

COMMENTARY

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Israel and the Continuing US-Iranian Dialogue: Possible Scenarios

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The Baghdad round of talks held during 23-24 May 2012 between the five permanent United Nations Security Council members plus Germany, and Iran proved to be inconclusive as the previous one held in Ankara in April. On the eve of this dialogue, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed scepticism that Iran would agree to refrain from developing its nuclear programme and added: "I have seen no evidence whatsoever that Iran is serious about ending its nuclear program. It looks as though they see the talks as another opportunity to delay and deceive and buy time, pretty much as North Korea did for many years. Iran is very good in playing this kind of chess game, and you know sometimes you have to sacrifice a pawn to save the king." Netanyahu also spelled out the basic parameters that Israel would demand in any agreement: a) a freeze on uranium enrichment within Iran; b) the removal from Iran of the uranium that has been enriched; and c) dismantling of the nuclear facility in Qom.

At the G-8 summit, President Barack Obama, perhaps in response to Netanyahu's comments, was at pains to present a much more flexible position towards Iran. The President stressed the following points: a) The G-8 states are unified in their approach to Iran; b) Iran has the right to build nuclear reactors for peaceful purposes; c) Nevertheless, Iran's repeated violations of international norms and its inability thus far to persuade the international community that it does not intend to work to acquire military nuclear capability is a source of grave concern to all countries; d) we are hopeful that the round of talks in Baghdad will succeed; e) However, we are

firmly committed to continuing with sanctions, pressure, and a diplomatic dialogue with Iran; and f) we are hopeful that it will be possible to resolve this issue peacefully, in a manner that respects Iran's sovereignty and its rights in the international system, but that also recognize Iran's international responsibility.

Are There Differences between of Israel and the US?

These statements by Obama and Netanyahu ostensibly indicate that Israel and the United States see eye to eye on the final goal vis-à-vis Iran— preventing it from obtaining nuclear weapon capability. Nevertheless, they give the impression that they differ on the question of the means of achieving this goal, and more than that, on the timetable allocated to reaching it. Netanyahu's comments clearly convey the following message: a) Israel is impatient about the amount of time that can be given to diplomatic efforts, and it wants immediate results, b) Israel does not trust Iranian intentions, and its basic assumption being that Iran is entering the dialogue only in order to relieve pressure and gain time. c) Israel will not be satisfied with a comprehensive agreement that fails to provide a response to its concrete demands intended to deny Iran the ability to develop nuclear weapons.

President Obama's comments make it clear that the administration is taking a different approach towards Iran than it had taken in recent months. Obama has adopted a moderate tone, and he is projecting the message that even if thus far, Iran has not fulfilled the international community's expectations, it should be trusted to change its way in the future. Furthermore, the President made clear the need to preserve Iran's sovereign rights and its right to develop peaceful nuclear capability. His remarks conveyed an explicit message that he is not as impatient as Israel and, therefore, even if the current round of talks fails, the possibility of a settlement with Iran at a later stage should not be ruled out.

This description clearly demonstrates the dilemmas facing the Obama administration in formulating its positions and policy towards Iran. It faces a complex and critical issue: How can it translate into action its commitment, public and secret, to preventing Iran from achieving military nuclear capability? We believe that the President must deal, inter alia, with the following main considerations:

1. The US is the leading world power and has fairly great endurance, both diplomatic and operational, in the Iranian context, far greater than Israel's. The framework of time of the United States is by far bigger than that of Israel.
2. The US has much broader considerations than Israel as to whether, how, when, and to what extent to fulfil its commitment to thwart Iranian nuclearization. The issues will include the ramifications for American relations with Russia, China, European countries, and Islamic nations. The President will also need to take into account a dramatic increase in energy prices, with an emphasis on oil prices, and the consequences for his chances of election to a second term in November 2012.

3. In spite of its tremendous strength, the US is sceptical of its ability to strike effectively the Iranian nuclear installations. Its inability to translate its military supremacy into a strategic victory in Iraq and Afghanistan probably serves as a strong psychological barrier in the decision about a US military strike in Iran.

