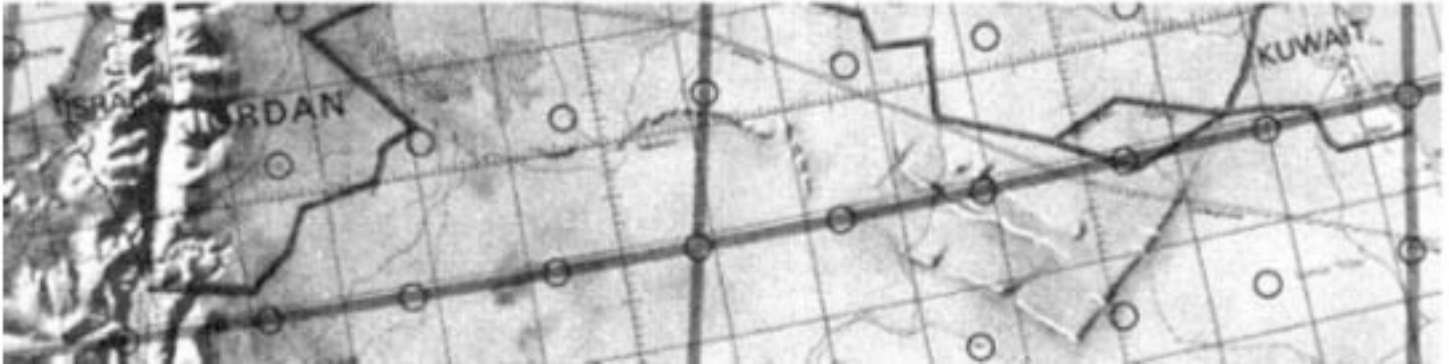


# MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

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## Decision Time for Israel on Iran?

*by Robert O. Freedman*

April 21, 2009 :: Number Five

### **Israeli leaders, both military and civilian, have begun to consider...**

a preemptive attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, including the centrifuge site at Natanz and the heavy water reactor now under construction at Arak.

The prospect of an Israeli attack has been heightened by Iran's recent conduct. Iran has increased the number of its nuclear enriching centrifuges to 7,000 (only 4,000 are needed to enrich Uranium 238 to bomb-grade Uranium 235), has tested increasingly sophisticated long-range missiles, and has put satellites in orbit. It continues to refuse to provide information to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about its suspected nuclear weaponization program.

At the same time, however, the Obama administration has jettisoned the hardline "Axis

of Evil" approach to Iran of its predecessor and has embarked on a new policy of engagement, while at the same time publicly warning Israel not to attack Iran.

Russia and China, with major economic interests in Iran, have downplayed the fear that Iran has been seeking nuclear weapons, making it very difficult for the United States, if it chooses to do so, to secure UN Security Council approval for major economic sanctions against Iran—a possible alternative to a military attack on Iran's nuclear installations.

Meanwhile, the Sunni Arab world is increasingly concerned about Iran's perceived quest for nuclear weapons. A number of Arab states, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia—the most hostile to Iran—have begun nuclear programs of their own.

This situation has left the new Israeli government of Binyamin Netanyahu in a difficult position. Either it acquiesces in Iran's acquiring of nuclear weapons, thus worsening Israel's strategic position in the Middle East vis-à-vis a country that has vowed to destroy it; or it launches a unilateral attack on Iran, putting it at odds with Israel's main strategic ally, the United States. How the Netanyahu government handles this situation may determine the future of Israel—and the Middle East—for many years to come.

### **Iran's policies**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a Shi'a religious dictatorship, where virtually all power is held by conservative clerics. The regime, headed by the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, conceals itself beneath the veneer of elections for parliament and the presidency. But all candidates for office must be approved by the religious conservatives, who regularly veto the candidacy of any individual they see as insufficiently "Islamic" or as pro-Western.

