

The Thin Red Line: Is Iran Outmaneuvering the U.S. and Israel?

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Now that Iran is capable of circumventing the nuclear weapons red line, the new U.S. and Israeli defense ministers must coordinate closely to avoid being further outflanked.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who recently made his first trip to Israel in his new post, has thus far avoided publicly using the phrase that had dominated U.S.-Israel relations in the second half of 2012: "Red line."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attracted world attention when he drew an actual red line on an image of a bomb at the United Nations last September. His speech suggested that the issue should be relegated to this spring, the point at which Iran would ostensibly have accumulated one bomb's worth of 20 percent enriched uranium, and could then dash within 30-40 days from reactor-grade to weapons-grade fuel if it chose to "break-out."

Since then, a series of other events have overshadowed the red line issue, including the U.S. election, the Israeli election, and President Obama's Israel visit. Beyond these specific events, there has been a development related to the Iranian nuclear program in the last few months that has given Israel an optimistic ray of hope.

For the first time last fall, an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran's nuclear program showed a dip in the amount of 20 percent enriched uranium -- a change from the steady increase in higher enrichment levels found in previous reports. Presumably, Iran had made the decision to divert some enriched uranium away from its nuclear program.

In the eyes of one senior Israeli official, this signaled that Iran had "internalized our red line," boosting some fragile hope that the nuclear issue could be resolved diplomatically. Many Israelis felt vindicated by Netanyahu putting

forward his red line at the UN.

But the situation is more complex than it appears, argues former deputy director-general for safeguards at the IAEA and senior nuclear inspector Olli Heinonen **in a recent article co-authored with Simon Henderson (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-nuclear-clock-and-world-diplomacy>)**. While acknowledging the decrease in 20 percent enriched uranium in centrifuge feedstock form, Heinonen reaches a different conclusion: that Iran has discovered a way to circumvent Israel's red line, rather than abide by it.

Iran has the capability to reconvert the uranium material back to the gas needed for its nuclear program. The converted 20 percent enriched uranium, now in a less worrisome oxide form, can "be converted back into centrifuge feedstock within a week." Heinonen explains that Iran may be able to do this without risk of detection. The question is whether the act of reversion itself can be detected by the IAEA or the United States, as the level of oxidized uranium decreases and the level of uranium suitable for centrifuge feedstock increases. Heinonen doubts that outsiders could detect such a change: "If there is a new, undeclared, yet-to-be-revealed centrifuge plant, the arithmetic changes again."

If, through this process, Iran can disguise the quantity of enriched uranium it actually possesses, then Israel's much-touted red line may be artificial. According to Heinonen, Iran has passed Netanyahu's red line of 250 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium -- he estimates, based on his sense of published IAEA reports, that they possess as much as 280 kilograms, excluding any material that has already gone through the conversion process.

Furthermore, both Heinonen and Netanyahu would agree that 20 percent enrichment is not the only yardstick. Given a new generation of centrifuges, Iran can also break out from reactor-grade to weapons-grade fuel starting from even five (not 20) percent enrichment within three to five weeks.

Given the possibility, albeit not certainty, that Iran is manipulating red lines, U.S.-Israel coordination must be tighter than ever. In the past, close coordination between former U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and former Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak reflected a desire by both sides to work together at the highest levels. Now, as the baton is passed to two new ministers of defense -- Chuck Hagel and Moshe Ya'alon -- the dynamic must remain strong.

Barak was well known in Washington and could easily move between the upper echelons of the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. Ya'alon, too, has spent some time in Washington in his time as Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff and in senior IDF positions as well as at a Washington think-tank (where we were colleagues). In his new position, however, he will likely be faced with greater challenges than before. Hagel, dogged at his hearings as a proponent of living with the Iranian bomb, will want to prove he is genuinely aligned (and not just pro-forma) with President Obama's antagonism to containment and cooperate with Israel as it relates to prevention of Iran going nuclear.

Ya'alon is viewed two ways in Washington: While he is seen as far more hawkish on the Palestinian issue than the U.S. administration, he is also seen as a proponent of force against Iran only as a last resort -- unlike Barak, who was portrayed as an enthusiastic and vocal proponent of military action. Ya'alon does not favor containment, however -- if diplomacy fails and the United States does not act, one can assume he will push for an Israeli strike.

Ya'alon is also one of the two remaining members of the "octet" of the last Knesset the other being Netanyahu himself), where the Iran nuclear program was a clear central focus. This experience gives him a greater role in Israeli decision-making and should help during his Washington talks. Hagel's visit with Ya'alon in Israel this week is merely round one of the coordination efforts that must take place between these two.

With Iran capable of manipulating the red line, Hagel and Ya'alon and their advisors will have to keep working together so the United States and Israel are not outmaneuvered.

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