

America's Shifting "Red Lines" on Iran's Nuclear Ambitions: A Wedge Issue in US-Israeli Relations

By Matthias Küntzel

In December 1998, an Israeli delegation led by then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to the Clinton White House and "inquired about the US government's possible support for an Israeli military operation against Iranian facilities," as Jack Caravelli, a witness of the meeting, reports.(1) President Bill Clinton refused. At the same time, he drew a clear red line: A state that perpetrates terrorist attacks may not obtain nuclear technology.

In March 2012, yet another Israeli delegation led by Prime Minister Netanyahu visited the White House and asked whether the US government would be willing to support a military strike on Iran. President Barack Obama refused. At the same time, he drew his own clear red line: A state that perpetrates terrorist attacks might gain the ability to build an atomic bomb but it must not produce it.

While in 1998 Netanyahu was satisfied with the result of his mission to Washington, fourteen years later he was not. Tehran should have neither a bomb nor bomb making capability, he explained at the White House, and he pressed the president to draw a red line at Iran's acquisition of nuclear capability. But President Obama was adamant. According to government officials, such policy "would be too ambiguous and open to different interpretations."(2)

This controversy has received scant coverage in the media, which preferred to speculate about the personal relations between Netanyahu and Obama. During Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012, this

disagreement remained beneath the surface. Now, however, the Iran crisis will once again bring it to the fore—including the American–Israeli strategic discord.

“An Atomic Power Virtually Overnight”

In December 2011, Israeli officials were relieved when *The New York Times* reported US Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta as having stated that the US was determined “to stop not only a [Iranian nuclear] weapon, but the ability to produce one.” But on January 6, 2012, Panetta revised his stance: “Are they trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No... Our red line to Iran is: do not develop a nuclear weapon. That’s a red line for us.”(3)

But what does the demand “do not develop a nuclear weapon” actually mean? *The New York Times* provided a clue: “Iran would have to become a country like Japan, which has the capability to become an atomic power virtually overnight, if need be, but has rejected taking the final steps to possessing nuclear weapons.” Such a situation could be “the most attainable outcome for the West” in its negotiations with Iran, added the newspaper with reference to several American and European officials. The paper quoted a senior European diplomat: “If you’re asking whether we would be satisfied with Iran becoming Japan, then the answer is a qualified yes. But it would have to be verifiable.”(4)

This “yes” means a decision the consequences of which can hardly be overestimated. True, thanks to its advanced uranium and plutonium program Japan could easily become a nuclear power with atomic weapons. This analogy, however, ignores all the factors that make the Iranian nuclear program particularly dangerous. While no one in Seoul, Manila, or Taipei is particularly worried about the Japanese nuclear potential, the Sunnis of the Persian Gulf region are already more than a little nervous today about the Iranian nuclear potential.

An episode dating back to February 2012 indicates the seriousness of the Obama administration's new line. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was not yet familiar with the newly established linguistic restraint. On February 27, 2012, she "slightly muddied the waters by testifying in the House that the goal of the United States was to prevent Iran from having 'nuclear weapons capability,'" mocked *The New York Times*, and continued: "Administration officials said she misspoke."(5)

Yigal Carmon, president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), and Ayelet Savyon, director of its Iranian Media Project, are among the few that had already criticized "the US' new policy" during Obama's election campaign. It allows Iran, they maintain, "to become a threshold state," and "provides legitimacy and impetus for Iran's efforts." It also "preempts any deal based on no enrichment above 5 percent on Iranian soil that Iran might possibly have accepted."(6)

Washington is hardly enamored with the idea of Iran as a nuclear threshold state. Not for nothing is Washington the hub and enforcer of the global sanctions regime against Tehran. President Obama, however, seems to give precedence to the prevention of a US military operation over the prevention of a nuclear option for Iran. His government signaled that a military attack would be considered only if Iran actually builds a bomb, while its production of the necessary means to do so would trigger the usual response: sanctions and protests.