Iran's human rights record is poor. The regime regularly imprisons opposition figures as well as visiting Americans of Iranian origin, such as National Public Radio correspondent Roxana Saberi, who has been jailed on trumped-up charges of espionage. In addition, HIV/Aids doctors, such as the brothers Aresh and Kamiar Alaie, have been jailed apparently because of their contacts in the

West, as was a blogger, Omidreza Mirsayafi, who questioned the lack of freedom in Iran, and died in prison under mysterious circumstances. In addition, the regime has cracked down on organizations seeking to reform discriminatory laws against women in such areas as child custody, divorce, inheritance and equal pay.

The regime, while maintaining its tough policy against domestic opposition, has not been able to solve the country's economic problems, which have been exacerbated by the drop in prices for oil and natural gas on which Iran depends to fund its budget. With inflation exceeding 26 percent and high youth unemployment, Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has tried to rally the Iranian public behind Iran's nuclear program, hoping to align the nationalist feelings of Iranians behind his defiant position vis-a-vis the West and especially the United States. Even if Ahmadinejad is defeated in Iran's June 12 presidential elections, it is doubtful that there will be more than marginal changes in Iran's policies. Ahmadinejad's main rival, former prime minister Mir Hussein Mousavi, is a strong supporter of the Islamic regime. On Iran's nuclear program he has stated, "We must know that we do not have the right to retreat on the nuclear issue."

In the realm of foreign policy, Iran has been pursuing an increasingly aggressive line, seeking to lead the Middle East under the



Iranian banner—even though the majority of the Middle East’s Muslims are Sunni, not Shi‘a. Iran has forged a close alliance with Syria, reportedly financing the Syrian nuclear reactor project that was destroyed by Israel in September 2007. It has been playing up the Palestinian issue, claiming to be the main defender of the Palestinian cause. It has backed both Hamas and Hezbollah with weapons and diplomatic support. In an effort to gain Sunni popular support, Ahmadinejad has called for the destruction of Israel and questioned the existence of the Holocaust, which many Arabs see as the cause of Western support for the establishment of Israel.

Iran also has claimed that leading Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have not done enough for the Palestinians, especially during the recent Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. To thwart the Iranian strategy, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have sought to pry Syria out of its alliance with Iran, albeit with little success, at least so far. In addition, Egypt has blamed Iran for supporting planned Hezbollah terrorist attacks on Egyptian territory that threatened vital Egyptian interests, such as the Suez Canal. Iran’s aggressive policies also have led Morocco to break off diplomatic relations, and caused a crisis with Bahrain when Iranian legislators asserted historical claims to that Arab Gulf kingdom.

In addition, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have reacted to the prospect of a nuclear Iran by embarking on nuclear programs of their own, with Egypt signing, in March 2008, an agreement with Russia for the construction of a nuclear reactor and Saudi Arabia signing nuclear agreements the same year with both

the United States and France. In addition, both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (which has a territorial dispute with Iran over three Iranian-occupied islands in the Persian Gulf) also signed agreements with France for nuclear reactors.

While all of these projects will, at least in theory, be under IAEA supervision, there is no question but that a nuclear arms race has broken out in the Middle East. It may not be too long before not only Israel and Iran have nuclear weapons, but Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Arab Gulf states and possibly Turkey (which has put out a tender for a nuclear reactor) will have them as well—unless the Iranian nuclear program can be stopped before it produces nuclear weapons.

This is why the leaders of the Sunni Arab states of the Middle East would not be unhappy if Israel destroyed Iran’s nuclear installations, just as there was minimal Sunni Arab criticism of Israel when it destroyed the Iranian-financed nuclear installation in Syria. To be sure, Iran will try to rally the populations of the Sunni Arab states to its side during a confrontation with Israel, but the growing Sunni-Shi‘a confrontation in the Middle East may make this a difficult task.

