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Obama's Logic of War

by Sheldon Richman
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Despite the alleged difference between Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Iran, both embrace a position that logically commits them to war. If war is to be avoided, as Obama says he wishes, he will have to abandon his current stance.

The difference between Obama and Netanyahu is more apparent than real. Both say Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon is "unacceptable." Both have vauntingly put "all options on the table," including the nuclear option. Both say they are willing to give harsh economic sanctions and diplomacy more time.

Some difference seems to exist over where they would draw the "red line." Netanyahu says he cannot tolerate Iran's having even partially finished components and know-how; by that low standard, Iran has already crossed the line. Obama seems to draw the line at actual production or possession of a nuclear weapon. In practice that may be a distinction without a difference, since, if Iran were to decide to build a weapon, it certainly would not do it in the open. When exactly would Obama consider the line crossed?

That is a big "if," however. Neither American nor Israeli intelligence believes Iran has decided to make a nuclear warhead, and the many U.S. intelligence agencies have twice said Iran scrapped what may have been a weapons program in 2003, the year the American military toppled Iran's nemesis, Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, from power.

For more than a decade, American and Israeli belligerents have warned in dire tones that an Iranian bomb is just a few years away. Yet Iran's uranium, which is under the watchful eye of

the International Atomic Energy Agency, has not been enriched to weapons grade. Iran complies with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran insists its nuclear research is for electricity and medicine, and no one has hard evidence to the contrary. Moreover, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei for years has said that Islam forbids possession of nuclear weapons. In February Khamenei repeated,

The Iranian nation has never pursued and will never pursue nuclear weapons. There is no doubt that the decision makers in the countries opposing us know well that Iran is not after nuclear weapons because the Islamic Republic, logically, religiously, and theoretically, considers the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin and believes the proliferation of such weapons is senseless, destructive, and dangerous.

One may reasonably be skeptical of what the head of any government says, but one is obliged to present some evidence to contradict a particular claim, especially one made over many years and supported by American intelligence. Khamenei's *fatwa* against nuclear weapons is highly inconvenient for those who want war with Iran.

At best Obama has bought some time with Netanyahu. The last thing Obama wants before the election is a new war that would, as the least of its consequences, send gasoline prices soaring. It would also lead to American deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention in Israel and, most especially, in Iran itself.

But let's not conclude that Obama deserves another Nobel Peace Prize just yet. The time he bought is time in which the Iranian middle and working classes will suffer greatly under the tightening sanctions, which impede the country's ability to sell its oil and import needed commodities. Food prices have skyrocketed as the value of the Iranian rial plummets. Innocent people, particularly children, are suffering.

The vise tightens each day. Under American prodding, Iranian banks have been shut out of the international payment network, which will make it even harder for Iran to obtain imports. The number of banks added to the blacklist is sure to grow. Where possible, Iran has resorted to barter, with all its inconveniences.

This is reminiscent of the 1990s U.S.-led sanctions on Iraq that killed 500,000 children and fueled the anti-Americanism that led to the attacks on September 11, 2001. One recalls Bill Clinton's UN ambassador (and later secretary of State) Madeleine Albright's infamous comment that the murder of those children was "worth it" in the effort to drive Saddam Hussein from power, which it did not do. Will Secretary of State Hillary Clinton say the same thing some day? Will she say it before or after some horrible incident?

Diplomacy?

The other track Obama touts is diplomacy. But the big question is this: What is there to talk about? Iran's government (with the support of the people) insists it may legally enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. Indeed, it may do so under the NPT, which it — unlike Israel, with several

hundred nuclear weapons — has signed and honored. But Obama and Netanyahu want Iran to end its enrichment program. A few years ago when Iran, seeking to defuse the situation, arranged to acquire enriched uranium for its civilian reactors in a swap with Turkey and Brazil — thereby ending its enrichment program — Obama scotched the deal (after claiming to favor such a compromise).

So the United States and Israel are making a demand — cessation of the making of fuel for its medical and energy reactors — that Iran cannot accept without becoming subservient to them. That it will not do, though in talks it has shown a willingness to seek an accommodation. Iran, whether the United States and Israel like it or not, is a major Middle Eastern country, with close to 80 million people and 636,000 square miles. It is a traditional power, and it will not be eager to relinquish that status.

