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Burning questions on Iran

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Israeli officials and strategic analysts are pondering several critical questions regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Recently, the Obama administration led an effort in the United Nations Security Council to finally pass a fourth round of tighter international sanctions against Iran over its renegade nuclear program. This was followed by the United States Congress and European Union adopting even tougher unilateral measures targeting the clerical regime in Teheran, the Revolutionary Guards Corps which secures its rule, as well as the Iranian banking and energy sectors.

Not long afterwards, reports emerged that the new sanctions were already having an impact, as many international banks severed their dealings with Iranian banks and government agencies. Big oil companies began dropping out of partnership deals with Iranian energy companies. Iranian oil tankers suddenly found it hard to find maritime insurance coverage. And Iran's rulers were unnerved by persistent reports that several countries were no longer refueling Iranian passenger planes.

Still, top officials in the Obama administration were just as quick to admit that sanctions alone will not be sufficient enough to stop Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons. "Will it deter them from their ambitions with regard to a nuclear capability? Probably not," confessed CIA director Leon Panetta. This was a surprisingly candid position to take, given that US diplomats had worked so long and hard to pass the latest UN sanctions over Russian and Chinese objections.

In addition, State Department officials insisted that Iran can no longer be trusted on its nuclear intentions, which means they likely now view further diplomacy as a pointless exercise.

These developments have left Israeli officials and strategic analysts pondering several critical questions.

First, if sanctions alone will not do the job, what else can be done in tandem with the economic squeeze on Teheran? Are military strikes on Iran's atomic facilities really the only effective option left, or is the US headed back toward Cold War-era notions of containment? If the US settles on containing Iran, is it safe for Jerusalem to assume along with Washington that the ayatollahs will never actually use the bomb? And with Iran and the Arab states starting to focus global attention on Israel's own presumed atomic arsenal, should Israel be reconsidering its traditional policy of nuclear ambiguity?

What else besides sanctions?

Dr. Chuck Freilich, a former Israeli deputy national security adviser who now lectures at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, recently outlined for *The Christian Edition* what he views as the six options available to try to deter the Iranian nuclear drive.

Freilich first noted that "Iran has very good national security reasons for pursuing nuclear capabilities. If I were an Iranian security adviser, I would want it as well. To give it up, they have to be subjected to nothing short of massive, crippling sanctions, plus some carrots. Otherwise, the sanctions we're seeing at the moment are not going to work. So one option is the current strategy and second is crippling sanctions," he said.

"A third option is regime change, and last year this option had a 'brief spring' but that moment may have passed," Freilich assessed. He said a fourth option, which has not gotten much attention lately, is a naval blockade meant to bring Iran to its knees. "That may be for later down the line," he stated.

"The remaining alternatives are the military option, and then there's deterrence and containment," Freilich continued. "My own personal assumption is that the US is heading for containment, which may be fine for the US... But the question is whether Israel can live with that."

Are the ayatollahs 'madmen'?

An American decision to resort to containment would rest upon the supposition that the clerics in Teheran would never actually press the nuclear trigger. At a recent conference on the Iranian nuclear threat at Tel Aviv University, those Israeli security experts present who would go on record all concluded that there were

dangerous implications for the entire region if Teheran acquired atomic weapons, but they doubted the ayatollahs were insane enough to ever push the button leading to their own self-destruction.

"This is going to be a long haul," Ephraim Halevy, a former Mossad chief, told the conference. "We have to be very patient and very resolute. We have to be prepared for the worst, with preparations both on the ground and in terms of our resolute determination."

"The Iranian regime is not apocalyptic, though [president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad has some apocalyptic tendencies that I would be worried about," ventured TAU professor David Menashri, considered one of Israel's foremost experts on Iran.

"I definitely do not share the fear that Iran would actually use nuclear arms," concurred Dr. Emily Landau of the university's Institute for National Security Studies. "I think Israel has a strong nuclear deterrent, and Iran knows it. I don't think it's in their interests to challenge Israel in that way. There are always those who say we can never know, and that's true. But I would say the chance of that is quite low. But still, Iran's becoming a nuclear state is a very dangerous development for the region," she said.

Landau is troubled, however, by Washington's move toward containment. "Unfortunately, there are growing indications that the United States has simply given up on Iran," she lamented. "There's more and more talk about containment and about missile defense... I get very worried and sense that Obama has given up on the ability to stop Iran."

In contrast to Western indecision, Landau believes that "Iran has a clear strategic goal. It wants to arrive at a military nuclear capability. With that goal, all the rest is tactics. Everything can be fit into the broad formula of moving ahead with maximum speed but at minimum cost."

She added that this "pragmatic strain is stronger than the ideological strain. We hear the ideology in the rhetoric, but when it comes to action, they are more pragmatic and step back some whenever they feel Western pressure rising."

Freilich explained that in the Israeli national security establishment, there are two broad schools of thought on the question of containment. "One says an Iranian nuclear capability is absolutely existential, that Israel cannot live with it," he said.

"The second says 'Yes, a dire threat, a severe threat, but it's not an existential one.' And the difference between dire and existential is a big one. My personal opinion is that the Iranians are extremists, but I don't think they're irrational," Freilich maintained. "But I can be wrong here, and maybe the existentialists are right. When you're talking national existence, there's no margin for error. So that puts the Israeli government in a very difficult position. And when you have people like the prime minister and just a handful of others making this decision, if they have a certain world view, then that's going to have an impact on their decision."

With regard to his last point, several Israeli commentators have recently pointed out that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu views his current role primarily as one of guarding the Jewish people from another Holocaust. Netanyahu also was very clear on what he thought about the containment question in a recent interview with *Fox News Sunday*.

It would be "a mistake," insisted Netanyahu. "We've had effective nuclear peace for more than half a century because everybody understood the rules. I don't think you can rely on Iran, I don't think you can rely on other radicals like the Taliban and al-Qaida... There is an irrationality here. And there's madness. And we should not allow irrational regimes like Iran to have nuclear weapons. It's the ultimate terrorist threat today..."

Finally, regarding the growing scrutiny of Israel's alleged atomic arsenal and calls for it to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Freilich explained that the nation's ambiguity policy has its background in a meeting between US president Richard Nixon and Israeli leader Golda Meir in 1969, a year after the NPT was enacted. Nixon pressed her to sign on, and she responded, "Over my dead body!"

The compromise reached was that Israel would never acknowledge having nuclear warheads, would never proliferate, and would never test.

"That was a well thought-out policy that has worked for 40 years, so why change it now?" Freilich demurred.



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