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Diplomacy to seal Iran's fate

By Victor Kotsev
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While the rhetoric between Iran and its enemies has reached new heights - with Iran's defense minister reportedly threatening the use of "hidden capabilities which are kept for rainy days" in response to a foreign attack - the diplomatic front is also busier than ever. A great deal of expectation is placed on the meeting between United States President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu next Monday, just as a great deal of attention is focused on Israel's preparations to strike the Iranian nuclear program.

Yet while Israel is one of the noisiest participants in the stand-off, it is by far not the only important player to watch. From a long rostrum of powers with heavy stakes (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and China immediately come to mind), Russia seems to be driving a particularly hard bargain with the US and its allies. Though not

much is known about these secret negotiations, what seems apparent is that the fates of Iran and Syria are intricately linked.

To be sure, the exchange of high-ranking American and Israeli officials has grown into a "parade" over the last month, to borrow the description of the Jerusalem Post. According to reports in the Israeli press, some kind of a grand bargain on Iran is shaping up between the two allies, to be concluded - ideally - during the visit of Netanyahu and the Israeli president, Shimon Peres, to Washington in about a week. (The influential Israeli defense minister, Ehud Barak, is currently there; the formal occasion for the upcoming visit of Peres and Netanyahu is the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.)

Despite last week's report by the International Atomic Energy Agency, according to which Iran's uranium enrichment has expanded significantly, [1] and despite the urgency which Israeli officials have sounded, there is increased talk about postponing the strike against the Islamic Republic until after the American elections in November. To be more precise, there are increased indications of massive American pressure on Israel to desist from attacking for now. "For the Americans, the upcoming summit reportedly has only one main aim: Receiving a Netanyahu pledge that Israel will not be striking Iran in the near future," writes the Israeli news site Ynet. [2]

The Israelis bring their own demands: according to the same article, "Netanyahu wants the statement to include an American declaration that Washington will further tighten the sanctions against Tehran." Yet it is doubtful that this would be enough for the Israeli prime minister to forego the military option he has built up at enormous expense over the last years, and which he professes to believe may soon be the only way left to ensure his country's survival.

According to a recent report in the Israeli daily Ha'aretz:

The Netanyahu-Obama meeting ... will be definitive. If the US president wants to prevent a disaster, he must give Netanyahu iron-clad guarantees that the United States will stop Iran in any way necessary and at any price, after the 2012 elections. If Obama doesn't do this, he will obligate Netanyahu to act before the 2012 elections. [3]

Moreover, a former Israeli official told Newsweek that "Obama's refusal to provide that assurance has helped shape Israel's posture: a refusal to promise restraint, or even to give the United States advance notice."

The article offers a fascinating account of how Israeli officials were imposed an informational "blackout" on their American counterparts from June through October last year, which, in retrospect, may have motivated the intense traffic that we see at present. It also recounts the visit of the head of Israel's Mossad spy agency in Washington last month:

According to an American official who was involved, Tamir Pardo wanted to take the pulse of the Obama administration and determine what the consequences would be if Israel bombed Iranian nuclear sites over American objections. Pardo raised many questions, according to this source: "What is our posture on Iran? Are we ready to bomb? Would we [do so later]? What does it mean if [Israel] does it anyway?" As it is, Israel has stopped sharing a significant amount of information with Washington regarding its own military preparations. [4]

There are countless theories about what an Israeli attack on Iran would look like, most including some combination of conventional air strikes with in-flight refueling, drone strikes, electronic warfare, and other methods, some bordering on science fiction. Medium range ballistic missiles (Jericho II) carrying specially designed high explosives, sea-borne (perhaps submarine-borne) cruise missiles, and special ground forces have all been suggested as possibilities; even large tungsten "rods from god" [5] mounted on the Jericho III intercontinental ballistic missiles Israel is believed to possess are not out of question.

There are two main schools of thought with respect to what a strike would aim to accomplish. According to an NBC report:

Israel would not try to take out every Iranian nuclear facility but instead would target certain facilities it considers critical, hoping to set the program back. US officials believe an attack could put the program back two to four years, Israelis estimate more like three to five. One official said the Israelis are prepared to "do the same in two to four years" if the Iranian program recovers. [6] Others, however, argue that Israel would choose to attack not only a larger number of additional nuclear objects, but also most of Iran's medium range ballistic missiles which can be used to strike back. (This would still leave Iran's capability to block the Strait of Hormuz intact, as well as the ability to attack US bases in the Persian Gulf.)

Assuming that Israel is set on attacking, a lot of the specifics would depend on what the Americans are saying behind closed doors, which is far from certain. One argument goes that Obama would rather Israel attacked without his explicit knowledge, and as minimally as possible, so that he could deny involvement and try to deescalate the crisis following a limited Israeli strike.

