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Netanyahu, Iran and the fundamentals of policy

An Israeli attack on Iran could lead to a regional collapse of the non-proliferation treaty.

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Washington, DC - The tall, polished European diplomat spoke in impeccable English and in a soothing tone. Seated comfortably in the stately, hushed inner sanctums of the State Department's seventh floor, he attempted to convey an empathetic understanding of his hosts' concerns. "Of course," he said, "we understand fully the trauma you suffered during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979".

His words could hardly have had a worse effect on his senior American listeners. Having come that day in 1993 to address the State Department's frequently and insistently stated calls for coordinated action to address then-current Iranian behaviour, he seemed to suggest that what was really at the heart of American policy towards Iran was some sort of unresolved national psychosis.

In substance and tone, his message was taken as both condescending and insulting, however benevolently it might have been intended; the rest of the meeting, which did not last long, was palpably frosty.

I recall having seen - and having shared - a similar reaction to one of the many statements made by then-French President Jacques Chirac in early 2003, as the US was preparing its invasion of Iraq. Both a noted admirer of the United States and a vocal opponent of the use of military force against Saddam Hussein, the French head of state managed to strike a particularly grating note of

Gallic hauteur on this occasion, when he attempted to explain the reason for his oft-stated advice to the Americans: When one sees an old friend about to make a great mistake, he intoned, one is obliged to speak out to tell him so.

These two vignettes come to mind, as Washington prepares to receive Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu this week. We have all seen this play before: Both Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama are speaking before the annual conference of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) - the leading pro-Israel lobbying organisation in the US - and the two leaders will hold a bilateral meeting at the White House. The topic on all three occasions: Iran.

Shaping policy

The entire process is shaping up as yet another ordeal for Obama, as the Israeli prime minister, AIPAC, the US president's prospective Republican rivals and the US Senate (32 of whose members are currently co-sponsoring a non-binding resolution calling, in effect, on the administration to bring its Iranian policy fully in line with Israel's) work in concert to exert as much pressure as possible for the administration to toughen its approach.

Indeed, much recent commentary is focused on the extent to which the current dynamic, to include domestic political considerations in all three concerned capitals, appears to be driving the US, Israel and Iran inevitably toward armed conflict. It is an unwelcome situation for Obama, but one which he seems powerless to control.

If one tries to look beyond the tactical drivers of current policy toward its more fundamental determinants, surely one of these is the Israeli government's obsessive notion that a nuclear-armed clerical regime in Tehran would pose an imminent existential threat. It is hard to imagine Obama escaping from the political maelstrom in which he is trapped without somehow addressing the touchstones of current Israeli policy.

It may be easy to suggest, as various commentators, including this one do, that Iran's willfully ambiguous and bellicose (and in the case of President Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial, offensive) statements are not meant to threaten direct military action by Iran against the Israeli state, which Iran would not undertake under any circumstances, but are rather meant as gloating descriptions of a future in which current trends, including demographic ones, will not work in Israel's favor.

Nonetheless, the words are there, and they play, when taken at their face, directly upon the historical reasons for Israel's creation. It is completely unreasonable to suppose that Israelis will dismiss them.

More fundamentally, given this history, Israel and its most ardent supporters are not about to trust the fate of the Zionist state to comforting prognostications regarding the intentions of their enemies. When dealing with enemies, into which category Iran must fall, Israelis will look to those enemies' capabilities only.

This accounts for the yawning gap between the Israeli government's insistence that Iran be precluded from developing even the capacity to build a nuclear weapon, and the US administration's alternative focus upon specific Iranian moves to develop one, irrespective of underlying capabilities.

Add to this, then, the individual background and psychology of Netanyahu himself, who has been publicly warning of the dire atomic threat from Iran at least since 1996. The son of an ardent and militant Zionist, who was for a time secretary to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and the brother of the commander of the Israeli commando unit responsible for the 1976 raid on Entebbe to free Israeli hostages (who was also himself killed in the operation), the Prime Minister has been steeped in the view that only Israel can be responsible for its own security, and that only through strength and bold action can the tragedies of the Jewish past be prevented from repetition.

Just last month, Netanyahu addressed the Israeli Knesset on International Holocaust Remembrance Day to say, "Seventy years after the Holocaust, many in the world are silent in the face of Iran's pledges to wipe Israel off the face of the Earth. This is a day in which the leaders of the world must commit not to allow another genocide."

Pressure from Obama

From my own experience with well-meaning foreigners' attempts to reduce my country's policies to a form of irrational psychology, or to a colossal misjudgment of its true interests, it is fair to say that any attempt by Obama to directly address the psychological and judgmental drivers of Israeli policy on Iran - in the unlikely event he attempted to do so - would be highly unlikely to succeed. In fact, only Israelis can do this.

If Netanyahu is to avoid a colossal misjudgment, his grasp of history cannot be only backward-looking, but capable of projection into the future - a future well beyond the short-term unpleasantness which would predictably result from a strike on Iran. These consequences, including ship attacks, skyrocketing oil prices and terrorist reprisals will all pass.

What is more important for Israel to consider is that military action will make Iran far more and not less determined to acquire nuclear weapons over the longer term, and will quite likely lead to a *de facto* regional collapse of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, in which other regional states, whose political future is uncertain, rush to nuclearise as well.

It will simultaneously make both more difficult and more unavoidable a situation in which Israel will be forced to declare its true status as a nuclear weapons' state and engage in regional de-nuclearisation talks.

Right now, Netanyahu, trapped as he is in a backward-looking perspective, sees only that strategic trends are not moving in his direction, which makes a blind throw of the dice seem enticing. He could not be more wrong.

No, outsiders' attempts at empathy and reasoned persuasion will not work with Netanyahu - not with so much seemingly at stake for Israel. For Obama to change the current political dynamic,

he would have to address Israel's demands head-on, forthrightly state the reasons for his administration's alternative view, and make clear the adverse consequences for US relations with Israel if the Jewish state were to undertake uncoordinated military action against Persia. If this seems an improbable choice by the US president, it is only yet another measure of the likelihood that war with Iran is approaching a point of inevitability.