

How to Build U.S.-Israeli Coordination on Preventing an Iranian Nuclear Breakout

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Sep 25, 2012

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Brief Analysis

On September 21, 2012, Patrick Clawson and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss the findings of the soon-to-be-released study [Preventing an Iranian Nuclear Breakout: U.S.-Israel Coordination \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preventing-an-iranian-nuclear-breakout-u.s.-israel-coordination\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/preventing-an-iranian-nuclear-breakout-u.s.-israel-coordination). Dr. Clawson is director for research and head of the Iran Security Initiative at the Institute. Ambassador Ross is the Institute's counselor and former special assistant to President Obama. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. Institute fellow David Makovsky also addressed the forum; an account of his remarks will be published separately.

PATRICK CLAWSON

In March, President Obama declared that he does not have a "policy of containment," but rather "a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapon." Although this statement may seem straightforward, in actuality the United States could have difficulty enforcing such a redline.

For example, Iran could imitate Pakistan by producing all the parts necessary for a bomb but leaving final assembly incomplete, allowing the regime to avoid technically qualifying as a nuclear weapons state. As long as Tehran does

not test a weapon, any U.S. action would have to be based on a U.S. intelligence judgment about the regime's capabilities. And in light of the Iraq experience, the intelligence community would likely be very cautious about asserting high confidence in any such judgment. Washington would also have great difficulty releasing enough evidence to convince the world, since intelligence officials are likely to be protective of their sources and methods.

Even apart from building a weapon, Iran could come right up to this redline in other ways without formally crossing it. For example, it could manufacture enough weapons-grade uranium for a bomb and then delay work on the device itself, waiting for a time when the world is preoccupied by some other crisis and the United States is less willing or able to strike Iran. Compared to uranium enrichment, producing a nuclear device is a relatively quick process.

As with redlines, deadlines present potential disadvantages for the United States. For instance, Tehran could wait until the day before a given deadline and then present a seemingly attractive deal whose fine print is deeply problematic. Washington would then be forced to consider this essentially empty proposal in order to appease the international community, wasting more time and allowing Iran to continue its nuclear efforts in the meantime.

Instead of redlines or deadlines, the United States should establish benchmarks that Iran must meet in order for negotiations to continue, such as applying the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol or shipping out nearly all of the 20 percent enriched uranium it has produced. Doing so would create a sense of urgency, requiring Tehran to act rather than stall through diplomacy while clarifying the moment at which the United States would consider using overt force.

The issue of striking Iran is complicated as well. Military action comes in many forms -- the United States has already been involved in covert operations against the regime for several years, such as intrusive intelligence collection by drones, sabotaging equipment bound for Iran, and encouraging defections. And someone has been assassinating Iranian scientists and unleashing computer viruses on the nuclear program. These campaigns continue; according to the Iranian government, the August 17 power outage at the Fordow enrichment site was an act of sabotage. Such quiet interventions could have major advantages over a large-scale overt attack, especially with regard to reducing the likelihood of international censure and Iranian retaliation. This type of shadow war can also be used to push Tehran toward diplomatic compromise.

Meanwhile, international sanctions are beginning to bite into the Iranian economy, and the coming months will show how much the regime's leadership actually cares about that development. On one hand, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei could adopt a mindset more in line with North Korea (which has sustained its revolutionary values for sixty years through three leaders) than China (where the regime persists but the revolution is gone). In that depressing scenario, he is unlikely to want a nuclear compromise. On the other hand, many key figures in Iran would no doubt disagree with this view, and they could win the day.

Another complicated issue is what kind of agreement might be reached with Iran. Much attention has been focused on limiting and monitoring the output of the regime's centrifuges, but such efforts are only one means toward the end of keeping Iran from being able to quickly produce nuclear weapons. The parameters of a deal are becoming apparent: namely, Tehran would get to keep many of its enrichment capabilities on condition that the resulting material is shipped out and returned to Iran in the form of fuel rods and plates, which are very difficult to use for weapons. Yet just because the outline of a deal is apparent does not mean the deal can be done, as the long-stalled Israeli-Palestinian talks illustrate.

DENNIS ROSS

Whatever disagreements the United States and Israel may have regarding Iran, it is important to remember that they firmly agree on a strategy of prevention, not containment. Their main differences are tactical and relate to issues of timing and the definition of prevention.

Timing is a function of two concerns: capability and context. Regarding the former, Israel is worried about what Defense Minister Ehud Barak calls Iran's "zone of immunity," that is, the moment after which Israeli military force would have minimal effect on Iran's nuclear infrastructure given its scope and redundancy. No Israeli prime minister will accept the prospect of facing an existential threat (in Iran's case, expressed through both rhetoric and behavior) without a military option to deal with it.

Yet the context in which a strike takes place is also important. The United States has more military capacity than Israel to deal with the problem and therefore more room to consider the day-after scenario. After all, strikes alone would not end the Iranian nuclear threat because the regime has the know-how and engineering capability to rebuild whatever is destroyed. Although military means can be used to set Tehran back, any strike would need to be followed by severe, sustained multinational sanctions. Context matters -- should an attack become necessary, conducting it in an environment in which diplomacy has been unmistakably exhausted could ensure that Iran remains cut off from the materials and financial resources needed to rebuild the program. If nothing else, the cost for Tehran would be dramatically higher and inevitably increase the time needed to reconstitute its nuclear infrastructure.

The recent Israeli push for a U.S. declaration of redlines brings up the issue of defining prevention. Redlines can be problematic -- historically, when one is drawn, everything up to that point is presumed to be acceptable. Therefore, if Washington declares that Iran cannot acquire nuclear weapons, the risk is that the regime will eventually do everything but turn the last screw on a weapon, then move quickly and confront the world with a *fait accompli*. In this sense, prevention would lose its meaning.

"Threshold" is a better concept than "redline." At some point, Iran's capabilities -- in terms of accumulated low- and medium-enriched uranium, advanced centrifuges, and the ability to weaponize -- could render Washington unable to prevent the regime from reaching *fait accompli* status. For prevention to have meaning, force would have to be used prior to that point. The United States should try to reach private understandings with Israel on how to define that threshold. Apparently, such discussions are taking place now, and the gaps between the U.S. and Israeli approaches are being narrowed.

Even so, there is still the issue of how best to set the context should force become necessary. What is needed now is a serious diplomatic initiative. Thus far, the P5+1 (i.e., the United States, Britain, China, France, Russia, and Germany) have been guided by a "small for small" approach to the negotiations. This incremental strategy was designed to build confidence, but it appears to have little promise. Moreover, it does not explicitly test the Iranians on what they say they want: civilian nuclear power.

Instead, Tehran should be presented with a "big for big" endgame proposal that would permit it to have civil nuclear power, but with restrictions that prevent it from acquiring a breakout capacity. If the regime is prepared to embrace this option -- which is consistent with what it says it seeks -- then the nuclear challenge could be resolved peacefully. If it does not accept the offer, however, the regime would be exposed before the world and the Iranian people. Unlike the small-for-small approach, this strategy would provide a logical endpoint for diplomacy and allow Washington to demonstrate that it went the extra mile to avoid the use of force.

Another means of pushing Iran toward an agreement is for the United States to approach the P5+1 for discussion of day-after scenarios while simultaneously affirming that it is serious about diplomacy. Word of such a request would quickly leak to Iran's leaders, hopefully shaking their view that Washington is not prepared to act on its threats. Day-after discussions are a good way to underpin U.S. credibility and resolve to strike Iran if need be.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gabrielle Tudin. ❖

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