What then? Considering what Obama (“I don’t bluff”) and Netanyahu demand, war is the only remaining option. Even if they sincerely do not want war, the logic of their position pushes in that direction. Speaking at the conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC, the main Israel-Jewish lobbying organization), he declared, “I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say. That includes all elements of American power.” “All elements” includes the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

For his part, Netanyahu continues to ratchet up the rhetoric, comparing the situation to Germany, 1938. “Seventy years after the Holocaust,” Netanyahu said, “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.”

His playing the Holocaust card is shameful. Iran, with a weak air force and army, is not Nazi Germany. Israel, in contrast, has an awesome nuclear arsenal, including a submarine-based second-strike capability, and a first-rate military financed and equipped by the American taxpayer to the tune of \$3 billion a year. Iran’s leaders know full well that an attack on Israel would be the death of the Islamic regime, and Israel’s leaders acknowledge that Khamenei’s goal is survival not suicide. (That is echoed by Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey, who calls the regime a “rational actor.”) Moreover, the charge that Iran has pledged to wipe Israel off the face of the earth is false, although Iranian officials oppose the Zionist regime. Iran’s intentions may be judged by the fact that its ancient Jewish community practices its religion freely, with 25 synagogues in Tehran, and has representation in the Iranian parliament. (That is not to say that Iranians are politically and economically free, but within the sphere of religion and culture people have a good deal of liberty.)

The demonization of the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the new Hitler is particularly absurd. Hoover Institution foreign-affairs expert Bruce Bueno de Mesquita estimates that Ahmadinejad is the 18th-most-powerful politician in Iran and has nothing to say about Iran’s military. His faction was dealt a big political setback in March’s parliamentary elections — at the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei. Following the elections, Ahmadinejad was summoned before the Parliament for questioning about his mishandling of the economy. Some members spoke of impeachment. Some Hitler.

Restraining Israel

Many American observers believe the Obama-Netanyahu meeting in March defused the tension that had built up over Iran. After all, before the meeting, it was reported that Netanyahu said he would give Obama no notice of an attack on Iran. But are the accounts of Obama's deft restraining of Netanyahu accurate?

John Feffer of Foreign Policy in Focus isn't so sure:

But this story of Obama the diplomat standing up to Netanyahu the bully omits some important information. During Netanyahu's visit, the Obama administration reportedly offered Israel a package of advanced military technology, including bunker-busting bombs and long-range refueling planes, as long as it postponed any attacks on Iran until 2013. In other words, Obama wasn't only buying time, he was bribing Israel to prevent the kind of October surprise — or even July surprise — that might derail his reelection bid. And he was doing so with precisely the weapons that Israel could use to execute an attack on Iran.

Is Obama against war or against war before the election? And has Netanyahu changed his strategic outlook? Apparently not. Reports *Haaretz*, a major Israeli daily,

Since his return from Washington, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has mainly been preoccupied with one thing: Preparing public opinion for war against Iran....

In his speech before the Knesset on Wednesday, Netanyahu urged his colleagues to reject claims that Israel is too weak to go it alone in a war against a regional power such as Iran and therefore needs to rely on the United States, which has much greater military capabilities, to do the job and remove the threat.

In other statements he insisted he does not need U.S. approval for the attack. He also attempted to connect the March violence between Israel and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to Iran, though there is no relationship. (The Palestinians there have been under Israeli rule since 1967.)

In the past Netanyahu has bragged that he is able to manipulate Americans. He seems to be up to his old tricks. (For the record, former Israeli intelligence chiefs think an attack on Iran is a bad idea; the Israeli public is leery of going it alone.)

In the end, Obama's and Netanyahu's objective — a subservient Iran — simply cannot be achieved except by regime change, something the Iranian government is not likely to facilitate. When (futile) diplomacy and sanctions fail, what will be left besides war?

Obama's adulators desperately want to believe he is a man of peace. They need to wake up.