Red Lines

Time and again Washington has adjusted its policy on Iran based on Tehran's technological achievements. President Clinton played an important role of his own by denying the Iranians access to nuclear technology. In 2006, President George W. Bush threw the Clinton doctrine overboard and backed UN Security Council Resolution 1696. On the one hand, this resolution provided Iran the right to use atomic energy for peaceful

purposes, but, on the other, demanded “that Iran shall suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, to be verified by the IAEA.”(7) Bush’s red line accepted the existence of civil nuclear facilities but excluded weapons-related technologies.

In September 2009, the Obama administration stretched the limits of this line and supported a proposal that accepts uranium enrichment up to 5 percent if Iran ships some of its enriched materials abroad to be used in the production of fuel rods for its research reactor.(8) The scope of this concession was remarkable: Whoever is able to enrich uranium to just 5 per cent has already mastered almost 70 percent of the technical effort required for the production of weapons-grade uranium.

Obama’s red line accepted Iranian enrichment of up to 5 percent but no more. Tehran promptly began to enrich uranium up to 20 percent. With the mastery of this technique, the mullahs raised their capability to 87 per cent of what is required for the production of weapon-graded-uranium. But instead of putting Iran in the pillory, the US administration adjusted its policy to accommodate this new development. President Obama’s latest line accepts the enrichment of up to 20 percent or more but excludes the actual construction of a bomb.

“No Containment”

President Obama, however, knew how to sweeten the pill of his new “red line” for Netanyahu when the Israeli leader approached the White House in March 2012. He promised not to contain, but to prevent an Iranian bomb. Both initiatives went hand in hand: on the one hand, the willingness to accord the Iranians a status comparable to Japan, but on the other, an even greater determination *not* to accept the bomb. “I don’t bluff,” President Obama assured an interviewer after being questioned if his threat of military action could be taken seriously. There is, according to the president, “a

profound national-security interest of the United States to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.”(9) The last “red line” is therefore considered to be strictly binding, even if this implies a military attack.

But how could Washington prevent the *fait accompli* of a secretly assembled Iranian bomb? President Obama answered that question with reference to “a pretty long lead time in which we will know that they are making that attempt.”(10) White House spokesperson Jay Carney claims that Washington has “visibility into the [nuclear] program, and we would know if and when Iran made what’s called a breakout move towards acquiring a weapon.”(11)

This confidence, however, is risky. First, the people responsible in Tehran frankly admit that they used to feed IAEA inspectors false information.(12) Second, the IAEA inspectors’ access to military installations is blocked. Third, US authorities were surprised not only by the emergence of Indian and Pakistani nuclear bombs but also by the establishment of Iran’s uranium enrichment facility at Natanz. Fourth, the installations to produce weapons-grade uranium and to assemble nuclear warheads are so compact that they could be accommodated in any major auto service center.

Netanyahu attacked the “pretty long lead time” argument in his recent speech to the UN General Assembly: “Do we want to risk the security of the world on the assumption that we would find in time a small workshop in a country half the size of Europe?”(13)

The same doubts were expressed by Henry Kissinger: “Once the requisite amount of fissile material has been produced, constructing and equipping a warhead is a relatively short and technologically straightforward process, almost certainly impossible to detect in a timely fashion.”(14) Robert M. Gates, the former defense secretary in President Obama’s cabinet, agrees: “If their policy is to go to the threshold, but not assemble a nuclear weapon, how do you tell that they have not assembled? I don’t actually know how you would verify that.”(15)

Let us assume that Washington would learn of an Iranian breakout intention early enough. Even in this case there is no guarantee that President Obama would be willing to take the tough decision to attack Iran. “America is ... anxious to avoid almost any war, at almost any cost,” stated Israeli journalist David Horowitz.(16) Considering the prevailing atmosphere in America today, he is probably correct.

