

# US Media Distorts Iran Nuke Dispute

**Exclusive:** The major U.S. news media continues its biased coverage of the Israel-Iran standoff, tilting consistently in favor of Israel, in part, by ignoring Israel's actual nuclear arsenal and hyping Iran's hypothetical one. Even a rare wrist-slap from the Washington Post's ombudsman has had no effect, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A few weeks ago, Washington Post ombudsman Patrick B. Pexton published a revealing column in which he delved into the nettlesome question of why the Post rarely writes about Israel's actual nuclear arsenal, even as it devotes intensive coverage to Iran's nuclear program, which remains far short of producing a single bomb.

Pexton deemed concerns about this imbalance "a fair question" and dug back through a decade of Post articles without finding "any in-depth reporting on Israeli nuclear capabilities." He then explored some reasons for this failure, including sympathy felt toward Israel because of the Holocaust and the difficulties that journalists confront in addressing the topic.

"But that doesn't mean the media shouldn't write about how Israel's doomsday weapons affect the Middle East equation," Pexton wrote. "Just because a story is hard to do doesn't mean The Post, and the U.S. press more generally, shouldn't do it."

Yet, there are few signs, if any, that the Post and other mainstream U.S. news outlets are heeding Pexton's criticism. Obviously, one way to alleviate the imbalance would be to mention that Israel has an undeclared nuclear arsenal in every story that discusses Iran's nuclear program, which Iranian leaders insist is for peaceful purposes only.

The fact that Israel has a large and sophisticated roster of nuclear weapons is surely relevant in evaluating why Iran might want a nuclear weapon of its own and why Iran would not want to provoke a war with Israel even if Iran did manufacture one or two bombs. Yet this context is almost never included in U.S. news stories.

U.S. journalists and their editors also might stop including hyperbolic statements that exaggerate the potential Iranian threat to Israel, such as the discredited claim that Iran has threatened to "wipe Israel off the map," an oft-repeated refrain that resulted from a mistranslation of a comment by Iranian

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

However, that seems to be too much to expect from major U.S. newspapers. For instance, on Friday, the New York Times in an article by Mark Landler and Helene Cooper not only fails to mention Israel's nuclear arsenal but inserts the provocative claim that "Iranian leaders have repeatedly threatened [Israel] with annihilation."

The article offers no quote to back up this assertion. It simply stands as a form of boilerplate, as if everyone knows it to be true. But the reality is that Iranian leaders may wish that the Zionist government of Israel ultimately disappears to be replaced by a non-religious state, but that is a far cry from threatening to annihilate Israel militarily, which is the clear implication from Landler and Cooper.

### **Repeat Offender**

Landler, the Times' White House correspondent, also has been a repeat offender in this journalistic malpractice. For instance, on March 5, he appeared on MSNBC and offered this account of the Israeli-Iranian tensions:

"The Israelis feel the window for that [denying Iran the capability to build nuclear weapons] is closing and it's closing really fast, and if they allow it to close without taking military action, they would find themselves in a position where the Iranians suddenly are in possession of nuclear weapons, which they've threatened already to use against Israel.

"As the Israelis always say, that's an existential threat to Israel, which is something we don't necessarily feel here in the United States."

Though Landler's account was hair-raising, claiming that Iranians have "threatened already to use [nuclear weapons] against Israel" which the Israelis understandably perceive as an "existential threat." But Landler's statement simply isn't true.

Iranian leaders continue to deny that they even want nuclear weapons, so it makes no sense that they would threaten to use them against Israel.

In February, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who controls the armed forces, called "the possession of nuclear weapons a grave sin" and said "the proliferation of such weapons is senseless, destructive and dangerous." He insisted that "the Iranian nation has never pursued and will never pursue nuclear weapons."

Further, the U.S. intelligence community reported in 2007 that Iran stopped

research work on a nuclear weapon in 2003 and has not resumed that effort. That assessment has been reaffirmed periodically and remains the position of the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

Beyond that, for Iran to threaten to “annihilate” Israel would represent one of the strangest threats in world history. Here is a nation without nuclear weapons and whose top leader disavows any intent to get nuclear weapons supposedly threatening to use those non-existent weapons against a nation which has a large stockpile of nuclear weapons.

