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Israel's gift to Iran's hardliners

By Juan Cole
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Iran's Green movement is one year old this Sunday, the anniversary of its first massive demonstrations in the streets of Tehran. Greeted with great hope in much of the world, a year later it's weaker, the country is more repressive, and hardliners are in a far stronger position - partly thanks to Israeli [Prime Minister](#) Benjamin Netanyahu and sanctions hawks in the [Barack Obama](#) administration.

If, in the past year, those hardliners successfully faced down major challenges within Iranian society and abroad, it was only in part attributable to the regime's skills in repression and sidestepping international pressure. Above all, the ayatollahs benefited from Israeli intransigence and American hypocrisy on nuclear disarmament in the Middle East.

Iran's case against Israel was bolstered by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's continued enthusiasm for the Gaza blockade, and by Tel Aviv's recent arrogant dismissal of a [conference](#) of nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatories, which called on Israel to join a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. Nor has Obama's push for stronger sanctions on Iran at the United Nations Security Council hurt them.

And then, on Memorial Day in the United States, Israel's Likud [government](#) handed Tehran its greatest recent propaganda victory by sending its commandos against a peace flotilla in international waters and so landing its men, guns blazing, on the deck of the USS Sanctions. Wednesday's vote at the United Nations Security Council on punishing

Iran produced a weak, much watered-down resolution targeting 40 companies, which lacked the all-important imprimatur of unanimity, insofar as Turkey and Brazil voted "no" and Lebanon abstained.

There was no mention of an oil or gasoline boycott, and the language of the resolution did not even seem to make the new sanctions obligatory. It was at best a pyrrhic victory for those hawks who had pressed for "crippling" sanctions, and likely to be counter-productive rather than effective in ending Iran's uranium-enrichment program. How we got here is a long, winding, sordid tale of the triumph of macho posturing over patient and effective policymaking.

Suppressing the Green movement

From last summer through last winter, the hardliners of the Islamic Republic of Iran were powerfully challenged by reformists, who charged that the June 12, 2009, presidential [election](#) had been marked by extensive fraud. Street protests were so large, crowds so enthusiastic, and the opposition so steadfast that it seemed as if Iran were on the brink of a significant change in its way of doing business, possibly even internationally.

The opposition - the most massive since the Islamic revolution of 1978-79 - was dubbed the Green movement, because green is the [color](#) of the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, among whom losing presidential candidate Mirhossein Moussavi is counted. Although some movement supporters were secularists, many were religious, and so disarmingly capable of deploying the religious slogans and symbols of the Islamic republic against the regime itself.

Where the regime put emphasis on the distant Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Levant, Green movement activists chanted (during "Jerusalem Day" last September), "Not Gaza, not Lebanon. I die only for Iran." They took their cue from candidate Moussavi, who said he "liked" Palestine but thought waving its flag in Iran excessive.

Moussavi likewise rejected Obama administration insinuations that his movement's stance on Iran's nuclear enrichment program was indistinguishable from that of Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. He emphasized instead that he not only did not want a nuclear weapon for Iran, but understood international concerns about such a prospect. He seemed to suggest that, were he to come to power, he would be far more cooperative with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The Israeli government liked what it was hearing; Netanyahu even went on *Meet the Press* last summer to praise the Green movement fulsomely. "I think something very deep, very fundamental is going on," he said, "and there's an expression of a deep desire amid the people of Iran for freedom, certainly for greater freedom."

Popular unrest only became possible thanks to a split at the top among the civilian ruling elite of clerics and fundamentalists. When presidential candidates Moussavi, Mehdi Karroubi and their clerical backers, including Grand Ayatollah Yousef Sanaei and wily

former president and billionaire entrepreneur Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, began to challenge the country's authoritarian methods of governance, its repression of personal liberties, and the quixotic foreign policy of Ahmadinejad (whom Moussavi accused of making Iran a global laughingstock), it opened space below.

The reformers would be opposed by Iran's supreme theocrat, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who defended the presidential election results as valid, even as he admitted to his preference for Ahmadinejad's views. He was, in turn, supported by most senior clerics and politicians, the great merchants of the bazaar, and most significantly, the officer corps of the police, the *basij* (civilian militia), the regular army, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Because there would be no significant splits among those armed to defend the regime, it retained an almost unbounded ability to crackdown relentlessly. In the process, the IRGC, generally Ahmadinejad partisans, only grew in power.