### **Changed U.S. position**

Barack Obama pledged during the Presidential election campaign to pull U.S. combat troops out of Iraq in 14 months, something that would be very difficult to do if chaos returned to that country. He also pledged to beef up U.S. forces in Afghanistan, in the fight there against Al Qaeda. He fears that Iran could complicate both efforts, destabilizing Iraq by more overtly aiding Shi‘a militia

leaders like Muqtada al-Sadr, and further destabilizing the situation in Afghanistan through its ties to the Shi'a community in that country. Consequently, one of the reasons why Obama has embarked on what could be considered a "charm offensive" toward Iran and its leadership is to get Iranian assistance, or at least acquiescence, as the U.S. pulls its troops out of Iraq and seeks to stabilize the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan caused by the resurgence of the Taliban. This coincides with Obama's penchant for a different style of American diplomacy, one of "listening, not dictating." Accordingly, Obama has embarked on a program of outreach to two states in the Middle East which the Bush administration had considered pariahs: Syria and Iran.

To be sure, Obama began his policy of engagement with Iran carefully, so as not to create the impression he was selling out Israel or America's Sunni Arab allies as part of a rapprochement with Iran. Thus in December 2008, when still president-elect, he stated on *Meet the Press*: "We need to ratchet up tough but direct diplomacy with Iran, making very clear to them that their development of nuclear weapons would be unacceptable, that their funding of terrorist organizations, their threats against Israel are contrary to everything we believe in." As another measure of reassurance to Israel and the Sunni Arabs, Obama also extended sanctions against Iran for another year.



These statements set the stage for Obama's March 20 Persian New Year videotape greeting to Iran's leadership and people. Ending the Bush administration's policy of threats to Iran, Obama stated that "The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations." He even quoted a Persian poet to demonstrate his respect for Persian culture, and said that the United States sought engagement that was "honest and grounded in mutual respect."

However, Obama balanced his comments by stating that Iran's rightful place in the community of nations "cannot be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization." Khamenei's response to Obama did not match the U.S. president's friendly tone, but he did say that if the United States changed its attitude, Iran would change its attitude as well. However the Iranian president noted that Iran had yet to see the required changes in U.S. policy such as the removal of sanctions and an end to U.S. support for Israel.

Despite this rather cold response, Obama pressed ahead, and the United States invited Iran to participate in an international meeting at the Hague on Afghanistan. Afghanistan is one area where the United States and Iran have a number of common interests, includ-

ing fighting the virulently anti-Shi'a Taliban, against whom Iran had almost gone to war in 1998, and ending Afghan drug production which has created a growing drug problem in Iran. One week after Obama's New Year's message, Iran announced it would send its deputy foreign minister, Mohammed Mehdi Akhoundzadeh, to the meeting, and the Iranian representative met briefly with the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, on the sidelines of the conference.

Following the Hague meeting, Iran announced it was willing to allow NATO to transit non-military equipment to Afghanistan through Iran. The warming of relations between the United States and Iran moved ahead further in early April 2009, when the United States announced that it would join the European states, Russia and China in face-to-face negotiations with Iran on its nuclear program. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: "There's nothing more important than trying to convince Iran to cease its efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon." Ahmadinejad responded to the U.S. announcement by stating that in light of the "changed conditions," Iran was preparing a new paper for discussion at the forum.

By now (mid-April 2009) one may already see the beginnings of a limited rapprochement between Iran and the United States. But will it last? How will the United States react if Iran simply strings out the talks while it continues to enrich and weaponize its uranium?

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, long an opponent of the use of force against Iran because of U.S. commitments in Iraq and Af-

ghanistan, in a statement on *Fox News Sunday* in March 2009 suggested that "economic pressure" could convince Iran to stop its nuclear program: "Perhaps if there is enough economic pressure placed on Iran, diplomacy can provide them with an open door through which they can walk if they choose to change their policies." Yet for economic pressure to be effective against Iran, even at a time when the drop in energy prices has badly hurt the Iranian economy, serious UN Security Council sanctions against Iran are required, including a ban on gasoline sales to Iran (Iran imports 40 percent of its gasoline), a ban on arms sales and a ban on foreign investment in Iran's oil and natural gas industries. Such sanctions require the agreement of Security Council members Russia and China, two countries that are unlikely to agree to such strong sanctions against Iran.

