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Israel and the United States in Disagreement over Iran

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No one who attended the May 29-30, 2012 INSS conference "Security Challenges of the 21st Century: Israel's Search for Opportunities in a Turbulent Region" could have failed to come away with the impression that Israel is nearing the point at which it will have to make a decision on the Iranian nuclear question. The statements made by the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister, and Deputy Prime Minister Ya'alon left no room for doubt that time is quickly running out. Their remarks offered a clear glimpse at the fundamental considerations that inform the Israeli government's perception of the current state of affairs.

First, all the efforts made in recent years and especially over the last months to dissuade Iran from continuing to develop nuclear capabilities have failed to bear fruit. These efforts have included lengthy dialogues with Iran in a host of different settings and forums, economic sanctions, actions designed to isolate it internationally, and even extensive covert activities attributed to Israel and the United States. Israel welcomes the expansion of the sanctions that are scheduled to be imposed against Iran in the coming weeks, yet it does not pin great hopes on the ability of the sanctions to stop Iran's nuclear activity. It seems that for Iran, the nuclear project is a supreme national interest, for which the regime of ayatollahs is prepared to pay a steep price.

Second, there is little hope that the negotiations of recent weeks, in Istanbul and Baghdad, as well as those scheduled for Moscow, can cause a transformation. Iran can assume that an international forum that includes Russia and China will find it hard to take far-reaching decisions against it. Likewise, President Obama's timeframe, influenced especially by the upcoming US elections, present the President with a set of serious constraints in terms of making far-reaching decisions on the Iranian nuclear issue. Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that under the guise of the talks, Iran continues its nuclear program, and according to Minister Ya'alon, "is laughing all the way to the bomb." Iran's attitude to the negotiations with the P5+1 does not indicate that Iran feels deterred in any way or senses any urgency. Rather, it projects complacency, self-confidence, and even disregard for anyone's capacity to harm it.

Third, Israel is fairly disappointed by the conduct of President Obama's administration in the talks with Iran. From the Israeli perspective, there is a conspicuous gap between the resolute tone of the Obama administration's statements on Iran and their translation into tough stances in the dialogue. Prime Minister Netanyahu stated explicitly that the threshold of demands presented to Iran in the recent talks is far from satisfactory to Israel: "Iran must stop all enrichment of nuclear material; it must remove all materials enriched to date from its territory; and it must dismantle its underground nuclear enrichment plant at Qom. Only a specific Iranian commitment during negotiations to meet all three demands and a clear confirmation that they have been executed can stop Iran's nuclear plan. This should be the goal of the negotiations. But I must say regretfully this is not what is asked of Iran today."

Fourth, the time that is elapsing presents Israel with serious dangers in terms of its ability to take military action against Iran. Defense Minister Barak and other speakers repeatedly stressed the risk that in the not-so-distant future Iran will have reached the zone of immunity and that will make it hard for Israel to take military action against Iran's nuclear facilities, or perhaps prevent it from doing so altogether. Moreover, the circumstances and heavy pressures may lead Iran to show certain tactical flexibility to make their position more acceptable to the P-5+1. If this happens and an agreement is signed, Israel's legitimacy to act against Iran will be severely impaired.

The American administration is well aware of the considerations and constraints facing Israel with regard to making a decision on the Iranian issue. In an effort to allay Israel's concerns the administration has labored to keep Israel well informed regarding the dialogue with Iran. Ms. Michele Flournoy, former Undersecretary of Defense under President Obama, and other American representatives who participated in the INSS conference, expressed the administration's positions, stressing the resolve of the United States to thwart a nuclear Iran, and in any case the futility of an Israeli military operation against Iran. Among the points made in this context were the following:

- a. President Obama has a reliable record in meeting his commitments. His declarations about preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons are unambiguous and not open to interpretation. The President has repeatedly said that the American policy on Iran is prevention, not containment.
- b. During his term in office, President Obama has strengthened strategic relations between the United States and Israel in an unprecedented manner, thereby manifesting his determination to safeguard Israel's security.

- c. The demands currently made of Iran are not final; they are merely the first stage of demands in the dialogue. Later, further demands will be made of Iran, and those will presumably satisfy Israel's concerns.
- d. An Israeli military operation will not solve the Iranian nuclear problem, though it may perhaps postpone it. Only the United States can come up with a complete solution to the problem.

United States Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro also worked to allay Israeli concerns. In his closing remarks, he stressed (in Hebrew) that “we do not intend to continue talking just for the sake of talking. The window of opportunity is closing. The clock is ticking and Iran must change its ways.”

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the dialogue between the P-5+1 and Iran in recent weeks, two major issues have emerged that display clear differences between Israel and the United States. First, Israel's timetable vis-à-vis Iran differs vastly from America's. While Israel operates out of a sense that it has very little time left, the United States seems to be in no hurry because it has a much longer timeframe. Second, Israel is making very specific and concrete demands of Iran, much more far-reaching than those being made by the United States, at least for now.

It seems that in the current circumstances, the bottom line is that Israel will find it hard to respond favorably to the suggestion/demand by President Obama's administration to place its trust in America's resolve to prevent a nuclear Iran and not act on its own. It seems that only a presentation of a tough American stance in the talks with Iran, accompanied by concrete steps against it, may perhaps persuade the Netanyahu government to respond positively to the administration's demands on the Iranian issue.