Under these circumstances, there is a certain temptation to “overlook” a break-out attempt of the regime and to become “surprised” by the established fact. By then it will be too late. A *fait accompli* could “leave the West with no choice but to back off, lest it provoke a nuclear confrontation,” reports *The New York Times* by referring to related debates in the White House.(17)

Threshold Power Iran?

While the Iranian people suffer from terror, censorship, economic mismanagement, and sanctions, Iran’s leaders can be satisfied with the results of their nuclear efforts, since for years they have been pushing to attain internationally recognized “Japan status.”

“Iran is trying to seek EU consent for modeling its nuclear program on the ‘Japanese/German model,’ i.e., attaining nuclear fuel cycle capabilities up to three months short of a bomb,” reported MEMRI as far back as February 2005.(18) In 2009, Iran’s Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki again demanded that “the view that exists about Japan’s nuclear activities should be applied to other countries, including Iran.”(19)

One motive for Iran’s relentless attempts to secure “Japan status” might be the fact that the rank of a “potential nuclear power” almost guarantees recognition as a regional leader and enables it to spread fear and terror—especially if that status was gained against the declared will of the

international community, and particularly the West. Even more important, however, is another aspect: Compared with the regime's ambition, Iran's nuclear weapons program is still in its infancy.

True, Iran could arguably detonate a primitive uranium device even today. Uranium bombs, however, have some disadvantages compared to plutonium bombs: They are five times heavier, i.e., much more difficult to load onto missiles and they cannot serve as a detonator for modern hydrogen bombs.(20) Tehran, however, is striving to develop modern nuclear weapons. Thus, Iranian technicians are feverishly working to complete the Arak heavy water reactor, which is due to start operation at the end of 2013. This type of plant is only useful if you want to produce weapons-grade plutonium. This reactor shell is complemented by the construction of a nuclear reprocessing plant.

If the "5 plus 1" powers would be ready to give Tehran threshold power status monitored by the IAEA, the regime could use this opportunity to quickly finish its plutonium path as well. Such a status would be, in fact, "the most attainable outcome for the West," as cited above, because it corresponds to the interests of the regime.

"Iran is scientifically and technologically capable of manufacturing a nuclear weapon," boasted a member of Iran's pseudo-parliament in April 2012.(21) "If Iran wants to build an atomic bomb... no one will be able to prevent it," President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatened.(22)

More cautious is the statement by Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Ya'alon: "Three years ago, Iran was not within the zone of the nuclear threshold. Today it is. Before our eyes Iran is becoming a nuclear-threshold power."(23) Olli Heinonen, the former chief inspector of the IAEA, explains: "Even a stockpile of five or six bombs-worth of 20%-enriched uranium would effectively make Iran a nuclear-weapon state."(24)

Thus, while America's president tries to lure the Iranian regime to the negotiating table just as he did four years ago, Iranian engineers have used that time to make a giant leap forward. Under these circumstances, the question arises: are President Obama and the US really going to come to terms with Iran as a nuclear threshold power? If that is indeed the case, then America's leader runs the risk of going down in history as this century's Neville Chamberlain.

The Israeli government has estimated that the crossing of the "red line"—and the possibility of military action—could occur by early summer 2013, since by then enough 20-percent uranium would be available to produce 25 kilograms of weapons-grade uranium—enough for one atomic bomb. This line may be attention grabbing but not very plausible, since it ignores the speed-up procedures at the Fordow uranium bunker and the considerable amount of 5-percent uranium stocks that the regime could also use for the production of weapons-grade uranium.

It seems clear that the real "red line" was drawn back in July 2006 when the UN Security Council required Tehran to "suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development." (25) The UN Charter allows for military action to enforce the Security Council's decisions regarding the maintenance of international peace and security.