### **Russian and Chinese positions**

Russia has long protected Iran in the UN Security Council in debates over sanctions, and the limited sanctions that have been voted against Iran have not been meaningful.

Russia has taken a pro-Iranian position on Iran for two reasons. First, at least until the Obama-initiated rapprochement, Iran was the leading anti-American force in the Middle East. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who has been pursuing an anti-American policy since 2005, saw in Iran a very useful anti-American ally. Consequently, Russian officials have constantly downplayed the threat of Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons or even missiles capable of hitting the United States or Europe. Moscow has stated that the IAEA has the Iranian nuclear program under full control, despite the fact that Iran has regu-

larly prohibited IAEA officials from inspecting its facilities and refused to answer questions about its weaponization program.

Moscow's hypocrisy on this issue is reflected in its attitude toward the ABM radar and missile installations which the United States is constructing in Poland and the Czech Republic as a counter to Iranian missiles. Obama has offered to hold off on the construction, which the Russian leaders claim threatens their security, if Russia will agree to strong sanctions against Iran to prevent its acquisition of nuclear weapons. The fact that Russia has not taken up Obama's offer is another indication that Moscow's propaganda on the ABM is just another means of inciting anti-American feelings among the Russian public, which reinforces Putin's anti-American foreign policy.

The second reason for Russia's opposition to sanctions is economic. Moscow has more than \$2 billion in annual trade with Tehran, and is Iran's major source of sophisticated arms, from military aircraft to submarines. Russia has also embarked on major oil and natural gas exploration projects with Iran which would be jeopardized if major sanctions were imposed.

Chinese reasons for opposing sanctions are primarily economic. As a major energy importer, China has been scouring the world to find oil and natural gas, and Iran has been a major provider of oil to China, accounting for 14 percent of its total imports. The two countries have also just signed a major \$3.2 billion natural gas deal under which China will help develop Iran's giant South Pars natural gas field.

Given this situation, and contrary to Defense Secretary Gates' hope for sanctions, the possibility of meaningful sanctions against Iran currently appears remote.

### **Israel's options**

If Iran follows a strategy of stringing out the negotiations with the United States while continuing to enrich and weaponize its uranium, what options does Israel have to deal with the nuclear threat from Iran—a threat which Israeli Jewish leaders across the political spectrum see as an existential one?

Because opposition to Israel's existence has been a centerpiece of Iranian foreign policy since the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 (despite some tactical cooperation during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s), Israel has viewed Iran's strides toward acquiring nuclear weapons with growing concern. Ahmadinejad's call for wiping Israel off the face of the earth, and his denial of the Holocaust, only reinforce Israeli fears.

During the George W. Bush administration, it initially appeared that the United States, with its powerful air force and navy, would eliminate the Iranian nuclear threat. But as the United States got increasingly bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, and after Gates replaced Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary, the possibility of a U.S. attack on Iran evaporated. In addition, in 2008, the United States even denied to Israel the advanced bunker-busting bombs and overflight rights (over Iraq) to enable Israel to bomb the Iranian nuclear installations on its own.

