



The contentious nuclear triangle

The broad ideological gap between Israel and the US on Iran's nuclear ambitions also explains the opposing views on Tehran's role in the chaos and brutality of the Middle East

IF THE conflict between the US and Israel over Tehran's nuclear weapons program had not reached boiling point prior to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's early March address to Congress, it certainly did in the immediate aftermath. The carefully prepared and expertly delivered text, followed by US President Barack Obama's pointed response from the Oval Office clearly articulated the vast chasm.

The confrontation goes well beyond disagreements over the number of centrifuges Iran will be allowed to keep or the time it would take Iran to build a bomb from the moment it decides to do so. While of central importance in and of themselves, these largely technical issues pale against profound differences over responses to war, terror and regional instability – and not only where Iran is concerned.

Throughout the exchange of blows, Netanyahu presented a position of cold and calculating political realism, driven by an underlying pessimism about the Middle East based on projections of power, competing interests and religious hatreds.

In his view, Iranian officials today may wear suits, smile and use the language of peace, but their goals, including wiping Israel off the map, are unchanged. It was the pressure of economic sanctions and not the rise of an ostensibly "moderate" leadership, which finally brought Iran to the negotiating table. And, according to Netanyahu, the pressure must continue

until Tehran dismantles thousands of illegal centrifuges it will otherwise surely use to enrich uranium for nuclear bombs.

By contrast, Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and other leading Democrats emphasize the need to understand Iranian fears and concerns, reflecting an overarching ideology of cooperation based on hope and optimism. In their view, a compromise agreement on the nuclear weapons program would mark a major step in this direction, while increased confrontation would push the Iranians into a dangerous corner. They argue that Netanyahu's demand to dismantle nuclear facilities (built in violation of agreements over the past twenty years) would be humiliating. Worse, in their view, following Netanyahu's policies, which are widely shared in Israel, including by his political opponents, would result in another terrible Middle Eastern war.

This broad difference in ideological outlook also explains the opposing views on Iran's role in the chaos and brutality of the Middle East. In his speech, Netanyahu presented the view as seen from Israel of Shi'ite Iran's steadily increasing power and destabilizing role throughout the region. He warned that "states are collapsing across the Middle East, Iran is charging into the void ...Iran now dominates four Arab capitals, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa [Yemen]. We must all stand together to stop Iran's march of conquest, subjugation and terror."

On the other hand, the dominant view in Washington, at least among Democrats and in the Obama administration, is that if Iran were embraced by the West as a legitimate partner, it would stop behaving like a rogue state. In other words, if it were to emerge from the political isolation that began with the Islamic revolution in 1979 and reenter the global economy, the regime in Tehran would become a source of stability, at least in comparison to the rest of the Middle East.

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From this perspective, the current Arab chaos, originally labeled the "Arab Spring," is not caused by religious and tribal enmity between Sunnis, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and Iran-led Shi'ites, but stems rather from a confrontation between radical Islamic terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and ISIS and moderate mainstream Muslims.

Thus, in order to defeat the jihadist Sunnis in Iraq, the US has aided the Shi'ite-led "moderate" Iraqi government. And in Syria, after first demanding the removal of Bashar Assad, the Syrian dictator from the Alawite minority, Obama has acquiesced, and even cooperated

with Iran and its Hezbollah proxies, in supporting the Damascus regime against radical Sunnis, including ISIS.

This view of a supposedly moderate Iran serving as a force for stability was dismissed by Netanyahu as dangerously naïve. “Iran and ISIS are competing for the crown of militant Islam. One calls itself the Islamic Republic. The other calls itself the Islamic State. Both want to impose a militant Islamic empire first on the region and then on the entire world. ... So when it comes to Iran and ISIS, the enemy of your enemy is your enemy.”

The argument between Israeli realists and American optimists also pertains to the role of international institutions, such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which in any deal with Iran would have the job of inspecting facilities and verifying compliance with or violation of agreements. For Obama, international frameworks, in which all countries, including Iran, participate and have equal status, are essential for negotiating and settling disputes through non-violent means.

Here, too, the Israeli view is very different. International institutions, and the UN in particular, are seen as major arenas for insidious political warfare against Israel that serve as an extension of terrorist and military attacks, often led by Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah. Moreover, in terms of holding Arab dictatorships and the Iranian regime to account, these institutions are worse than useless. Indeed, they are part of the prob-

lem. Even when staff members attempt to function professionally rather than politically, the frameworks are weak and ineffective.

In this spirit, Netanyahu reminded the Congress that “inspectors document violations; they don’t stop them. Inspectors knew when North Korea broke to the bomb, but that didn’t stop anything. North Korea turned off the cameras, kicked out the inspectors. Within a few years, it got the bomb.” Similarly, he warned, Iran has defied the IAEA’s inspectors. “Like North Korea, Iran broke the locks, shut off the cameras.” Thus, no deal with Iran is possible that merely leaves the centrifuges spinning and nuclear sites operating under safeguards. In the Israeli view, regardless of the wording of any agreement, this operational infrastructure will inevitably be used to build nuclear weapons.

In the past, the impact of these differences was blunted by close cooperation between Jerusalem and Washington and the specter of overwhelming American power. Among the Arabs states, the potential for US intervention reinforced Israel’s ability to project power and overcome threats to vital interests, thus providing some stability in a very unstable environment.

But after overreaching in Iraq and Afghanistan under George W. Bush, the US has retreated under Obama, particularly in the Middle East. Syria and Iraq have been left to fight their inhumanly destructive civil wars, the violence in Ye-

men has been ignored, and the military regime in Egypt that replaced an elected but unpopular Muslim Brotherhood government was initially shunned.

As a result, the concern over a triumphalist Iranian regime armed with nuclear weapons is even more pronounced in the Sunni-led countries. Saudi Arabia and Gulf States such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and the UAE repeatedly voice fears of being exposed to Iranian expansionism and interference. Recently, the Saudi newspaper *Al Arabiya* carried a previously unthinkable headline: “President Obama, listen to Netanyahu on Iran.”

For all these reasons, the shadow cast by Iran’s efforts to achieve the status of a nuclear power will continue to trouble relations between Jerusalem and Washington. The differences are not due primarily to the well-documented personality and political clashes between Obama and Netanyahu; rather they reflect very real and mutually exclusive understandings of power and politics, particularly in the volatile Middle East. ■

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