"The likelihood of some nuclear exchange will mount dramatically," Kissinger recently warned in his *Washington Post* op-ed, if Iran is able to continue acting as it has been. Now, "the diplomatic process must be brought to a point of decision," he suggests. "Diplomacy may reach an acceptable agreed outcome. Or its failure will mobilize the American people and the world. It will clarify either the causes of an escalating crisis, up to the level of military pressure, or ultimate acquiescence in an Iranian nuclear program." (26)

Without the "mobilization of the American people and the world," the enforcement of the UN resolution or a similar solution will not be possible. If

the Iranian regime is given the choice of either dismantling its nuclear installations or risking a terrible war and the ouster of its leadership, then there is perhaps a chance of preventing the completion of an Iranian bomb without using force.

Of course, such an attempt to maintain peace requires a clear and unequivocal “no” to the existence of Iranian nuclear weapons capability. It assumes, moreover, that at their next meeting, the American president will give a different answer to the question posed by his Israeli counterpart—very different than the one the Israeli prime minister received in 1998 or 2012.

Notes:

1 Jack Caravelli, *Nuclear Insecurity* (Westport, 2008), p. 105.

2 Jay Solomon and Carlo E. Lee, “US, Israel Pull Closer on Iran,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2012.

3 David E. Sanger, “Iran Trumpets Nuclear Ability at a Second Location,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2012.

4 Helene Cooper, “Sanctions Against Iran Grow Tighter, but What’s the Next Step?” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2012.

5 Mark Landler, “Obama Says Iran Strike Is an Option, but Warns Israel,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2012.

6 Ayelet Savyon and Yigal Carmon, “Iran Becomes a Nuclear Threshold State,” MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 888, October 5, 2012, p. 3.

7 United Nations, Security Council, S/RES/1696 (2006), July 13, 2006.

8 Matthias Küntzel, “Obama’s Search for Peace in Our Time. The West goes wobbly on Iran,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 7, 2009, pp. 26-28.

9 “Obama to Iran and Israel: As President of the United States, ‘I Don’t Bluff,’” *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.

10 Ibid.

11 Michal Shmulovich, “US didn’t foresee 9/11, officials in Jerusalem say, after White House claims it would know if Iran was about to get the bomb,” *The Times of Israel*, August 11, 2012.

12 Rick Gladstone and Christine Hauser, “Iran’s Top Atomic Official Says Nation Issued False Nuclear Data to Fool Spies,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2012.

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www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2012/PMNetanyahu-addresses-UN-27-Sep-2012.htm.

14 Henry A. Kissinger, “Iran must be President Obama’s immediate priority,” *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2012.

15 David E. Sanger, “On Iran, Questions of Detection and Response Divide U.S. and Israel,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2012.

16 David Horowitz, “The limits of friendship,” *The Times of Israel*, October 23, 2012.

17 Helene Cooper, “Sanctions Against Iran Grow Tighter, but What’s the Next Step?” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2012.

18 B. Savyon, “Iran seeks EU Consent for Modeling Its Nuclear Program on the ‘Japanese/German Model’ – i.e., Nuclear Fuel Cycle Capabilities Three Months Short of a Bomb,” MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 209, February 23, 2005.

19 Ayelet Savyon and Yigal Carmon, “Iran Becomes a Nuclear Threshold State,” MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 888, October 5, 2012, p. 2.

20 Mitch Ginsburg, “Israeli expert: Iran already a nuclear power, but can’t deliver a bomb,” *The Times of Israel*, September 10, 2012.

21 “Iran Ahead of Upcoming Nuclear Talks: Majlis Member: We Can Manufacture Bomb, But We Won’t,” MEMRI, Special Dispatch No. 4638, April 9, 2012.

22 George Jahn, “6 powers, Iran, remain split on nuclear issues,” Associated Press, June 8, 2012.

23 Ari Shavit, “Moshe Ya’alon tells Ari Shavit he is preparing for war,” *Haaretz*, June 14, 2012.

24 Olli Heinonen and Simon Henderson, “What We Know About Iran’s Nukes,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 2012.

25 Here I rely on Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. See Jeffrey Goldberg, "Robert Satloff on Next Steps in the Iran Crisis," *The Atlantic* September 10, 2012.

26 Kissinger, op. cit.

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