A year later, it's clear that the hardliners have won decisively through massive repression, deploying *basij* armed with clubs on motorcycles to curb crowds, jailing thousands of protesters, and torturing and executing some of them. The main arrow in the opposition's quiver was flashmobs, relatively spontaneous mass urban demonstrations orchestrated through Twitter, cell phones, and [Facebook](#).

The regime gradually learned how to repress this tactic through the careful jamming of electronic media and domestic surveillance. (Apparently the IRGC now even have a Facebook Espionage Division.) While the opposition can hope to keep itself alive as an underground civil rights movement, for the moment its chances for overt political change appear slim.

Nuclear hypocrisy

Though few have noted this, the Green movement actually threw a monkey wrench into Obama's hopes to jump-start direct negotiations with Iran over its enrichment program. His team could hardly sit down with representatives of Khamenei while the latter was summarily tossing protesters in filthy prisons to be mistreated and even killed. On October 1, 2009, however, with the masses no longer regularly in the streets, representatives of the five permanent members of the UN [Security](#) Council plus Germany met directly with a representative of Khamenei in Geneva.

A potentially pathbreaking nuclear agreement was hammered out whereby Iran would ship the bulk of its already-produced low-enriched uranium (LEU) to another country. In return, it would receive enriched rods with which it could run its single small medical reactor, producing isotopes for treating cancer.

That reactor had been given to the Shah's Iran in 1969, and the last consignment of nuclear fuel purchased for it, from Argentina, was running out. The agreement appealed to the West because it would deprive Iran of a couple of tons of LEU that, at some point, could theoretically be cycled back through its centrifuges and enriched from 3.5% to over

90%, or weapons grade, for the possible construction of nuclear warheads. There is no evidence that Iran has such a capability or intention, but the Security Council members agreed that safe was better than sorry.

With Khamenei's representative back in Iran on October 2, the Iranians suddenly announced that they would take a timeout to study it. That timeout never ended, assumedly because Khamenei had gotten a case of cold feet. Though we can only speculate, perhaps nuclear hardliners argued that holding onto the country's stock of LEU seemed to the hardliners like a crucial form of deterrence in itself, a signal to the world that Iran could turn to bomb-making activities if a war atmosphere built.

Given that nuclear latency - the ability to launch a successful bomb-making program - has geopolitical consequences nearly as important as the actual possession of a bomb, Washington, Tel Aviv and the major Western European powers remain eager to forestall Iran from reaching that status.

As the Geneva fiasco left the impression that the Iranian regime was not ready to negotiate in good faith, the Obama team evidently decided to respond by ratcheting up sanctions on Iran at the Security Council, evidently in hopes of forcing its nuclear negotiators back to the bargaining table. Meanwhile, Netanyahu was loudly demanding the imposition of "crippling" international sanctions on Tehran.

Washington, however, faced a problem: Russian Prime Minister and *eminence grise* Vladimir Putin initially opposed such sanctions, as did China's leaders. As Putin observed, "Direct dialogue ... is always more productive ... than a policy of threats, sanctions and all the more so a resolution to use force."

Moreover, the non-permanent members of the council included Turkey and Brazil, rising powers and potential leaders of the non-permanent bloc at the council. Neither country was eager to see Iran put under international boycott for, from their point of view, simply having a civilian nuclear enrichment program. (Since such a program is permitted by the NPT, any such [Security](#) Council sanctions on Iran represent, at best, arbitrary acts.)

By mid-May, Obama nonetheless appeared to have his ducks in a row for a vote in which [Russia](#) and China would support at least modest further financial restrictions on investments connected to the IRGC. Many observers believed that such a move, guaranteed to fall far short of "crippling", would in fact prove wholly ineffectual. Only Turkey and Brazil, lacking veto power in the council, were proving problematic for Washington. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey leads the Justice and [Development](#) Party, which is mildly tinged with Muslim politics (unlike most previous strongly secular governments in Ankara). Viewing himself as a bridge between the Christian West and the Muslim world, he strongly opposes new sanctions on neighboring Iran. In part, he fears they might harm the Turkish economy; in part, he has pursued a policy of developing good relations with all his country's direct neighbors.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has led a similar charge against any

strengthened punishment of Iran. He has been motivated by a desire to alter the prevailing North-dominated system of international relations and trade. Popularly known as "Lula", the president has put more emphasis on encouraging South-South relations. His country gave up its nuclear weapons aspirations in 1980, but continued a civilian nuclear energy program and has recently committed to building a nuclear-powered submarine. Having the Security Council declare even peaceful nuclear enrichment illegal could be extremely inconvenient for Brasilia.

