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## Obama Is Pushing Israel Toward War

*President Obama can't outsource matters of war and peace to another state.*

By BRET STEPHENS



Events are fast pushing Israel toward a pre-emptive military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, probably by next spring. That strike could well fail. Or it could succeed at the price of oil at \$300 a barrel, a Middle East war, and American servicemen caught in between. So why is the Obama administration doing everything it can to speed the war process along?

At July's G-8 summit in Italy, Iran was given a September deadline to start negotiations over its nuclear programs. Last week, Iran gave its answer: No.

Instead, what Tehran offered was a five-page document that was the diplomatic equivalent of a giant kiss-off. It begins by lamenting the "ungodly ways of thinking prevailing in global relations" and proceeds to offer comprehensive talks on a variety of subjects: democracy, human rights, disarmament, terrorism, "respect for the rights of nations," and other areas where Iran is a paragon. Conspicuously absent from the document is any mention of Iran's nuclear program, now at the so-called breakout point, which both Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his boss Ali Khamenei insist is not up for discussion.

What's an American president to do in the face of this nonstarter of a document? What else, but pretend it isn't a nonstarter. Talks begin Oct. 1.

All this only helps persuade Israel's skittish leadership that when President Obama calls a nuclear-armed Iran "unacceptable," he means it approximately in the same way a parent does when fecklessly reprimanding his misbehaving teenager. That impression is strengthened by Mr. Obama's decision to drop Iran from the agenda when he chairs a meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Sept. 24; by Defense Secretary Robert Gates publicly opposing military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities; and by Russia's announcement that it will not support any further sanctions on Iran.

In sum, the conclusion among Israelis is that the Obama administration won't lift a finger to stop Iran, much less will the "international community." So Israel has pursued a different strategy, in effect seeking to goad the U.S. into stopping, or at least delaying, an Israeli attack by imposing stiff sanctions and perhaps even launching military strikes of its own.

Thus, unlike Israel's air strike against Iraq's reactor in 1981 or Syria's in 2007, both of which were planned in the utmost secrecy, the Israelis have gone out of their way to advertise their fears, purposes and capabilities. They have sent warships through the Suez Canal in broad daylight and conducted widely publicized air-combat exercises at long range. They have also been unusually forthcoming in their briefings with reporters, expressing confidence at every turn that Israel can get the job done.

The problem, however, is that the administration isn't taking the bait, and one has to wonder why. Perhaps it thinks its diplomacy will work, or that it has the luxury of time, or that it can talk the Israelis out of attacking. Alternatively, it might actually want Israel to attack without inviting the perception that it has colluded with it. Or maybe it isn't really paying attention.

But Israel is paying attention. And the longer the U.S. delays playing hardball with Iran, the sooner Israel is likely to strike. A report published today by the Bipartisan Policy Center, and signed by Democrat Chuck Robb, Republican Dan Coats, and retired Gen. Charles Ward, notes that by next year Iran will "be able to produce a weapon's worth of highly enriched uranium . . . in less than two months." No less critical in determining Israel's

timetable is the anticipated delivery to Iran of Russian S-300 anti-aircraft batteries: Israel will almost certainly strike before those deliveries are made, no matter whether an Iranian bomb is two months or two years away.

Such a strike may well be in Israel's best interests, though that depends entirely on whether the strike succeeds. It is certainly in America's supreme interest that Iran not acquire a genuine nuclear capability, whether of the actual or break-out variety. That goes also for the Middle East generally, which doesn't need the nuclear arms race an Iranian capability would inevitably provoke.

Then again, it is *not* in the U.S. interest that Israel be the instrument of Iran's disarmament. For starters, its ability to do so is iffy: Israeli strategists are quietly putting it about that even a successful attack may have to be repeated a few years down the road as Iran reconstitutes its capacity. For another thing, Iran could respond to such a strike not only against Israel itself, but also U.S targets in Iraq and the Persian Gulf.

But most importantly, it is an abdication of a superpower's responsibility to outsource matters of war and peace to another state, however closely allied. President Obama has now ceded the driver's seat on Iran policy to Prime Minister Netanyahu. He would do better to take the wheel again, keeping in mind that Iran is beyond the reach of his eloquence, and keeping in mind, too, that very useful Roman adage, *Si vis pacem, para bellum*.

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