However, in this scenario it would be ultimately up to Iran to decide whether or not the US was involved (and whether or not to hit back), and it is unlikely that many in the American administration would be comfortable with trusting the Iranians. The opposite argument seems to fit better the current events: that the American president is eager to know every Israeli move, in order to prevent an attack.

The international community - countries as diverse as Russia, Japan and the European powers - ostensibly backs the American pressure on Israel. The main reason for this is illustrated in the NBC report cited above:

The price would spike immediately, going from around \$100 a barrel now to "between \$200 and pick-a-number," said one oil trader. How quickly it would revert to lower levels would depend on how quickly the situation stabilized and how and where Iran would respond. An attack on Saudi Arabia, for instance, would place the price target at close to that "pick-a-number" scenario, the trader said.

Even a \$25 a barrel increase would have serious consequences for the recoveries in the US, European and East Asian economies, particularly Japan. "It would be a game changer," for the US economy and the political season, said a US official.

One way Obama might persuade Israel to hold off from attacking Iran without committing to strike himself could be to "lead from behind" in Syria. (This would imply a Libya-style overt or covert intervention, spearheaded by "allied" forces.) The argument would be that taking out Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would weaken greatly the Iranian deterrent against Israel; we could think of it as a kind of carrot offered to Netanyahu to wait and to hope that the Syrian threat to start a war with Israel if cornered is just a bluff.

It might take some time to depose Assad, but there are already unconfirmed reports of Turkish and Qatari special forces on the ground.

While Syria deserves a separate analysis, it is important to note that, according to recent statements by a wide variety of officials, the fate of the two countries is linked beyond the obvious (they are close allies and Iran is reportedly helping Assad repress his domestic opponents). Take, for example, the following quote which Ha'aretz attributes to US National Security Advisor Tom Donilon: "America will not allow Iran to act aggressively and ruthlessly exploit the Arab Spring, 'which is proposing ideological alternatives to Iran's Islamic Revolution,' suggested Donilon." [7]

This statement would ring less odd, and suggestive, if, practically at the same time, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood lawmakers weren't predicting that the Arab Spring would spread to Iran. [8] Add to this the cryptic comments by yet another American official, Anthony Blinken, that American policy vis-a-vis Iran is targeted at "buying time and continuing to move this problem into the future, and if you can do that - strange things can happen in the interim." [9]

Russian analysts, on the other hand, have long maintained that the Arab Spring was a "color revolution", a tool either invented or adapted by the West to advance its interests. Not that Russia's hands - or motives - are clean. In Syria, Russia is concerned mainly with its naval base in Tartus, its weapons sales, and its influence in the Arab world. The Syrian rebels have reportedly offered to be flexible on the first issue. As concerns the second, a source close to the Russian analyst community suggested that once it has completed the deals, the Kremlin may be eager to demonstrate the capabilities of its arms. (Among other things, this could boost sales to other countries.)

With respect to Iran, Russia seems to be balancing between two different fears. On the one hand, the same source suggested, the Russians are afraid that if the United States accomplishes regime change in Tehran, the American missile defense shield would arrive at Russia's doorstep from that direction. On the other hand, the current Iranian regime armed with nuclear missiles is far from the ideal neighbor, either (separated from Russia by the Caspian Sea).

Moreover, if Iran's regime suffers a limited defeat, but is left standing, it will likely be desperate for more Russian weapons.

Thus, while the Kremlin is officially a key ally of both Syria and Iran, crucial to supporting both regimes diplomatically and with military technology, in reality it is ready to play both sides at once, if it isn't doing that already. It may be more amenable to some scenarios than to others - for example, it might, under some conditions, accept point strikes in Iran, or a regime change in Syria that does not threaten its interests.

While neither the Russians nor any other player is likely to have its full agenda in the Middle East fulfilled, the bargaining that is undoubtedly raging in secret will seal the fate of the region, at least for the near future.

Notes:

1. Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, IAEA, February 24, 2012.
2. Netanyahu wants silence on Iran, Ynet, February 25, 2012.
3. If Israel strikes Iran, it'll be because Obama didn't stop it, Ha'aretz, February 23, 2012.
4. Obama's Dangerous Game With Iran, Newsweek, February 13, 2012.
5. The Rods from God, The Weekly Standard, June 8, 2005.
6. Panetta report fuels concerns that Israel will attack Iran, NBC News, February 2, 2012.
7. Barak will have to pass an attack on Iran through a reluctant U.S., Ha'aretz, February 26, 2012.
8. Muslim Brotherhood lawmaker: Arab Spring headed to Iran, Ha'aretz, February 28, 2012.
9. U.S. policy aimed at 'buying time' with Iran, says senior official, Ha'aretz, February 28, 2012.