully laid out his insistence that Iran would not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons, that the U.S. would not implement a strategy of acceding to and then "containing" a nuclear Iran, that preventing Iran from gaining nuclear weapons was a top priority for U.S. global interests as well, and that his concern about an Israeli attack right now is that it could help Iran and hurt Israel.

Goldberg writes: "[T]he United States 'has Israel's back,' and that he will order the U.S. military to destroy Iran's nuclear program if economic sanctions fail to compel Tehran to shelve its nuclear ambitions.... The president also said that Tehran's nuclear program would represent a 'profound' national-security threat to the United States even if Israel were not a target of Iran's violent rhetoric, and he dismissed the argument that the United States could successfully contain a nuclear Iran.... Obama went to great lengths to caution Israel that a premature strike might inadvertently help Iran: 'At a time when there is not a lot of sympathy for Iran and its only real ally, [Syria,] is on the ropes, do we want a distraction in which suddenly Iran can portray itself as a victim?'" ("Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,'" March 2, 2012)

In other words, Obama is assessing whether or not to wage war on Iran from the standpoint of U.S. imperialism's global and regional interests—not from the perspective of opposing war.

The Obama strategy may be: Israel, don't attack right away; let's see if sanctions and covert operations force Iran to cave, or lead to the weakening/destabilization of the regime, particularly given the potential for taking down the Assad regime in Syria. But if this doesn't work, we're in a much stronger position to wage war if we're seen as having walked the last mile for peace by giving sanctions "a chance," and engaging in some negotiations. And given the dangers of war, it's important to be in the strongest possible position.

One Israeli think tank notes that the U.S. has not decisively demanded Israel not attack:

"Statements made by administration officials are clear evidence of the administration's unwillingness to be viewed as the one giving Israel even a tacit green light to attack Iran. Nevertheless, even now, the administration's conduct in this context, especially the lack of threats against Israel should it ignore US entreaties to desist from attacking Iran, cannot but project the lack of a decisive stance. In the foreseeable future and the closer the administration approaches the moment of truth with regard to Iran, it may very well be—though there is no certainty here—that the administration will consider changing its current negative attitude regarding an Israeli military action against Iran." (Zaki Shalom, Institute for National Strategic Studies, February 29, 2012)

Obama told Goldberg that U.S. differences with Israel were "tactical and not strategic" and this may be such an instance. AntiWar.com reports: "While insisting that they 'want to see sanctions work,' Obama Administration officials are convinced that the sanctions won't lead Iran to abandon its civilian nuclear program and that either the US or Israel will attack Iran as a result.... Officials say Obama has been telling Israel he wants to 'give sufficient time' to the current round of sanctions before starting the war, though they say that in the end the result will...be a war because Iran is 'behaving like sanctions don't matter.'" ("US officials believe Iran sanctions will fail, making military action likely," Jason Ditz, AntiWar.com, February 17, 2012)

The U.S. and Israel claim their threats and moves towards war are to prevent a dangerous regime from obtaining nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons in anyone's hands pose a terrible threat to humanity. But the U.S. holds a massive stockpile of nuclear weapons and has already used them to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the Middle East, it is Israel that has an existing arsenal of 75 to 200 deliverable nuclear weapons. Those nukes are in the hands of a regime built on ethnic cleansing, a regime that carried out repeated wars against its neighbors since its inception.

Whether Israel first attacks Iran alone, or together with the U.S., both are guilty and both should be condemned worldwide.

The U.S. and Israel are already working together in attacking Iran in many ways and spreading lies and pretexts for war. They are both working to weaken or topple the Islamic Republic. They are making military preparations in the region. And they are both determined to prevent Iran from getting nuclear capacity. And bottom line: Israel could never even think about attacking Iran without U.S. aid, arms, military collaboration, and the all-around U.S.-led assault on Iran—and the preservation of Israel and its security is a key U.S. imperialist objective.

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