

COMMENTARY

No. 163

Wednesday, 20 November 2013

Unified Approach to Negotiating With Iran

Alon Ben-Meir

New York University

On the surface, the United States and Israel appear to be on the same page regarding Iran's nuclear program and how to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons without the use of force. Less discussed, however, are the significant differences between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The most recent conspicuous public discord between the two leaders was manifested during the United Nations General Assembly.

Whereas Obama embraced President Rouhani's "charm offensive," welcomed his goodwill gesture and even spoke with him on the phone, Netanyahu dismissed Rouhani's overture with utter disdain, insisting that there is no change in Iran's ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons—only its tactics.

Although the US and Israel share intelligence and carefully monitor Iran's nuclear program, their strategic and tactical differences on how to tackle Iran's nuclear program are bound to surface once Iran-US negotiations get underway. Here are some of those differences:

First, Obama's credibility came into question in the wake of his vacillation on the Syrian crisis where tens of thousands are being butchered. Moreover, Obama's credibility was further tarnished following his reversal on punishing Assad once he crossed the "red line" by using chemical weapons, which Obama asserted would be the tipping point.

Israel doubts Obama's repeated assertion that all options are on the table, including the use of military force to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and that he will in fact execute what he proclaims.

President Obama's lack of credibility is also widely seen by many Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, who is terrified of the prospect of Iran becoming the region's hegemon equipped with nuclear weapons and being in a position to bully its neighbours.

Second, while Israel agrees, albeit grudgingly, that diplomacy should be given a chance, Israelis worry that given Obama's eagerness to find a peaceful solution, he may lift some of the sanctions prematurely before Iran demonstrates in deeds its intentions.

Although Obama and Netanyahu share the view that Rouhani's moderate stance is precipitated by the crippling sanctions, Netanyahu is convinced that even if the Iranian regime agreed to stop uranium enrichment, it will resume it once the sanctions are lifted. This will also re-intensify Iran's efforts to provide financial means to bolster its regional sway while aiding radical groups.

Third, whereas Netanyahu demands the dismantling of all of Iran's nuclear facilities, Obama believes that this may well be a non-starter for Iran and has already indicated that Iran could maintain a limited nuclear program for peaceful purposes under strict international supervision.

Here too, Netanyahu is firm in his belief that Iran has demonstrated its uncanny ability to deceive the international community, and there is no reason to assume that it will now change course even under strict international monitoring.

Fourth, although Obama has time and again affirmed the US' unshakable commitment to Israel's national security, the view in Washington and other Western capitals is that fearing a massive retaliatory attack by the US, Iran will never use nuclear weapons against Israel, even if it had one.

Israel is fearful that if Iran manages to reach the point of no return in its nuclear weapons program, Obama may eventually settle on containing Iran's nuclear capability through deterrence rather than use force to prevent it from acquiring nuclear bombs in the first place.

Netanyahu is absolutely convinced that the Iranian threat is existential and that the logic of deterrence does not apply to the Mullahs in Tehran.

Some question why Israel can have a nuclear program and Iran cannot. Simply put, Iran has repeatedly threatened Israel existentially, which Israel takes seriously. Thus, Israel feels it has the right to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons as long as Iran represents such an imminent danger.

Moreover Israel, like the US, is extremely concerned that the proliferation of WMDs could be catastrophic should such weapons fall into the wrong hands.

In an interview with NBC's Andrea Mitchell, Netanyahu stated that "you don't want to be in a position where this messianic, apocalyptic, radical regime that has these wild ambitions but a nice spokesman gets away with building the weapons of mass death."

For this reason, Netanyahu insists that "when it comes to Iran's nuclear program, here's my advice: Distrust, dismantle and verify"—a condition that he is unlikely to get, which raises other concerns for him.

Netanyahu knows that during the negotiations his hand may well be tied and he will not be in a position to take military action. His concerns will be compounded if the US reaches an

agreement which is not air-tight and leaves Iran with an opening to resume its nuclear weapons program.

To avoid any misunderstanding and to increase the US' leverage in the negotiations with Iran, the US must work closely with its allies, especially Israel, and project a unified approach by taking a number of steps.

The US should convince Iran that any agreement ought to fully satisfy its allies, including Israel. To that end, Tehran must understand that the US will regularly consult with its regional allies, and their endorsement of any agreement is a prerequisite.

President Obama should publicly disabuse Iran of the notion that the US can force Israel's hand to accept any deal. Iran must be convinced that Netanyahu is not bluffing when he says, "if Israel is forced to stand alone, Israel will stand alone."

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Netanyahu pointedly said, "I'll give you a state secret. The US has a stronger military than Israel, but, but don't short-change Israel either."

Any differences between the US and Israel should be discussed privately. Iran must recognize that there is no daylight between the US' and Israel's positions and that it cannot drive a wedge between them.

Finally, the US should not try to inhibit or pressure Israel from publicly threatening Iran. Only when Iran takes the Israeli threats seriously will it make the concessions necessary to reach an agreement acceptable to the US and Israel as well.

To reach a lasting solution, a number of specific stipulations should be met:

Although negotiations will resume between Iran and the P5+1 in mid-October, being that Iran needs to satisfy the US' demands and that the US is not willing to settle for the lowest denominator (which Russia and China may push for), only bilateral negotiations between the US and Iran could potentially produce an enduring accord.

Given Iran's long record of deception and propensity to play for time, the timeframe for the duration of the negotiations should be limited to three to four months to prevent Iran from exploiting lengthy negotiations to further advance its nuclear weapons program.

Tehran has made great strides in advancing its nuclear program in the past in spite of repeated Israeli-American cyber attacks and the assassination of several of its top nuclear scientists. If Iran is sincere about reaching an agreement, it can be accomplished within the allotted period.

The US must not remove any of the sanctions unless Iran shows that it is negotiating in good faith and first implements prior demands by the IAEA at the onset of the negotiations.

This includes allowing immediate and unfettered access to all its nuclear facilities and providing full disclosure about any undeclared nuclear material and its location. Finally, Iran must cease uranium enrichment during the negotiations.

Given that Iran will not agree to dismantle its nuclear facilities, the US and Israel should agree on the scope of such a program and a monitoring regime that may include a permanent presence of international monitors.

To be sure, there may be an opportunity to end the impasse over Iran's nuclear program peacefully: Since Iran has always insisted that its nuclear program is peaceful, Tehran has, in fact, a built-in face-saving way out by agreeing to maintain a strictly supervised and limited nuclear program on its soil.

Ayatollah Khamenei could emerge as the "winner" from these negotiations by successfully removing the sanctions, preserving national pride while satisfying the US and its allies, including Israel.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/unified-approach-to-negotiating-with-iran/>

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: alon@alonben-meir.com

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