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What's Netanyahu Really Afraid Of?

By Muhammad Sahimi

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Although the Obama administration has made it clear that it wants to pursue diplomacy with Iran and the president himself has made overtures toward Iran, Israel continues to threaten Iran with military attacks. Its lobby in the United States, led by AIPAC and its supporters in the War Party, continues to issue dire warnings about Iran's nuclear program and the danger that it allegedly poses to not just Israel and the Middle East, but the entire "free world." Meanwhile, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has reaffirmed time and again that all of Iran's known nuclear facilities and nuclear materials, including its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, are safeguarded and monitored by the agency; there is no evidence for a secret parallel nuclear program, or one that is aimed at developing nuclear weapons; and all the issues regarding Iran's six cases of noncompliance with its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA have been resolved to the agency's satisfaction.

Over the past several months, the chief mouthpiece for Israel, particularly Benjamin Netanyahu and his government, has been Elliott Abrams, a convicted criminal (later pardoned) in the Iran-Contra scandal, son-in-law of [Norman Podhoretz](#) (former editor of *Commentary* and the man who prayed that George W. Bush would order military attacks on Iran), and deputy national security adviser for the Middle East in the Bush White House. Abrams is now at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Acting as Netanyahu's alter ego and trying to deflect attention from what Israel did to the Gaza Strip in December and January, in March Abrams propagated the absurd notion that Iran was sending weapons to Hamas by a [route through Sudan and Egypt](#). The story first [appeared](#) in January on a Web site that has close ties with Israel's intelligence services. Then the *Times* of London, the Rupert Murdoch-owned bastion of truthfulness, [ran a story about it](#). Abrams suggested that Iran ships arms to Sudan, which are then transported through Egypt and the Sinai Desert to reach Hamas in Gaza. How the weapons smugglers could evade the intelligence services of Egypt, a nation that has been ruled by president-for-life Hosni

Mubarak with emergency laws since 1981, is beyond the comprehension of the author and, indeed, most objective analysts.

When the allegations regarding Iran sending weapons to Hamas did not catch fire, Abrams created a new twist in the propaganda campaign against Iran. In an article in the *Weekly Standard* on March 2, Abrams, declaring his opposition to the withdrawal of Israel's forces from the occupied territories, [opined](#), "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now part of a broader struggle in the region over Iranian extremism and power. Israeli withdrawals now risk opening the door not only to Palestinian terrorists but to Iranian proxies."

In other words, Abrams suggested that not only must the Palestinians wait decades to get their independent state, if ever, but also that they will not get it unless Iran is contained first. By then, of course, the facts on the ground, i.e., Israel's settlements in the West Bank, will have dramatically changed.

Since then it has become an article of faith among Israel's supporters and the War Party that, in order to achieve a lasting peace in the Middle East, Iran's nuclear program must first be halted. Never mind that the Israel-Palestinian conflict existed long before the Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979 and that Israel maintained secret relations with Iran, selling it weapons and spare parts for its American-made armament, until the Iran-Contra scandal, in which Abrams himself played a leading role, put an end to the engagement.

Tying the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the containment of Iran's nuclear program is part of the absurd argument that Iran's nonexistent nuclear weapons program poses an "existential threat" to the Jewish state. This false notion has been repeated so often that any opposition to it is treated as tantamount to treason or supporting Iran's "mad mullahs." Never mind that, Tzipi Livni, Israel's former prime minister, [stated last year](#) that, even if Iran did develop a nuclear arsenal, it would pose little threat to Israel. She even criticized Ehud Olmert, her predecessor, for exaggerating the Iranian nuclear issue for political gain.

Despite Livni's admission, the myth of Iran's "existential threat" to Israel is very much alive. In the latest twist, Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, while conceding that Netanyahu has a reputation for "conspicuous insincerity," claimed that his preoccupation with the Iranian nuclear program seems sincere and deeply felt. Writing in the *New York Times* on May 17, [Goldberg stated](#), "I recently asked one of his [Netanyahu's] advisers to gauge for me the depth of Mr. Netanyahu's anxiety about Iran. His answer: 'Think Amalek.'" According to the Old Testament, the Amalekites were great enemies of the Jews, attacking them on their escape from Egypt. Thus, metaphorically, Iran's nonexistent nuclear weapons program is our era's Amalek's arsenal. In the past Netanyahu has also repeatedly claimed that it is 1938 all over again, Iran is the new Nazi Germany, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the new Hitler, an absurd and baseless notion [I have refuted before](#).