You would think, at minimum, that Landler would be expected to cite an actual Iranian official making a specific threat. But he doesn't and apparently no one in power demands that he do so. His claim that Iran has threatened to attack Israel with a nuclear bomb is simply accepted as what everybody knows to be true.

### **Explaining the Failure**

That is the sort of ludicrous propaganda that has become commonplace in the U.S. news media, a topic that the Post's ombudsman addressed gingerly on Aug. 31. Pexton offered mostly innocent explanations for this journalistic misfeasance.

“First, Israel refuses to acknowledge publicly that it has nuclear weapons,” Pexton wrote. “The U.S. government also officially does not acknowledge the existence of such a program. Because Israel has not signed the [nuclear non-proliferation] treaty, it is under no legal obligation to submit its major nuclear facility at Dimona to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections.

“Iran, in contrast, did sign the treaty and thus agrees to periodic inspections. IAEA inspectors are regularly in Iran, but the core of the current dispute is that Tehran is not letting them have unfettered access to all of the country's nuclear installations.

“Furthermore, although Israel has an aggressive media, it still has military censors that can and do prevent publication of material on Israel's nuclear forces. Censorship applies to foreign correspondents working there, too.”

Plus, Israel has demonstrated that it will deliver harsh punishment on any Israeli who does divulge secrets about the nuclear program, as nuclear technician Mordechai Vununu learned in 1986 when he became a whistleblower about the secret Israeli arsenal. He was then kidnapped, taken to Israel against his will, and imprisoned for 18 years, much of it in solitary confinement.

Pexton added that “perhaps most important, Americans don't leak about the

Israeli nuclear program either.” He cited the inclination to protect a friend and ally, as well as the reality that deviating from this silence “can hurt your career.”

Pexton quoted George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as saying: “It’s like all things having to do with Israel and the United States. If you want to get ahead, you don’t talk about it; you don’t criticize Israel, you protect Israel. You don’t talk about illegal settlements on the West Bank even though everyone knows they are there.”

However, the job of journalism should be to present all the relevant facts in context, especially on life-or-death issues like war and peace.

When the New York Times and the Washington Post institute systemic bias in their coverage of such an issue as the two newspapers also did in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq they not only fail to uphold the principles of journalism, they risk becoming complicit in the slaughter of innocent people.

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’* are also available there.**

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## Has Netanyahu Gone Too Far?

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is demanding that President Obama set a precise “red line” regarding Iran’s nuclear program, meaning a commitment to go to war even if Iran is not actually building a nuclear weapon. Ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar sees a possible turning point in the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

By Paul R. Pillar

Maybe this time the Israeli prime minister has gone too far in his bullying and arrogance in dealing with the United States of America, so far as to undermine the habits and attitudes in the United States that have made such swagger possible in the first place.

“This time” can refer to Benjamin Netanyahu’s [attention-getting outburst](#) this week in which he criticized the Obama administration’s posture regarding Iran’s

nuclear program, demanding that the United States impose a clear “red line” and declaring that those who do not impose such lines “don’t have a moral right to place a red light before Israel.”

The harshness of Netanyahu’s blast took aback even some American politicians accustomed to falling in line in the customary way on matters related to Israel. Sen. Barbara Boxer of California said in a letter to Netanyahu, as “one of Israel’s staunchest supporters in Congress,” that she was “stunned” by Netanyahu’s remarks.

Boxer is a Democrat who no doubt was also trying to soften any political impact of this latest indication of ill will between the Israeli prime minister and the U.S. president. But her response was still one indication of how far Netanyahu had gone beyond the bounds of what supposedly is a relationship between friends and allies.

“This time” also could refer more generally to the whole warpath-blazing campaign of agitation about the Iranian nuclear program. That campaign clearly is mainly an Israeli thing, and especially a project of Netanyahu and his rightist government.

Historians decades from now will be trying to explain how the superpower of the day allowed itself to get so preoccupied with a still-nonexistent weapon in the hands of a second-rate power that, even if the weapon came into existence, could not pose a threat to U.S. interests anywhere near what the preoccupation implies.

Israel, with its longstanding and sizable nuclear arsenal of its own as well as its conventional regional military superiority, also does not face a threat that warrants all the agitation and warmongering.

