

Israel between rhetoric and reality over Iran

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The recent American overtures to induct Iran in any political settlement over Iraq have immensely troubled the Israel. So perturbed has been the government in Tel Aviv that she has mounted a concerted campaign in America to keep alive the notion that Iran poses a grave danger to the US and must be thwarted at any cost.

On November 12, The Jerusalem Post reported that an Israeli Self-Defence Force (IDF) spokesperson told the newspaper that: "Only a military strike by the U.S. and its allies will stop Iran obtaining nuclear weapons." While Israeli Defence Minister Ephraim Sneth was more blunt about attacking Iran. He said, "I am not advocating an Israeli pre-emptive military action against Iran and I am aware of its possible repercussions. I consider it a last resort. But even the last resort is sometimes the only resort."

The Israeli Prime Minister on his visit to Washington earlier this month said in an interview on NBC's "Today" show. "I know that America will not allow Iran to possess nuclear weapons because this is a danger to the whole Western world."

American think tanks also joined in the foray against Iran. In an opinion editorial piece in the Los Angeles Times, Joshua Muravchik, resident scholar at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute said, "We must bomb Iran. The path of diplomacy and sanctions has led nowhere. Our options therefore are narrowed to two: we can prepare to live with a nuclear-armed Iran, or we can use force to prevent it. John Pike, director of Globalsecurity.org, a military issues think-tank, said. "They are going to bomb WMD facilities next summer. It would be a limited military action to destroy their WMD capabilities."

Clearly uncertainty has permeated the corridors of power in Washington regarding Iran. On the one hand the Bush administration is prepared to entertain the idea that force against Iran cannot be ruled out. While at the same time the Bush administration is warming to the idea of reaching out to Iran to help US extricate itself from the quagmire in Iraq. The muddled signals stem from the ongoing conflict between the realists who are in ascendancy and the neoconservative who are in bitter retreat. The neoconservatives believe that America's strategic interests in the Middle East are intertwined with Israel's security. Therefore any of Israel's neighbours that pose a danger to Israel's security must be neutralised. This not only involves disarming the so called menacing country, but also dividing the country along ethnic and sectarian lines—a sort of Lebanonisation (term first used by Barnard Lewis the chief patron of the neocon movement) — where new countries curved out from the bloodshed perpetrated by the US Army pledge their allegiance to serve the American Empire. From Israel's perspective, the Muslim populace surrounding her borders must be kept busy in perpetual conflicts manufactured by exploiting ethnic and sectarian tensions, and thereby creating new countries that are weak and incapable of threatening Israel's security— this is commonly known as the Kivunim plan.

The desire to Lebanonise the Middle East came to the fore in US foreign policy with the emergence of the neoconservatives in the Bush administration. Their rise to power neatly fitted with Israeli aspirations and hence their respective interests converged. With the debacle in Iraq, the realists have regained the upperhand and are exerting their influence over all foreign policy matters—including in this revision is Iraq, Palestine and Iran. What this means for Israel's supporters inside the Bush administration is that time is running out for neoconservatives likes of Bolton and Abrams and they will soon be replaced with realists. A more calibrated approach that is inclusive of the concerns expressed by America's allies will be adopted.

Thus the belligerent statements emanating from US and Israeli officials regarding Iran should not be interpreted as the manifestations of a hostile US policy towards Iran. Rather, it should be read as the vestige of a discredited neoconservative theory that is in its last throes. This was aptly summed up by US Foreign Secretary Rice who mentioned three reasons why the United States is currently unable to carry out a military operation against Iran: the wish to solve the crisis through peaceful means; concern that a military strike will be ineffective – that it would fail to completely destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities; and the lack of precise intelligence on the targets' locations.

Without US assistance, it is very unlikely that Israel would carry out such strikes. Leaving the military capability aside, there is another major factor that makes its difficult for Israel to contemplate military action against Iran. The Iraq war, the re-occupation of Palestinian territories and Hizbollah's stiff resistance has not made Israel any safer. On the contrary, these events supported and engineered by the neoconservatives have not only shattered the myth of Israel's invincibility, but also exposed her population to perpetual insecurity.

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