

Obama's Fight with Israel: This Time It's Serious

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New rifts in U.S.-Israeli cooperation could mean that time is running out for peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue.

America and Israel are in uncharted waters. Just eight months since President Barack Obama visited Israel on the first foreign trip of his second term in an attempt to patch things up with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the two close allies are at odds once again -- this time over a proposed "first step" nuclear agreement with Iran. Washington and Jerusalem eventually will find a way to move beyond this titanic clash, but no kiss-and-make-up effort can erase the scars that will be left behind.

The current crisis is already one of the biggest U.S.-Israel blowups, ever -- and it could get worse before it gets better.

Not since Menachem Begin trashed Ronald Reagan's 1982 peace plan has Israel so publicly criticized a major U.S. diplomatic initiative. In a rousing speech in Jerusalem on Nov. 10, Netanyahu even called on leaders of American Jewry to use their influence to stop what he called a "bad" Iran deal.

Never has a U.S. secretary of state taken to a podium in an Arab capital, proclaimed his pro-Israel bona fides and then specifically cautioned the prime minister of Israel to butt out of ongoing U.S. diplomatic efforts and save his critique for after a deal is inked. That is what John Kerry did in a remarkable Nov. 11 news conference in Abu Dhabi, standing next to the foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates.

And not in recent memory has the spokesperson for the president of the United States, knowing that Israel and many of its American friends have criticized the administration's Iran policy, accused detractors of leading a "march to war," thereby opening a Pandora's box of hateful recrimination that will be difficult to close.

Israel's critique of U.S. Iran policy has three key aspects.

First, in terms of strategy, Israel worries that the administration quietly dropped its longtime insistence that Iran fulfill its U.N. Security Council obligation to suspend all enrichment activities, and that an end to enrichment is no longer even a goal of these negotiations.

Second, in terms of tactics, Israel cheers the administration's imposition of devastating sanctions on Iran but fears that the near-agreement in Geneva would have wasted the enormous leverage that sanctions have created in exchange for a deal that, at most, would cap Iran's progress without any rollback of Iran's uranium enrichment capabilities and no commitment to mothball the worrisome Arak plant, which could provide an alternative plutonium-based path to a nuclear weapon.

And third, operationally, Israel has complained that it was kept in the dark on details of the proposed Geneva deal -- what was being offered to Tehran and what was being demanded of it -- despite commitments from Washington to keep Jerusalem fully apprised.

These are weighty concerns and serious accusations. They deserve a full accounting. It is shameful to suggest that anyone who raises these questions prefers war to diplomacy. That is especially because each of these charges appears to have merit.

One would be hard-pressed, for example, to find a senior administration official saying that securing Iran's full implementation of U.N. Security Council resolutions remains the goal of these negotiations, let alone an American "red line." Instead, officials have termed the pursuit of suspension a "maximalist" position and prefer to cite the president's commitment to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, a far looser formulation that could allow Iran a breakout capacity. Rejecting the Iranians' claim to a "right to enrich," as the administration apparently did in Geneva, is important, but it is not the same as demanding that they suspend enrichment.

In terms of the details of the "first step" agreement, administration officials argue that early sanctions relief for Iran will be marginal and limited, and that the core oil and banking sanctions will remain in place until a comprehensive accord is reached. This, however, is a promise that no administration can guarantee since sanctions are only as strong as their weakest link. No one can predict how other countries, some greedy for trade with Iran, will react to the imagery of a "first step" deal, but it is not fanciful to suggest that the sanctions regime may begin to erode once the interim agreement is reached. That underscores the wisdom of demanding the maximum possible concessions in the "first step" -- i.e., a stoppage at Arak -- and of countering the image of fraying sanctions by giving Iran tangible evidence that they will become tighter and more painful.

As for whether Israel was kept in the dark about Geneva, an inconsistency in Kerry's comments suggests there is something to it. After all, he and other officials have said that Israeli leaders have been continually and fully briefed and that Israel's critiques were unwarranted, since the Israelis didn't know the details of what actually was on the table in the talks. Both statements cannot be true. Moreover, it is patently disingenuous to ask Israel or domestic detractors of a "first step" deal to withhold their criticism until after the agreement is signed, which is the administration's position, since there would then be zero chance to affect an outcome already reached.

It didn't help matters that Washington and Jerusalem had a parallel crisis of confidence on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process amid the Iran imbroglio. Kerry -- who has justly earned praise for his persistence and creativity in pursuing this Sisyphean diplomacy -- inexplicably lost his cool when Israel announced construction approval for 1,900 new apartments in disputed territory, itself a political response to Palestinian jubilation at Israel's release from prison of 26 hardened terrorists. One doesn't have to support Israeli settlement policy to note that 90 percent of those apartments are to be built either in existing Jewish neighborhoods within Israel's capital, or on land on the "Israeli side" of the West Bank security barrier that is likely to end up in Israel's control in any agreement.

Kerry's surprisingly ferocious reaction was to lump all construction together and denounce it, publicly question Israel's commitment to peace, rhetorically ask whether Israel prefers a third intifada and wonder aloud whether Israel will ever get its troops out of the West Bank -- troops that have worked with Palestinian security forces to fight terrorism and prevent the spread of Hamas influence. If the Obama administration wanted to raise the blood

pressure of even the least paranoid Israelis, the combination of the rush to a deal in Geneva and an attack on Israel's peacemaking credentials was a sure way to do it.

For its part, Israel has sent Washington some mixed signals of its own, especially on the question of urgency in nuclear talks. In recent months, Israelis kept up a steady drumbeat about the Arak plutonium reactor, continually reminding Americans that once it goes "hot," the radiation hazard will make it immune to military attack. Their message was: "Time is not on our side." This Israeli reasoning provided the administration a powerful rationale (some would say "excuse") for a "first step" deal -- if such a deal included a shutdown of Arak. Since the Geneva talks, however, Israelis have told a different story, i.e., that "time is on our side." America has much more leverage than it recognizes, Israelis have said, because the Iranians are desperate to gain relief from the devastating impact of sanctions. Again, both arguments -- time is and time isn't on our side -- can't be true.

It is clear that the current crisis could have been avoided. The question now is whether it can be remedied.

As of this writing, it appears that the administration opposes the obvious compromise solution on sanctions -- approval now of additional sanctions that would only go into effect if no "first step" deal is reached or when a definitive deadline on negotiating a comprehensive arrangement expires. It also would be useful for the administration to put in place new mechanisms for real-time consultation with Israel so there is no chance even swiftly moving developments will surprise the Israelis. And because the White House's canard about its warmongering critics has had the effect of tarnishing the credibility of America's military threat against Iran, already weakened by the Syria chemical weapons episode, the administration needs to take urgent steps, both on its own and with regional allies, to make the threat more believable.

More than anything, repairing the torn fabric of U.S.-Israel relations -- including the fundamental question of whether the world should allow Iran any independent enrichment capacity -- will require a renewed meeting of the minds between Obama and Netanyahu. As the president said in Jerusalem last March, "Because of the cooperation between our governments, we know that there remains time to pursue a diplomatic resolution [of the Iran nuclear problem]." If his formula is accurate, the absence of cooperation means that time really might be running out.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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