



Interviews and Presentations

Robert Satloff on Next Steps in the Iran Crisis

[Jeffrey Goldberg](#) and [Robert Satloff](#)

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Atlantic Monthly national correspondent Jeffrey Goldberg interviewed Institute executive director Robert Satloff about the current state of the international crisis over Iran's nuclear program and U.S. and Israeli policy.

[Read this article on the Atlantic's website.](#)

Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has been a close observer of the Iranian nuclear program -- and the world's response to the Iranian regime's nuclear ambitions -- for years. Periodically, we here at [Goldblog](#) check in with Satloff to get his latest views on the crisis. We exchanged e-mails over the past couple of days, at the dawn of what might be a very interesting week in this continuing drama. Here is our conversation:

Goldberg: Iran is increasing the pace of enrichment activities, and taking measures to protect and make redundant its centrifuge operations. Sanctions have not dissuaded the regime from this path. Negotiations have clearly not worked. Tell me why we're not heading toward a military confrontation.

Satloff: I believe there is indeed a significant chance of Israeli preventive military action against the Iranian nuclear program in the near future. Looking at the situation from afar, my assessment is that the Obama administration has not satisfied Israel's requirement for clear, bold U.S. red lines on Iran sufficient to convince Israeli leaders to limit or possibly surrender their option for independent action of their own.

If such Israeli action does not happen, it will either be because the Israeli government becomes satisfied with U.S. red lines in the very near future or because the Israeli government becomes unnerved at the prospect that the United States may not be willing or able to help Israel by leading effective international efforts to prevent Iran from repairing and reconstituting its nuclear weapons program when the dust clears from an attack.

Goldberg: Mike Rogers, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, describes the

Israeli government as being at "wits' end" over what he terms the White House's lack of clarity on red lines. Why do you think the Administration isn't providing these red lines, and can you speculate about what such red lines might look like?

Satloff: I have no idea what the Administration is saying to the Israelis privately, leader-to-leader, or whether the Administration is undertaking clandestine efforts against Iran's nuclear program that would constitute fresh, substantial and tangible evidence to back up the Administration's commitments. In the public (or semi-public) domain, the Administration has not drawn a red line based on a clear definition of what "preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon" really means in practice: for example, is it about enrichment, weaponization, or the institutional know-how to build a device? Indeed, the Administration rarely even says that it is seeking the immediate suspension of Iran's enrichment activities, as called for in various UNSC resolutions.

In the public messaging domain, I also thought the President missed an opportunity in his Charlotte convention address to include a one-liner along the lines of "I kept my word when I said we will hunt down Bin Ladin; I will keep my word when I say we will make sure Iran never gets a nuclear weapon." Why the reluctance? It's unclear but apparently the Administration believes it already provided adequate assurances, wants to avoid additional assurances that may constrain its freedom of action, prefers not to employ the sort of clandestine means that might trigger their own unintended consequences, and may believe that further definition of "red lines" would torpedo any chance for successful negotiations (such as they are).

Goldberg: You're an expert on, among other things, Israeli politics, and you know how to read the Israeli press (which is to say, carefully, and skeptically). Would you care to speculate about the recent stories suggesting that Ehud Barak has changed his mind about a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities? To the extent that this is not all opaque, can you analyze the workings of the security cabinet, and the Barak-Netanyahu dynamic?

Satloff: Two important caveats: First, I think there is a potential for over-psychoanalysis of Israeli leaders and the interplay among the members of the security cabinet. Second, there is also the possibility of disinformation in anything one reads or hears on the issue. My experience is that this is a remarkably disciplined security cabinet, with internal debates quite closely held. To the extent there are differences among members of the group, I don't think there are differences over estimates of Israeli military capabilities or the likelihood of technical success of any military mission; rather, there have been serious discussions as to how military action fits in a larger strategy of ensuring that the Iranians don't get a military nuclear capability one year, two years, five years down the road, i.e., the real "day after" question. And this connects to the American relationship.

