

# Israel Tests the Bounds of Its US Clout

Israeli resistance to deals on Palestinian peace and Iran's nuclear program has strained U.S.-Israeli relations and will test if Congress is more loyal to Prime Minister Netanyahu or President Obama. But the tension underscores a deeper division between the two countries, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A [piece by Jeffrey Goldberg](#) at *The Atlantic*, bearing the title "The Crisis in U.S.-Israeli Relations is Officially Here," has performed a useful service in at least two respects. One is that Goldberg's piece highlights how friction in the U.S.-Israeli relationship is primarily an epiphenomenon of an Israeli policy trajectory that is detrimental to Israel itself, no matter what U.S. officials may or may not say about the policies, publicly or privately, and not only detrimental to others.

In commenting, for example, on the latest insertion of right-wing Jewish settlers into Arab areas of East Jerusalem, which many Palestinians unsurprisingly see as another step in de-Palestinianizing East Jerusalem so much that it could not become capital of a Palestinian state, Goldberg writes, "It is the Netanyahu government that appears to be disconnected from reality. Jerusalem is on the verge of exploding into a third Palestinian uprising."

He's right about the potential for a new intifada, one that could emerge spontaneously from bottled-up frustration and anger and would not need to be ordered or directed by anyone.

Another service by Goldberg is to portray the relationship far more realistically than one would conclude from the boilerplate that both governments routinely serve up about supposedly unshakeable ties between close, bosom-buddy allies. The fact is that the interests that this Israeli government pursues (not to be confused with fundamental, long-term interests of Israel and Israelis generally) are in sharp and substantial conflict with U.S. interests. No amount of pabulum from official spokespersons can hide that fact.

For both these reasons, Goldberg's article deserves a wide readership.

The most recent expressions that reflect the true nature of the relationship are not just a matter of unnamed U.S. officials mouthing off. Goldberg notes in the third sentence of his piece that the comments he is reporting are "representative of the gloves-off manner in which American *and Israeli* [emphasis added] officials now talk about each other behind closed doors."

So the barbed tongues extend in both directions, but with two differences. One is that in this relationship the United States is the giver (of many billions in aid, and much political cover in international organizations) and Israel is the taker; harsh comments are far harder to justify when they are directed by an ungrateful beneficiary to its patron rather than the other way around.

The other difference is that Israeli leaders insult the United States not just through anonymous comments to journalists but also publicly and openly; the current Israeli defense minister is one of the more recent and blatant practitioners of this.

One can legitimately question some of the particular accusations by the U.S. officials that Goldberg reports, not to mention the scatological and indecorous terminology employed. But to concentrate on this is to overlook the larger and far more important contours of the relationship. The most fundamental truth about the relationship is that, notwithstanding routine references to Israel as an "ally," it is not an ally of the United States beyond being the recipient of all that U.S. material and political largesse.

An ally is someone who offers something comparably significant and useful in return, particularly on security matters. That this is not true of Israel's relationship with the United States is underscored by the priority that the United States has placed, during some of its own past conflicts in the Middle East such as Operation Desert Storm, on Israel *not* getting involved because such involvement would be a liability, not an asset.

The core policy around which much of this Israeli government's other behavior revolves, and which defines Israel in the eyes of much of the rest of the world, is the unending occupation of conquered territory under a practice of Israel never defining its own borders and thus never permitting political rights to Palestinians under either a two-state or a one-state formula. This policy is directly contrary to U.S. interests in multiple respects, not least in that the United States through its close association with Israel shares in the resulting widespread antagonism and opprobrium.

One of the biggest and most recent U.S. foreign policy endeavors is the negotiation of an agreement to restrict and monitor Iran's nuclear program to ensure it stays peaceful. Completion of an agreement would be a major accomplishment in the interest of nonproliferation and regional stability. The Israeli "ally" has been doing everything it can to sabotage the negotiations and prevent an agreement.

It is a fallacy to think that making nice to the Israeli government will get it to back off from its opposition. It is a fallacy because that government has

shown it does not want any agreement with Iran no matter what the terms, and because it is dishonest in expressing its opposition.

There certainly is genuine concern in Israel about the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon, but that is clearly not what is behind the Israeli government's opposition because the sort of agreement that is shaping up would make it markedly less likely, in terms of both Iranian motivations and capabilities, for Iran ever to make a nuclear weapon than would be the case with no agreement. That's the very purpose of the agreement.