Another notion propagated by Israel's supporters is that [Iran is ruled by a messianic, apocalyptic group so bent on destroying Israel](#) that it does not care about retaliatory strikes. This is sheer nonsense. Iran's leaders, despite their rhetoric, are [rational and pragmatic politicians](#), at least when it comes to foreign policy. What better evidence for their pragmatism than the fact that they bought weapons from Israel in the 1980s; that in the conflict between Christian Armenia and Shi'ite Azerbaijan, Iran sided with the former; that Iran played a crucial role in the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, when its ally, the Northern

Alliance, took Kabul? Moreover, Iran's leaders are also fully aware that any attack on Israel will provoke a massive counterattack by both Israel and the U.S. that will destroy Iran and kill millions of Iranians.

So what is the crux of the issue? Goldberg quotes Netanyahu as saying that "Iran's militant proxies would be able to fire rockets and engage in other terror activities while enjoying a nuclear umbrella." This statement provides some insight into Netanyahu's thinking.

Netanyahu, the Likud, and Israel's far Right, including quasi-fascist Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, would like to be able to do to their occupied territories whatever they please without any hindrance. They [do not recognize](#) the internationally recognized right of the Palestinians to have their own independent, viable state, and they want to continue building settlements in the West Bank.

At the same time, about [half of the water used in Israel is captured and diverted from its neighbors](#), including the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Golan Heights. Many of these water sources are running out. Thus, Israel needs new sources. One such source is the Litani River in southern Lebanon, which, at its closest point, is about two miles from the border with Israel. Even before Israel's establishment, its leaders have had their eyes on the Litani. David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan both advocated Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and the Litani. As early as 1941, [Ben-Gurion thought that the Litani should be Israel's northern border](#). Israel's invasions of southern Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 were partly motivated by its desire to control the Litani. In fact, there was a big row in 1994 when Israel was accused of diverting water from the Litani, just as it steals the water resources of the Golan Heights. All that ended when Hezbollah forced Israel to leave southern Lebanon after an 18-year occupation.

So the crux of the issue is not that Iran is ruled by a messianic, apocalyptic group, or that it has a secret nuclear weapon program, or that if it gets its hands on nuclear warheads, it will attack Israel. None of these are true.

The crux of the issue is not that, emboldened by Iran's nonexistent nuclear weapons, Hezbollah and Hamas will keep firing rockets into Israel. Both are supported by Iran, but neither is its proxy. Hamas' ambition is limited to recovering the occupied territories. It has never carried out any military or terrorist operation outside of historical Palestine, and it has offered to go into a decades-long cease-fire with Israel in exchange for Israel's complete evacuation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Iran is also not the only Muslim state that supports Hamas.

Hezbollah is a powerful sociopolitical movement in Lebanon that would continue to thrive without any help from Iran. It is part of Lebanon's government and has a significant presence in the Lebanese parliament. It is expected to increase its votes in the parliamentary elections on June 7. It is regarded by many Lebanese people as the guardian of southern Lebanon and the Litani.

The crux of the issue is also not what Netanyahu told Goldberg, namely, that a nuclear Iran "would embolden Islamic militants far and wide, on many continents." Those Islamic militants, including both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, are almost exclusively Salafi Sunnis who hate Shi'ite Iran.

The crux of the issue is that, Netanyahu, Israel's military, and the War Party in the U.S. all believe that an Iran equipped with the technological capability for enriching uranium would have a credible nuclear deterrent and, therefore, would be unattackable. That scenario, as Thomas P.M. Barnett, the author of [*The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*](#), has put it, "[would level the playing field by finally allowing the Muslim Middle East to sit one player at the negotiating table as Israel's nuclear equal.](#)" Thus, Israel would no longer be able to force its will on its neighbors, a prospect that is not acceptable to the Israeli establishment and the American War Party.

Such a scenario would also have another consequence. A situation in which Israel's government maintains a permanent state of war with its neighbors, but in which Israel and the Muslims are in equilibrium militarily, would halt immigration to Israel, even reverse it. That would be the ultimate existential threat to Israel. The only realistic way to prevent this from happening is for Israel to reach a just peace with the Palestinians and Syria and give up the dream of controlling the Litani River. But, Netanyahu, the Likud, and the Israeli establishment are incapable of making these happen, and the progressive forces that could force such a solution have practically disappeared from Israel's political scene.