

## How Washington Encourages Israel to Bomb Iran

*Israel knows sanctions aren't likely to work and is increasingly aware of the poor quality of U.S. intelligence.*

By **REUEL MARC GERECHT**

In recent speeches, interviews and private meetings, President Obama has been trying hard to dissuade Israel from bombing Iran's nuclear facilities. All along, however, he's actually made it much easier for Israel to attack. The capabilities and will of Israel's military remain unclear, but the critical parts of the administration's Iran policy (plus the behavior of the Islamic Republic's ruler, Ali Khamenei) have combined to encourage the Israelis to strike.

Public statements define a president's diplomacy, and in front of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee this month Mr. Obama intensely affirmed "Israel's sovereign right to make its own decisions about what is required to meet its security needs." He added that "no Israeli government can tolerate a nuclear weapon in the hands of a regime that denies the Holocaust, threatens to wipe Israel off the map, and sponsors terrorist groups committed to Israel's destruction."

By so framing the Iranian nuclear debate, the president has forced a spotlight on two things that his administration has wanted to leave vague: the efficacy of sanctions and the quality of American intelligence on Tehran's nuclear program. The Israelis are sure to draw attention to both in the coming months.



Getty Images

President Barack Obama (right) talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as they walk along the Colonnade of the White House, March 5.

Given Mr. Khamenei's rejection of engagement, Mr. Obama has backed sanctions because they are the only plausible alternative to war or surrender. Ditto Congress, which has been the real driver of sanctions. But the timeline for economic coercion to work has always depended on Israeli or American military capabilities and the quality of Western intelligence. Neither factor engenders much patience.

Even the U.S. Air Force might have difficulty demolishing (with conventional explosives) the buried-beneath-a-mountain Fordow nuclear site near Qom, where the Iranian regime has been installing uranium-enrichment centrifuges. In Israel, Mr. Netanyahu and his hawkish defense minister, Ehud Barak, may have waited too long to raid this now-functioning facility; steady Iranian progress there certainly means that the Israelis must strike within months if they are serious about pre-emption.

Although the Iranian regime dreads new Western sanctions against its central bank, and especially the ejection of the Islamic Republic from the Swift international banking consortium, Tehran still has a huge advantage concerning time. Iran made around \$79 billion last year from the sale of oil. Whatever the cost of its nuclear program, the regime has surely spent the vast majority of the monies required to deliver a nuclear weapon, and Tehran certainly still has the few billions required to finish producing highly enriched uranium, triggering devices, and warheads for its ballistic missiles.

Sanctions that cannot starve the nuclear program could still conceivably collapse the Iranian economy, bringing on political chaos that paralyzes the nuclear program. But if we have learned anything from the past 60 years of sanctioning nasty regimes, it is that modern authoritarian states have considerable resilience and a high threshold of pain.

Many Iran observers would like to believe that sanctions could rapidly exacerbate divisions within the regime and thereby force Tehran to negotiate an end to possible nuclear weaponization. But this scenario beggars the Iranian revolutionary identity. Mr. Khamenei has shown no willingness to halt the program. Commanders of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, who are handpicked by the supreme leader and now control much of the Iranian economy and oversee "atomic research," have not even hinted they differ with Mr. Khamenei on the nuclear question.

The sanctions-political-chaos-nuclear-paralysis scenario envisions either the supreme leader or the Revolutionary Guards abandoning nukes just when they are within grasp. To verify the cessation of the nuclear-weapons quest, so the theory goes, these men would allow the unfettered inspection of all nuclear and military sites by the International Atomic Energy Agency. In other words, everything Mr. Khamenei and his praetorians have worked for since 1979—the independence and pre-eminence of the Islamic Republic among Muslim states in its battle against the "world-devouring," "Islam-debasing" United States—would be for naught.

The supreme leader and his allies are acutely sensitive to the age-old Persian conception of *haybat*, the awe required to rule. Those who still believe in the revolution are obviously more ruthless than those who want change (hence 2009, when security forces brutalized the pro-democracy Green Movement). Whoever might want to compromise on the nuclear issue within Iran's ruling elite surely lives in fear of those who don't.

Mr. Khamenei hasn't allowed the Revolutionary Guards to expand their economic reach because he wants them to be rich—it's because he wants them to be powerful. Iran's ruling elite are in a better position to survive sanctions today than they were when President George W. Bush described them as part of an axis of evil in 2002. Sanctions are a good tool to deny Tehran resources, but as a tool to stop nuclear weapons they aren't particularly menacing. They may now have become primarily a means to stop the Israelis, not the Iranians, from achieving their desired ends.

Under presidential pressure, the CIA's traditional sentiments toward Israel—suspicion laced with hostility—have likely been forced underground. Sharing intelligence has probably become de rigueur. The Israelis (like the British and the French) now undoubtedly know what we know about the Iranian nuclear program.

It's an excellent bet that the Israelis now know that the CIA probably has no sources inside the upper reaches of the Iranian scientific establishment, Mr. Khamenei's inner circle, or the Revolutionary Guards' nuclear brigade. They know whether the National Security Agency has reliably penetrated Iran's nuclear communications, and how Iran has improved its cybersecurity since Stuxnet.

The Israelis surely know that when the administration says it has "no evidence" that Mr. Khamenei has decided to build a nuclear weapon, this really means that Washington has no solid information. That is, Washington is guessing—most likely in the spirit of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which willfully downplayed Tehran's nuclear progress.

Because of his multilateral openness with our allies, Mr. Obama has likely guaranteed that the Western intelligence consensus on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program will default to what the Israelis and French have always said is most critical to weaponization: How many centrifuges do the Iranians have running, and are they trying to hide them or put them deep underground?

The Israeli cabinet reportedly still hasn't had the great debate about launching a pre-emptive strike. Democracies always temporize when confronted with war. But that discussion is coming soon and Barack Obama—who, despite his improving efforts at bellicosity, just doesn't seem like a man who would choose war with another Muslim nation—has most likely helped Messrs. Netanyahu and Barak make the case for military action.

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