The Israeli government instead seeks to keep Iran permanently in diplomatic exile, precluding any cooperation between Iran and the United States on other issues (which would dilute Israel's claim to being the only worthwhile U.S. partner in the Middle East) and retaining the specter of Iran and a nuclear threat from it as the "real problem" in the Middle East supposedly more worthy of international attention than the occupation and unresolved plight of the Palestinians.

These objectives, as well as the setback for the cause of nonproliferation that collapse of an agreement with Iran would entail, also are directly contrary to U.S. interests.

The best way to handle the implacable opposition to an Iranian deal from Netanyahu, who, according to Goldberg's reporting, has "written off" the Obama administration, is to write off Netanyahu and any hope that he could be brought around on the subject. Needed instead is to expose, to Israelis, as well as to members of Congress and other Americans, the fundamental dishonesty of Netanyahu's opposition.

Maybe a useful step in doing that would be to bring back Netanyahu's cartoon bomb that he displayed at the United Nations General Assembly and point out how the preliminary agreement reached with Iran last year (and which the Israeli prime minister consistently denounced) has already drained the bomb and moved the Iranian program back from the lines that the Israeli prime minister drew with his red marker.

Calling Netanyahu to account certainly is not a sufficient condition to achieve political change in Israel, with its ever steeper rightward tilt, but it is probably a necessary condition. The state of the relationship with the United States is highly salient and highly important to many Israelis, but it will not be a driver of political change as long as it remains masked by all that boilerplate about how great the "alliance" is.

There are a couple of problems with the title of Goldberg's piece (which is

probably the doing of an editor, not Goldberg). One is that there isn't "officially" a crisis. The fact that official statements continue to talk about a supposedly rosy relationship is part of what is, as explained above, wrong.

The other problem is that in this context the word *crisis* is a misnomer. The term usually indicates a potential for a big turn for the worse, especially the outbreak of a war between whatever two parties are experiencing a crisis. That's not what's involved here.

The only reason the term *crisis* comes up regarding U.S.-Israeli relations is the fictional, deliberately inflated view of the relationship as something qualitatively different that ought to defy any of the usual rules that apply to any patron and client or to any bilateral relationship. Sweep aside the politically-driven fiction about two countries that supposedly have everything in common and nothing in conflict and instead deal with reality, and the concept of crisis does not arise at all.

What you have instead is a bilateral relationship that is like many others the United States has, with some parallel interests and objectives along with other objectives that diverge, sometimes sharply, and with honest recognition of the latter being a normal part of business. Being honest and realistic is good for U.S. interests, and in this case it would be good for the long-term interests of Israel as well.

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## Russia's Key Role in Iran-Nuke Deal

Though the Ukraine crisis drove a wedge between Presidents Obama and Putin, their cooperation remains crucial to a negotiated agreement to constrain but not end Iran's nuclear program, as Gareth Porter makes clear in reporting on a possible breakthrough for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

U.S. and Iranian negotiators are working on a compromise approach to the issue of Iran's uranium enrichment capabilities, which the Barack Obama administration has said in the past Iran was refusing to make concessions on.

The compromise now being seriously discussed would meet the Obama administration's original requirement for limiting Iran's "breakout capability" by a combination of limits on centrifuge numbers and reduction of Iran's stockpile of low enriched uranium, rather than by cutting centrifuges alone. That approach might permit Iran to maintain something close to its present level of operational centrifuges.

The key to the new approach is Iran's willingness to send both its existing stockpile of low enriched uranium (LEU) as well as newly enriched uranium to Russia for conversion into fuel for power plants for an agreed period of years.

In the first official indication of the new turn in the negotiations, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Marziah Afkham acknowledged in a briefing for the Iranian press on Oct. 22 that new proposals combining a limit on centrifuges and the transfer of Iran's LEU stockpile to Russia were under discussion in the nuclear negotiations. The briefing was translated by BBC's monitoring service but not reported in the Western press.

Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman, who heads the U.S. delegation to the talks, has not referred publicly to the compromise approach, but she appeared to be hinting at it when she said on Oct. 25 that the two sides had "made impressive progress on issues that originally seemed intractable."

Despite the new opening to a resolution of what had been cited for months as the main obstacle to a comprehensive agreement, the negotiations could nevertheless stall in the final weeks over the timing of sanctions removal. Iran's willingness to negotiate such arrangements with the U.S. delegation will depend on Russia's agreement to take the Iranian enriched uranium.

The beginning of discussions on the new approach was reported in September just days after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Russian President Vladimir Putin had met to discuss key issues in Iranian-Russian cooperation on the building of two nuclear power plants and fuel supply for Bushehr.