Significance for Israel

From Israel's point of view, the situation that is developing could lead to a number of possible scenarios. The first is that growing international pressure on Iran, the concrete fear of a US and/or Israeli military strike, and the approach of the date when the expanded sanctions take effect will lead the Iranian regime to accept the basic demands of the Obama administration on the question of continued nuclear development. At this point, this scenario appears to be manifestly improbable.

A second scenario, one that is more likely, is that the circumstances described above will lead to Iranian willingness to tactically adopt more flexible positions and to accept some of the Western demands in a limited fashion. This willingness would lead to a settlement between the two sides. Such a settlement, we can assume, would lead to slower Iranian nuclear development, but it would not completely prevent Iran from realizing its vision of military nuclear capability in the future.

The fact that the President presented Iran with an escape hatch, in the form of nuclear facilities for "peaceful purposes" that Iran can build with full permission, is likely to be seen in Iran as a tacit willingness by the major powers, including the US, to turn a blind eye to a slow, gradual and controlled process of development of nuclear capability. Israel must assume that as soon as there is a declaration that the sides have signed an agreement, almost irrespective of its content, the legitimacy of an Israeli military strike against Iran will be dramatically reduced. Such a strike would be seen by the international community, including the US—and justifiably so—as blatant Israeli defiance and a vote of no confidence not only in the US, but in the entire international system.

A third scenario also would reduce Israel's freedom of manoeuvre vis-à-vis Iran, but less. This scenario assumes that the two sides do not reach a settlement in the current round of talks. However, as President Obama has hinted, the two sides will declare that "opportunities have been created" for an agreement that are not to be missed because of the Israeli tendency to rashness and impatience, and that credit must be given to the diplomatic process, accompanied by widespread economic sanctions that are supposed to be applied in the coming weeks. If Israel faces such a scenario, it will have to plan its steps on the basis of the following basic considerations, among others:

1. **Israel's sense of threat:** The government of Israel is operating on the assumption that the Iranian nuclear programme is aimed mainly at Israel and that it is a concrete and existential threat. This assumption appears to have widespread domestic public support.
2. **Timetables and their operational consequences:** Israel is acting on the basis of the assumption that at some point in the foreseeable future, Iran is likely to enter a zone of immunity. In November 2011, Defence Minister Ehud Barak said that there is a period of about one year until Iran reaches this state. What this means is that Israel, with its current capabilities, would no longer be able to effectively strike Iran's nuclear facilities. If this period passes, then Iran's continued nuclearization would depend only on decisions by the US administration.
3. **The US elections:** Israel is very well aware of the great political significance of the period leading up to the elections in the US. This is a time when the President's ability to restrict the steps taken by Israel in various areas is very limited. If Israel acts against Iran during this period, the administration's ability to respond, the scope of the criticism, and the possibility of taking punitive measures against Israel will be very limited. This will not be the case after November 2012.
4. **The administration's credibility:** As noted, the Obama administration made an unequivocal commitment, at the most senior levels, to prevent Iran from going nuclear. However, this administration, and also the previous US administrations, have more than once turned their back on their promises, even explicit ones, when they realized that there were new circumstances that prevented them from fulfilling the commitments they had made, or when fulfilling the commitments was perceived as harming the national interests of the US. In any case, the current administration is serving until November 2012. No one knows at this point whether the current President will be elected for a second term or replaced by another President who will seek to re-examine the issue and will be less bound by previous commitments.

Conclusion

At this point, it is difficult to assess how the current round of talks between the major powers and Iran will end. Basically, the following possibilities exist:

1. Growing international pressure on Iran, the concrete threat of an Israeli and/or US military strike against Iran, and the approaching implementation of broad sanctions will lead Iran to substantially accept the terms of the US administration and to sign an agreement that will bring about a cessation of nuclear operations. This option currently appears improbable.
2. The circumstances described above will lead Iran to agree to tactical flexibility only in its positions on the nuclear issue. In practice, Iran will continue to adhere to fulfilment of its plans to achieve military nuclear capability, perhaps in the longer term. Such a scenario would leave intact the necessity of an Israeli military strike. However, the legitimacy of such an operation would be dramatically reduced.

3. The sides are not able to reach an agreement and the current situation remains as it is. In such a case, the military option and the issue of its legitimacy would remain unchanged.

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