With Gates still defense secretary and Obama seeking a rapprochement with Iran to ease

U.S. problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, there appears no chance at the current time that the United States would attack Iran. In addition, the Obama administration has been publicly telling the Israelis that they should not attack Iran either. In mid-March, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen warned that an Israeli attack on Iran could undermine Middle East stability and endanger the lives of Americans in the Persian Gulf. Three weeks later, Vice President Joe Biden, speaking on CNN, stated that Israel would be “ill-advised” to attack Iran, and Gates himself, in mid-April, warned that while an Israeli strike might delay Iran’s nuclear program from one to three years, it would unify Iran, “cement their determination to have a nuclear program, and also build into the whole country an undying hatred of whomever hits them.” One might question the logic of Gates’ prediction, given the opposition of many Iranians, particularly the young, to the Islamic regime. But the pattern of Obama administration statements seems to be yet another part of Obama’s rapprochement with Iran, as if the United States were demonstrating its good will to Iran by condemning in advance any attack by its Israeli ally.

The question is how long will the Obama administration give Iran until it is convinced that the Iranians won’t change their policy. To be sure, Netanyahu will give the United



States time to try to work out an agreement with Iran to stop its nuclear enrichment programs. But how much time can the Israelis afford to give the United States? Netanyahu,

who is already at loggerheads with the Obama administration over the desirability of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Obama insists on it; Netanyahu has yet to endorse it), has no desire to have another conflict with Obama at the present time, especially since most

observers think Iran is still at least a year away from constructing a nuclear weapon.

If, however, by 2010 Iran has not made substantive concessions on its nuclear program, Israel will probably launch a strike against Iran irrespective of American wishes, with Israeli aircraft flying around the Arabian Peninsula to Iran and Israeli submarines in the Indian Ocean possibly launching cruise missiles against Iran. The Israeli air force has already been planning such an attack, with practice exercises in the Mediterranean, and, reportedly, in a strike in the Sudan against an Iranian arms convoy that was carrying weapons to Hamas in Gaza. The only event that could prompt an earlier strike by Israel would be a decision by Russia to deliver long-range SAM-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, a development that would seriously complicate an Israeli air- and cruise missile-strike against Iran. Israel would strike before the SAM-300 missiles were activated. Netan-

yahu may also reason that in a year's time, most U.S. combat forces will have left Iraq, and the situation in Afghanistan will have been stabilized, if not markedly improved, with the arrival of thousands more American troops.

Under these circumstances, with Iran stalling in its negotiations and the United States less vulnerable in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration may be more willing to allow an Israeli strike. For its part, Israel would be better protected against Iranian and Hamas and Hezbollah reprisals with its anti-Qassam-missile Iron Dome system in place, along with the Arrow II missile, which has been successfully tested against weapons similar to Iranian intermediate-range Shehab missiles. In addition, in a year's time, Secretary of Defense Gates may resign, to be re-

placed by someone more sympathetic to a U.S. or Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear installations.

In conclusion, the coming year will be a most interesting one in U.S.-Israeli as well as U.S.-Iranian relations as both American and Israeli leaders decide what to do about Iran. If a working personal relationship can be created between Obama and Netanyahu—unlike the very negative relationship that Netanyahu had with Bill Clinton from 1996 to 1999—then conflict over Iranian policy may be minimized between the United States and Israel. Indeed, Netanyahu may yet prove willing to make concessions on his policy toward the Palestinians to get a freer hand to deal with Iran. Iran may prove to be an unwitting catalyst in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. ••





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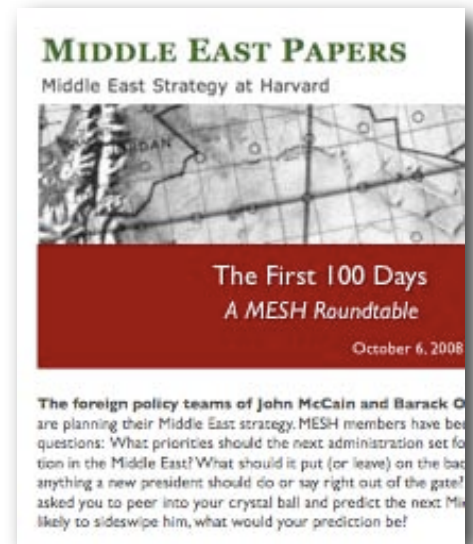
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