Maybe preventing the mere possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon would mean Israeli leaders would think only once and not twice before the next time they throw their weight and armed might around in Gaza or Lebanon or someplace else. And the drum-beating about Iran does divert attention away from that pesky matter involving political rights and self-determination for Palestinians.

Perhaps there is seeping into the consciousness of more and more informed Americans the realization that Netanyahu, with his drum-beating, his complete rejection (in defiance of the policies of the United States and other Western powers) of the very idea of negotiations with the Iranians, and his demand for red lines, is trying to lead America by the nose into a war that would be profoundly against U.S. interests.

And it would be a war fought primarily to maintain Israel’s regional nuclear

weapons monopoly and, also not in U.S. interests, untrammled ability to throw its weight around. Even for those attuned less to specific calculations about U.S. interests and more to general concepts of right and wrong, Netanyahu has provided much to offend.

A military attack launched to damage or destroy somebody else's nuclear program, launched, no less, by a state that long has had nuclear weapons completely outside any international monitoring or control regime, would be an act of aggression clearly in violation of international law.

The infliction of casualties involved, inflicted to maintain the aggressor's nuclear weapons monopoly, would be an immoral act. And yet Netanyahu says those who may object to any of this "don't have a moral right" to do so. Incredible.

The prime minister's behavior can be interpreted in multiple ways. His latest tantrum may be part of his effort to sink the re-election chances of the incumbent U.S. president, in favor of an alternative who would be beholden to interests whose primary affinity is to the Israeli right, by accentuating Barack Obama's supposed inability to get along with Israel. This is probably at least part of the explanation for the behavior.

Some have questioned Netanyahu's stability and temperament, in ways that go beyond merely having a short temper. Some Israeli commentators have spoken most recently in terms of Netanyahu "going berserk" or being a "mythomaniac" guided by a sense of heroic mission.

Given all we have heard, in connection with Iran's nuclear program, about the hazards of irrational or fanatic people with their fingers on the button, perhaps we should ask about Netanyahu: is this a man who can be trusted with nuclear weapons?

Even assuming rationality on the prime minister's part, there probably is an emotional element involved in his recent outburst in the sense of someone used to getting his way being flummoxed by even the slightest push-back. Netanyahu probably has been conditioned, through such experiences as speaking to Congress with a gallery stacked with AIPAC supporters, to believe that the bullying will always work.

Even sensible and mild push-back, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement that the United States is not going to set deadlines on the Iranian nuclear issue, then becomes disturbing to him.

Netanyahu also may have been reacting to increased acceptance in mainstream discourse in the United States of the concept that an Iranian nuclear weapon would not be the calamity he insistently portrays it as and that trying to

preclude one would certainly would not be worth starting a new war.

Going beyond the Iranian nuclear issue, perhaps we are seeing some fear that the whole political edifice that has enabled Netanyahu and other Israeli prime ministers to get their way in the United States is showing some cracks. It *ought* to crack. After all, the overall nature of the relationship, in which the superpower that lavishes billions of aid and dozens of United Nations vetoes on the smaller state gets pushed around by the latter, rather than the other way around, is crazy and illogical.

Ultimately the power of the edifice depends on fear of confronting that power. Theoretically to break down that edifice it would take one courageous American political leader, in a bold FDR-like move, to point out that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

That is not about to happen, and the lobby in question will fight hard to make sure it does not happen. But over the last few years some cracks have become visible. Some people thought they saw a crack at the Democratic National Convention when repeated voice votes were required to override the “noes” that opposed the platform plank about declaring Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel.

Maybe Netanyahu’s arrogance, greater than the norm even for Israeli prime ministers dealing with the United States, may be a force that eventually reshapes the relationship. It can do so by making it painfully clear to Americans what they are dealing with.

M. J. Rosenberg evidently is talking about this when he goes so far as to say that Netanyahu “poses an existential threat to the Jewish state.” He is referring to the damage being done to the relations with the superpower patron, that “all Netanyahu is accomplishing with his ugly saber-rattling is threatening the survival of the US-Israel relationship.”

That may well be the effect of Netanyahu’s behavior on the relationship, but perhaps we should not speak of this in terms of threats. Replacing the current pathological relationship with a more normal one certainly would be good for U.S. interests.

Ultimately, however, it also would be good for the interests of Israel, which, in order to get off its current path of endless conflict and isolation, desperately needs the sort of tough love that it is not getting now.

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