All that said, the dynamic at play is fascinating -- contrary to his reputation, Netanyahu has always been reluctant to use military force, in contrast to several of his predecessors, but this would be one of the gutsiest-cum-riskiest decisions to use force ever made by a PM; Barak has virtually no political base left in the country yet he is in a critical position to affect its destiny; and the two men have a history, of course, going back to their military service, with Barak having served as Netanyahu's commander. Bottom line: if PM Netanyahu and DM Barak concur on the need and timing for action, chances are quite likely they will be able to win over a majority of the security cabinet.

Goldberg: Come back to red lines. What would your red line be if you were the Israeli

prime minister, and what would your red line be if you were the American president?

Satloff: Thankfully, I am neither, just a humble think-tank director. The rub is that America and Israel have similar and complementary interests but not identical interests; the threshold for risk to be borne by a great power thousands of miles away and a small though potent regional power in the neighborhood are different; and therefore the red lines the Israeli prime minister and American president will lay down will necessarily be different. Especially at this hyper-politicized moment, when President Obama is allergic to the idea of deepening foreign entanglements, it is highly unlikely that he could begin to approach the sort of commitment-to-use-military-force-when-Iran-crosses-a-certain-enrichment-threshold that PM Netanyahu would like to hear. (Interestingly, in his Charlotte address, the President referred to al-Qaeda as America's top enemy, even when his advisors privately boast that al-Qaeda is on the ropes, nearing total defeat, so the chances that he would publicly authorize the use of force -- or the imminent use of force -- against a lesser foe in the near future are really slim.)

As an American, I shudder at the thought that my country (under either political party) would end up accepting an Iranian nuke the way we ended up accepting North Korea's and Pakistan's nukes. And here, we have a powerful weapon that we seem unwilling to brandish to the fullest extent possible -- UN Security Council resolutions demanding Iran's suspension of enrichment activities until Iran comes into compliance with its IAEA obligations. We won that fight at the Security Council, fair and square, and if I were president -- especially a president as justifiably and legitimately committed to non-proliferation as President Obama -- that's what my red line would be. But then, I am just a humble think-tank director.

Goldberg: Final questions, and big ones: Do you see anything in Iranian behavior or ideology that might cause them to reverse course and comply with Security Council demands? Do you see any proof that sanctions have worked? Have you seen anything to suggest that the Iranians might reach a certain point and then just stop -- freeze their enrichment work, freeze whatever they may be doing on missile development or warhead development?

Satloff: Sanctions have been both a remarkable success and an abysmal failure -- the former, in creating an effective international coalition that succeeded in dramatically raising the cost to the Iranian economy for its leaders' pursuit of nuclear weapons; the latter, in having no discernible impact on the pace and scope of the Iranian nuclear program, except perhaps to see it speed up during the sanctions period.

So far at least, the basic idea of U.S. strategy -- that the high-price of sanctions would compel Iran's leaders to re-calculate the cost of their egregious behavior and seek a diplomatic way out -- has not worked out as intended. Of course, that may happen tomorrow or next week, but chances of that decrease every day. But perhaps the strategy is simply too circuitous, i.e., why count on an economic lever to have political impact when there are political levers that might be able to do the job more effectively and more directly? Here, the basic point is that if the Khamenei-led regime were faced with the stark choice -- desist from pursuit of nuclear weapons, with all that it entails, or risk the end of the regime -- there is a much higher likelihood they would buckle and at least slow down their program or suspend parts of it, as they apparently did with weaponization in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq. It's not a 100 percent certainty, of course, but a much higher chance. This would be akin to Ayatollah Khomeini agreeing to drink the chalice of

poison and end the Iran-Iraq War.

However, there is no sign that any external actor -- America, Israel or anyone else -- is putting Iran to that dilemma or considering such a policy and, in its absence, it is not irrational for the Iranians to bear an economic burden to acquire the nuclear insurance that, in their eyes, would protect them from the fate of Saddam's Iraq and Qadhafi's Libya.

[Read a followup discussion between Dr. Satloff and scholar Shaul Bakhash.](#)