The proposed reduction of Iran's accumulation of LEU by shipping it to Russia could achieve the Obama administration's original minimum objective for an acceptable agreement, which was defined by a minimum number of months it would take Iran to enrich enough uranium for a single nuclear weapon.

Secretary of State John Kerry presented the administration's requirement for that period last April as being six to 12 months. The six- to 12-month requirement has been translated into a demand in the negotiations for a draconian cut to a few thousand centrifuges. However, that demand is not justified on technical calculations of a "breakout timeline."

David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, who supported the demand for a cut to a few thousand centrifuges, acknowledged in an analysis published in June that the reduction of the Iranian LEU stockpile to 1,000 kilograms would increase the breakout time for the present level of 10,000 Iranian operational centrifuges to six months, and a reduction to zero would increase it to nearly a year.

A deal that would reduce Iran's stockpile to a minimum would be consistent with the proposal Iran had presented to the P5+1 early in the negotiations. As Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif outlined the proposal to this writer in June, Iran proposed to guarantee immediate conversion of each batch of low-enriched uranium to oxide powder to be used to make fuel assemblies for the Bushehr reactor.

But the plan did not explicitly address how Iran would dispose of the existing stockpile of LEU, and the United States has dismissed any plan in which Iran maintained large quantities of oxide powder, on the ground that it could be reversed. Iran could not negotiate such arrangement with the P5+1 without first reaching agreement with the Russians.

But the problem of shipping LEU to Russia for conversion to nuclear fuel was linked to a larger set of difficult issues in Iran's nuclear cooperation with Russia. Iran and Russia already have a commercial agreement for Russian provision of fuel for Iran's Bushehr reactor until 2021. But Iran and Russia have been negotiating on the construction of two new nuclear reactors by Russia, and Iran wanted Russia to agree to Iranian participation in enrichment for the fuel as well as in making the fuel assemblies for the reactors.

A "preliminary agreement" on a contract for building the two new reactors was announced March 12, but negotiations on key points involving the additional Iranian demands were still pending. Anton Khlopkov, director of the Center for Energy and Security Studies in Moscow, told IPS that the Russian acceptance of Iranian LEU would pose serious commercial issues for Russia.

It would lose significant profits it expected from doing the enrichment itself by agreeing to use Iranian LEU for conversion into fuel assemblies rather than uranium available in Russia. Iranian uranium is much more expensive than the uranium to which Russia has access, Khlopkov said. Iran also wants to do at least some of the enrichment for the new reactors to be built, which would increase the compensation required for the deal.

Explaining the rationale for the Iranian enrichment demand, Ali Akbar Salehi, the director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said in early July that Iran had no desire to "carry out all the enrichment inside Iran" but

added that “the other parties must know that if some day they don’t give us the fuel for power plants, Iran has the ability to produce it.”

The second major commercial issue in the negotiations with Russia is Iran’s desire to take over the fabrication of fuel assemblies for Bushehr and other power plants from the Russians after 2021. In a Sept. 29 interview with this writer, Salehi said that the negotiations with Russia “include a wide spectrum of issues,” which include Iran’s desire to “share in the technology of the power plants.”

Iran is years away from having the capacity to do that, however, and it would need technical assistance from Russia. The United States, meanwhile, has made it clear it believes Iran could and should continue to rely on Russia to provide the fuel for the Bushehr reactor, even after the current contract for the fuel expires in 2021.

Khlopkov did not rule out the possibility of “some kind of partnership for fuel production,” but only if Iran is ready to compensate Russia for its commercial losses. Fuel fabrication is a “big business, which nobody wants to lose,” Khlopkov said.

On June 24, the spokesman for AEOI, Behrooz Kamalvandi, announced that the contract for the two nuclear power plants would be signed within weeks during a visit by Salehi to Moscow, but he acknowledged “some elements” in the agreement remained unresolved.

In a sign that Russia and Iran were close to agreement on the unresolved issues connected with the reactor deal, the heads of government were brought into talks. On Sept. 12, Putin’s foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov said the two presidents would meet on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and that both bilateral cooperation on nuclear power and the Iran-P5+1 talks would be among the topics to be discussed.

On Sept. 19, one week after the Rouhani-Putin meeting, the Associated Press reported that a new U.S. proposal involving a trade-off between reducing the LEU stockpile and the size of the cut in centrifuges had been discussed in bilateral talks between the United States and Iran. Iran was reported to have been “cautiously receptive”.

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