

President Obama on Iran: Assessing Key Passages in the AIPAC Speech

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Although the president's AIPAC speech offered reassurances that he is committed to the full logic of a "prevention" strategy in dealing with the Iranian nuclear challenge, including potential military action, it also implied a clear preference for Israel to hold back and let the noose of international sanctions tighten.

In a speech that was part foreign policy and part domestic politics, President Obama came to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference yesterday morning to reassure an anxious Israel -- and Israel's U.S. supporters -- that his administration was committed to the full logic of a "prevention" strategy in dealing with the Iranian nuclear challenge, including the potential use of military force. While the president mentioned Israel's "sovereign right" to act in its own self-defense and labeled as a "basic truth" the assertion that no Israeli leader could live with a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic of Iran, an unspoken subtext of the president's remarks remained a clear preference for Israel to hold back on its own preventive military action and let the noose of international sanctions tighten around the neck of Iran's rulers until they are forced to choose between giving up their quest for a nuclear weapon or facing what he called possible U.S.-led military "contingencies."

Key Themes

The main elements in the president's message on Iran were:

- Affirmation that he views as legitimate both Israel's fear of the potential implications of a nuclear-armed Iran and Israel's right to act against this threat should it deem such action necessary. In a passage on America's commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge, the president specifically repeated the powerful and emotive mantra that "Israel must always have the ability to defend itself, by itself, against any threat."
- Refutation of the argument that America's interest in stopping Iran's quest for a nuclear weapon is merely a response to special pleading for Israel. To the contrary, he enumerated several reasons why vital U.S. interests are at stake, beginning with a theme with which he is closely associated, proliferation: "A nuclear-armed Iran would thoroughly undermine the nonproliferation regime that we've done so much to build," he said.
- A soup-to-nuts defense of his administration's approach to Iran from the morrow of his inauguration, beginning with a jab at the Bush administration ("When I took office,

the efforts to apply pressure on Iran were in tatters") and culminating with a paternity claim for tough sanctions measures (such as those on the Central Bank of Iran), credit for which really belongs elsewhere (in this case, with Congress).

- Recognition that tightening sanctions is not an end in itself but only a means to achieve the goal of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. "The effective implementation of our policy is not enough; we must accomplish our objective," he said. And here lies the sentence that amounts to the president's plea for restraint from Israel: "And in that effort, I firmly believe that an opportunity still remains for diplomacy backed by pressure to succeed."
- A declaration that his administration is committed to a policy of prevention (i.e., stopping Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon), not containment (i.e., limiting Iran's ability to employ a nuclear weapon, once obtained, as a tool of foreign policy): "Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon."
- Several iterations on the theme that the president is ready, *in extremis*, to use force to achieve U.S. strategic objectives vis-a-vis Iran: "I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say. That includes all elements of American power: a political effort aimed at isolating Iran, a diplomatic effort to sustain our coalition and ensure that the Iranian program is monitored, an economic effort that imposes crippling sanctions and, yes, a military effort to be prepared for any contingency."

Reading between the Lines

Just as important as what the president said were certain important aspects of Iran policy that he did not address, especially given the heated media run-up to his speech. On the positive side, the most important nonstatement was that he did not air publicly any of the arguments against military force that whisperers from inside his administration have been telling journalists in recent weeks, i.e., that Iran might retaliate with terrorist action inside the United States, that the global and/or domestic economic recovery would be threatened by a conflict-induced spike in oil prices, or that Iran might respond to U.S. action by targeting U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Those statements -- including, at times, by the president himself -- had the effect of undermining the overall thrust of U.S. strategy. What the president said at AIPAC -- and what he did not say -- should be the final word for the rest of the administration; the two key tests are whether key officials who have strayed from the president's line now follow it more closely, and whether the administration as a whole takes further action in accord with the president's embrace of Teddy Roosevelt's "speak softly and carry a big stick" policy.

On the negative side, it is important to note that the president did not take the opportunity to repair damaging statements by senior administration officials disparaging Israel's ability to mount effective military operations against Iran. (By contrast, in his own AIPAC address, Israeli president Shimon Peres made the argument that Israel would not only fight if forced to defend its interests, but that it would "prevail.") And by repeatedly saying his administration was committed to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon -- but never mentioning the capability to build a nuclear weapon -- the president clearly settled the debate about what the goal of U.S. policy really is, in favor of the narrower definition of what Washington is actually trying to prevent (i.e., a weapon, not the broader capability to build a weapon).

One additional item noticeable by its absence was any message to the people of Iran. This was a lost opportunity. At a time when the administration is counting, at least in part, on the punitive impact of sanctions to compel Iran's leaders to change course; when U.S. officials are decrying the increased militarization of the Iranian regime; when Iran just completed parliamentary elections in which only varieties of conservatives were allowed to run; and when the people of Syria, Iran's only Arab ally, are rising up courageously against tyranny, it would have been a useful moment for the president to underscore America's hope that the people of Iran will soon enjoy the "universal rights" he frequently extols in Arab countries undergoing transition. One hopes this lacuna was not a product of the commonly held -- but profoundly mistaken -- idea that outreach to the Iranian people complicates nuclear diplomacy with the regime.

Perhaps most important, the president made no mention of specific red lines, timeframes, or triggers for potential military action, effectively sidestepping the "zone of immunity" issue that may be driving Israel toward military action sooner rather than later. The implication of the president's remarks is that it is critical to see whether a series of impending sanctions -- Iran's suspension from the SWIFT international banking clearance system, the U.S. ban on dealings with Iran's Central Bank, and the European prohibition on oil imports -- will impose sufficient pressure on Iran's rulers to make them change course on the nuclear issue. What is clear is that the cumulative impact of these measures will only be felt well past the date when Defense Minister Ehud Barak once said Israel may be unable to mount its own operations against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Although the president cannot be faulted for failing to specify timetables for U.S. military action in a public speech, there is intense speculation as to whether Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu is keen to hear more specifics about this aspect of U.S. strategy in his private meeting with the president today. Here, the two leaders are likely to strive for the golden mean between clarity (so they can avoid misunderstanding) and ambiguity (so they can preserve freedom of maneuver in the future) that sounds optimum in a seminar room but is difficult to achieve in the real world.

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