

Position Paper

Netanyahu's calculations: Coercing Washington into attacking Iran



It has been decades since the Israeli leadership has attempted to interfere in American presidential elections in the manner Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has attempted in the past few weeks. It is not unusual or extraordinary for the Israelis and the American Zionist lobby groups allied to them to strive to influence American elections; but Netanyahu's interference in this election has been blatant and audacious, with outbursts reflecting despair and fear or, perhaps, calculated haste.

The issue that Netanyahu exploited in order to interfere in US politics was, of course, the Iranian nuclear issue, which has come to constitute the most pressing and worrisome strategic obsession of the Israelis. Netanyahu's objective was to portray US President Barack Obama (who is attempting to win a second presidential term in the face of a not-unsubstantial challenge from Republican candidate Mitt Romney) as confused and indecisive in his policy towards Iran, particularly with regard to what the Israelis describe as Iran's speedy approach to attaining the capacity to manufacture a nuclear weapon.

This article looks at a week of almost open conflict between Obama and Netanyahu, and explores its reasons and its possible consequences on Israeli relations with the Obama administration if the incumbent US president were to win a second term.

Clash over red lines

In a surprise move, Obama took the initiative on Tuesday, 11 September 2012, to engage in a telephonic conversation with the Israeli prime minister for an entire hour. There has to be something troubling afoot for an American president to speak for such a lengthy period to the prime minister of another country, especially an American ally, in the final weeks of a blazing election campaign. More precisely, there must be something disturbing the relationship between the two administrations. During the conversation, according to American sources, Netanyahu attempted to extract an undertaking from Obama that the latter would announce an American red line with regard to the Iranian nuclear programme, and would threaten that Tehran's crossing of that line would lead to an American military strike against the Iranian programme and its facilities.

Netanyahu's proposal related, firstly, to the quantity of enriched Iranian uranium stockpiles of a level of enrichment that comes close to what is suitable for a nuclear weapon. That is, Netanyahu wanted the US to make it clear that Iran should be allowed only medium enrichment, which would then require more than just one additional phase of enrichment to ready it to arm a nuclear bomb. The second red line related to the '5+1' group – the UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany – fixing a warning period for the Iranians during irregular negotiations between them so that, if Iran did not comply with western demands within that period, it would face an American attack. According to the same American sources, Obama rejected both proposals

proffered by Netanyahu and reiterated the undertaking he had given the Israelis in March 2012: that the United States will not allow Iran to possess a nuclear weapon.

For Netanyahu, this was an unhappy outcome of a telephonic conversation in which the American president seemed keen to lessen tensions between the two sides. Netanyahu then went on to participate in several political talk shows on American television stations in the weekend following the telephonic conversation, defending his perspective and his 'red line' policy. In other words, he decided to target American public opinion directly and to openly articulate his dispute with Obama on the US Iran policy. Clearly, Netanyahu's position echoes the Romney campaign's attacks against Obama's foreign policy, with the Republican candidate accusing Obama of not doing enough to protect a close ally of the United States (Israel).

Israeli officials close to Netanyahu deny that he has any intention of interfering in the American election process. They argue that Netanyahu was pushed to escalate the matter by a feeling of disappointment that arose out of an earlier meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in which she had affirmed that Washington would not accept warnings with red lines. However, it is certain that the telephone call between Netanyahu and Obama occurred in a far tenser context than simply an attempt to contain an Israeli reaction. It becomes clearer when one considers the Israelis' leaking of a report to the American media accusing Obama of refusing a request to meet Netanyahu on the side-lines of the opening of the UN General Assembly session in New York. A White House spokesperson had rushed to refute the report, attributing the failure to secure a meeting to Obama's scheduling difficulties. The refutation, of course, suggests that Obama had not seen any purpose in scheduling an appointment.

In this drama and escalation by Netanyahu, the Obama Administration seems the less concerned and tense party. On the other hand, Netanyahu, by saying that the Obama administration did not possess the 'moral right' to stop Israel from proceeding with unilateral military action against Iran if Washington refused to limit the Iranian nuclear programme, exposed his political impetuosity and the impression that his stance seems to be characterised by an increasing sense of crisis. But what prompted Netanyahu to adopt such an approach vis-à-vis Obama at such a sensitive time in American political life?

Netanyahu's calculations: Entangling America

The echoes of the telephone call between Netanyahu and Obama had not even begun to fade when Israeli Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intelligence and Atomic Energy, Dan Meridor, entered the fray with a comment to Israeli Army Radio that the situation did not require 'red lines or warning timeframes'. Meridor is not alone. In truth, there is widespread Israeli opposition to a unilateral military strike by Israel against the Iranian

nuclear programme – a policy that Netanyahu is clearly pushing for, at least in public pronouncements. Opposition to such a move includes a significant number of Israeli government leaders and senior current and former military brass and intelligence figures. In reality, Netanyahu's support does not go beyond the deputy prime minister, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak – who does not have a strong electoral support base, and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman – who is not taken seriously within or outside Israel. The broad-based Israeli opposition to Netanyahu's position arises from practical considerations and military calculations and not from ethical concerns.

