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Bibi's Three Steps Forward, One Back

by Trita Parsi
October 11, 2012

There seems to be a delusion reigning in Washington. After Israeli Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cartoonish presentation at the United Nations General Assembly and implicit signaling that he would not unilaterally attack Iran before the U.S. elections, there is a belief that Netanyahu caved to President Barack Obama. But did he really?

The choreography around Israel's threats to attack—unless the U.S. and the EU further sanctioned Iran, did not strike a deal, and committed to take military action at some point—was elaborate, relentless and quite convincing. A never-ending stream of dramatic verbiage created the impression that this time around is different from the many threats Israel issued in the past. Israel cries wolf over and over again, yet escapes being held to account thanks to the fear in the West that Israel might just be serious this time around.

But whether the bizarre, open debate in Israel recently about bombing Iran—with cabinet ministers airing their opinions and former intelligence officers publicly attacking Netanyahu for his "messianic" tendencies—has been deliberate or accidental, Netanyahu and his team have been bluffing, not threatening.

Consider the following: in September 2010, the *Atlantic* published an article by Jeffrey Goldberg titled "[Point of no Return](#)." Goldberg interviewed a large number of Israeli officials and drew the conclusion that Netanyahu and Israel were not bluffing. (Remarkably, Goldberg manages to miss all the Israeli officials who only a year later had no difficulty finding a public venue to express their opposition to a unilateral Israeli military strike.) Goldberg even resorted to pop-

psychoanalysis to warn that Netanyahu's "deep sense of his role in Jewish history" as a result of his relationship with his father, Benzion Netanyahu, "might lead him to attack Iran, even over Obama's objections."

Conveniently timed only weeks before crucial mid-term elections, the message was clear: unless Obama got serious about Iran (meaning imposing more sanctions), Netanyahu would have no choice but to act. Soon the "point of no return" would be crossed. Obama moved accordingly. Iran was hit with some of the strictest sanctions ever imposed on a nation. And, magically, the point of no return disappeared into the dustbin of history—at least for a few months.

By the fall of 2011, Congress was preparing new sanctions that would hit Iran's Central Bank and would significantly limit Tehran's ability to conduct trade. While the White House favored more sanctions, it was concerned about their impact on world oil markets, and testified against them. The administration also wanted to move forward with a new round of diplomacy to create a buffer against an Israeli attack and test if the Iranians had softened their position. But Congress and Israel were of a different mind.

The threats from Israel began anew, with a new choreography and a new buzzword: "zone of immunity." This time, Netanyahu's Defence Minister Ehud Barak led the charge. The Iranian nuclear program was about "to enter the zone of immunity, after which the Iranian regime [would] be able to complete the program without effective interruption," he argued, while urging the world to impose more sanctions on Iran. In the fall of 2011, Barak told CNN's [Fareed Zakaria](#) about Tehran entering zone of immunity by summer of 2012.

The Obama administration resisted, pushing back against Netanyahu's demand that the U.S. adopt the Israeli red line for war —Iranian achievement of a nuclear *capability*. Instead, Obama publicly drew a red line making it clear that Washington would go to war with Iran if Tehran built a nuclear weapon. This victory of tactics over strategy stands in contrast to the North Korean example, where had the U.S. set this red line, we would have gone to war with that country

Moreover, Obama agreed to further ratchet up sanctions against Iran, just as Israel had requested. Sure enough, even though Iran continued to approach Israel's zone of immunity, Netanyahu used his U.N. speech to postpone the deadline for military action until next spring or summer—exactly as he had done with the deadline for the point of no return, not to mention the earlier red lines Israel had pushed on the U.S.

Once again, the threat of military action had succeeded in yielding more sanctions on Iran, limiting Obama's diplomatic maneuverability, and getting a U.S. commitment for a trip wire for war with Iran.

Netanyahu's strategy has been to take three steps forward and, occasionally, once he has gotten what he wants, he takes a step back.

Declaring victory every time Netanyahu agrees to back off temporarily confuses tactical developments with the larger strategic picture. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of Netanyahu's strategy: Even though he temporarily dials down his pressure on the U.S., he has

nevertheless ensured that the trajectory of developments are in his favor; that is, the U.S. and Iran inch closer to a confrontation.

Not bad for a guy who gives cartoonish presentations at the U.N.