On May 15, Erdogan and Lula met with Ahmadinejad in Tehran and announced a nuclear deal that much resembled the one to which Iran had briefly agreed in October. Turkey would now hold a majority of Iran's LEU in escrow in return for which Iran would receive fuel rods enriched to 19.75% for its medical reactor. Critics pointed out that Iran had, by now, produced even more LEU, which meant that the proportion of fuel being sent abroad would be less damaging to any Iranian hopes for nuclear latency and therefore far less attractive to Washington and Tel Aviv. Washington promptly dismissed the agreement, irking the Turkish and Brazilian leaders.

Meanwhile, throughout May, a conference of signatories to the NPT was being held in [New York](#) to hammer out a consensus [document](#) that would, in the end, declare the Middle East a "nuclear-free zone".

Unexpectedly, they announced success. Since Israel is the only country in the Middle East with an actual nuclear arsenal (estimated at about 200 warheads, or similar to what the British possess), and not an NPT signatory, Tel Aviv thundered: "This resolution is deeply flawed and hypocritical ... It singles out Israel, the Middle East's only true democracy and the only country threatened with annihilation ... Given the distorted nature of this resolution, Israel will not be able to take part in its implementation."

The hypocrisy in all this was visibly Washington's and Israel's. After all, both were demanding that a country without nuclear weapons "disarm" and the only country in the region to actually possess them be excused from the disarmament process entirely. This was their gift to Tehran. Like others involved in the process, Iran's representative to the IAEA immediately noted this and riposted, "The US ... is obliged to go along with the world's request, which is that Israel must join the NPT and open its installations to IAEA inspectors."

A windfall for hardliners: The flotilla assault

With the Tehran agreement brokered by Turkey and Brazil - and signed by Ahmadinejad - and Israel's rejection of the NPT [conference](#) document now public news, Obama's sanctions program faced a new round of pushback from China.

Then, on May 31, Israeli commandos rappelled from helicopters onto the deck of the *Mavi Marmara*, a Turkish aid ship heading for Gaza. They threw stun grenades and fired rubber-jacketed metal bullets even before landing, enraging passengers, and leading to a

fatal confrontation that left at least nine dead and some 30 wounded. An international uproar ensued, putting Israel's relations with Turkey under special strain.

The *Mavi Marmara* assault was more splendid news for Iran's hardliners at the very moment when the Green movement was gearing up for demonstrations to mark the one-year anniversary of the contested presidential election. Around the Israeli assault on the aid flotilla and that country's blockade of Gaza they were able to rally the public in solidarity with the theocratic government, long a trenchant critic of Israeli oppression of the stateless Palestinians.

Green leaders, in turn, were forced to put out a statement condemning Israel, and Khamenei was then able to fill the streets of the capital with two million demonstrators commemorating the death of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic.

The flotilla attack also gave the hardliners a foreign policy issue on which they could stand in solidarity with Turkey, Iraq, Syria and the Arab world generally, reinforcing their cachet as champions of the Palestinians and bolstering the country's regional influence. There was even talk of sending a new Gaza aid flotilla guarded by Iranian ships.

Because Turkey, the aggrieved party, is at present a member of the Security Council, this fortuitous fillip for Iran has denied Obama the unanimity he sought on sanctions. Finally, the incident had the potential to push international concern over Tehran's nuclear enrichment program and that country's new assertiveness in the Middle East into the background, while foregrounding Israel's brutality in Gaza, intransigence toward the peace process and status as a nuclear outlaw.

In the end, Obama got his watered-down, non-unanimous sanctions resolution. There is no doubt that Netanyahu's reluctance to make a just peace with the Palestinians and his cowboy military tactics have enormously complicated Obama's attempt to pressure Iran and deeply alienated Turkey, one of Wednesday's holdouts in the Security Council.

His election as prime minister in February 2009 turns out to have been the best gift the Israeli electorate could have given Iran. The Likud-led government continues its colonization of the West Bank and its blockade of the civilian population of Gaza, making the Iranian hawks who harp on injustices done to Palestinians look prescient. It refuses to join the NPT or allow UN inspections of its nuclear facilities, making Iran, by comparison, look like a model IAEA member state.