There is no doubt that all Israelis, those that support Netanyahu's position and those that oppose it, are concerned about the Iranian nuclear programme. The prevalent belief in Israel is that the extremely harsh western monetary and economic sanctions on Iran will not succeed in halting Iranian progress in the nuclear sphere. What concerns Israelis even more is the latest report of the International Atomic Energy Agency, which confirms that the Iranian stockpile of low- and medium-grade uranium has reached proportions that make it possible for Iran to manufacture six nuclear bombs if this uranium were to be further enriched.

However, it is also certain that the Israelis cannot direct a significant military strike against Iran's nuclear programme without American participation or major American support. This is generally accepted in Israeli military and intelligence circles. In fact, American Military Chief of Staff, Martin Dempsey, alluded to this fact in a public comment recently. The Israelis do not possess a sufficient number of aircraft capable of reaching the most important Iranian nuclear facilities, which are spread across a wide geographical area, nor do they have a sufficient number of airplanes capable of providing refuelling facilities in the air, nor a sufficient number of missiles capable of penetrating Iranian defences protecting the nuclear facilities. Furthermore, several Arab and Islamic countries separate Israel from Iran no matter what air route the Israelis use, and these countries will not welcome Israeli use of their airspace. Some have, in fact, openly threatened to shoot down Israeli airplanes if they violate these countries' airspace, making the execution of a unilateral Israeli military strike a very risky exercise with numerous obstacles.

In the best case scenario for Israel, its attack may inflict limited destruction on only a few targets – without achieving any significant disruption of the Iranian programme. Such a strike will, moreover, provide the Iranians with a justification within regional and international public opinion to proceed with their manufacturing of a nuclear weapon – if that is their intention. In addition, such a scenario may also lead to escalating the tension in the region, with the possibility of an Iranian response that might include implementing their oft-repeated threat of shutting the Strait of Hormuz and thereby triggering an international economic crisis.

Numerous American officials believe that the Israeli prime minister is no less aware than his opponents of the limitations of Israel's power and the risks involved in a unilateral strike, but that he is using the threat of a unilateral strike against Iran to pressure Washington and to push the US to adopt a more aggressive and more effective policy towards Iran. However, the Obama administration is clearly not going to react hastily. According to Obama's aides, the administration is committed to its undertaking to prevent Iran from possessing a nuclear weapon, and they are sceptical about reports that claim that Tehran is close to possessing the capacity to manufacture a nuclear bomb. In fact, they indicate that there is no evidence to confirm that the Supreme Guide of the Islamic Republic, Ayatullah Ali Khamene'i – who has the final word on nuclear matters, has ordered work on the development of a nuclear weapon. Obama administration officials are also saying that the president should remain open to a range of strategic options and that no one should obligate him to draw red lines or issue warnings, which will limit his capacity to engage and restrict his freedom to make decisions.

The future: An Escalation of tensions

In spite of Obama's numerous attempts in the past four years to please the Israelis and their supporters in the United States, his personal relationship and that of his administration's with Netanyahu and his government have never been amicable. The Israeli prime minister has a long record of following devious policies and inspiring no confidence, whether in Washington or in other western capitals. However, Obama was fully aware, when he took control of the White House that his presidency would be looked upon sceptically in Zionist lobby circles in the USA and beyond. As a result, he went much further than American foreign policy in the Middle East requires in order to demonstrate his bias towards the Israeli perspective with regards to the Palestinian question.

Obama is unable to respond positively to the Israeli demands on the Iranian nuclear issue. In spite of the fact that American and western economic, monetary and oil sanctions on Iran have reached levels that are harmful to the country, Washington realises that the nuclear issue is extremely complex and has become intertwined with issues such as Iraq, Syria and the struggle over the Gulf region. This certainly does not mean that it is impossible, correct or wise to discount a major American strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, but it does mean that such a decision will be taken on the basis of American assessments and not Israeli pressure.

Such assessments will be more American and less Israeli in the future if Barack Obama succeeds in winning a second term in the White House. In his engagement with Netanyahu in the tense weeks of September, Obama demonstrated strength, suggesting

that he did not accept Netanyahu's open exploitation of the American election to attain quick political gains pertaining to one of the most sensitive and complex American foreign policy issues – whether in the Middle East or internationally. As far as his second presidential term is concerned, Obama will probably be less concerned about the Israeli prime minister, and may even strive to bring him down or weaken him in the coming Israeli parliamentary elections.

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