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Sent: Mon 3/5/2012 7:19:17 PM
Subject: March 4 update

4 March, 2012

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Article 1.

NYT

U.S. Backers of Israel Pressure Obama Over Policy on Iran

Mark Landler

March 3, 2012 — On the eve of a crucial visit to the White House by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, that country's most powerful American advocates are mounting an extraordinary public campaign to pressure President Obama into hardening American policy toward Iran over its nuclear program.

From the corridors of Congress to a gathering of nearly 14,000 American Jews and other supporters of Israel here this weekend, Mr. Obama is being buffeted by demands that the United States be more aggressive toward Iran and more forthright in supporting Israel in its own confrontation with Tehran.

While defenders of Israel rally every year at the meeting of the pro-Israel lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, this year's gathering has been supercharged by a convergence of election-year politics, a deepening nuclear showdown and the often-fraught relationship between the president and the Israeli prime minister.

Mr. Obama and Mr. Netanyahu will both speak to the group, known as Aipac, as will the three leading Republican presidential candidates, who will appear via satellite from the campaign trail on the morning of Super Tuesday. Republicans have seized on Iran's nuclear ambitions to accuse Mr. Obama of being weak in backing a staunch ally and in confronting a bitter foe.

The pressure from an often-hostile Congress is also mounting. A group of influential senators, fresh from a meeting with Mr. Netanyahu in Jerusalem, has called on Mr. Obama to lay down sharper criteria, known as "red lines," about when to act against Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"We're saying to the administration, 'You've got a problem; let's fix it, let's get back on message,' " said Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, who took part in the meeting with Mr. Netanyahu and said the Israeli leader vented frustration at what he viewed as mixed messages from Washington.

"It's not just about the Jewish vote and 2012," Mr. Graham added. "It's about reassuring people who want to avoid war that the United States will do what's necessary."

To give teeth to the deterrent threat against Iran, Israel and its

backers want Mr. Obama to stop urging restraint on Israel and to be more explicit about the circumstances under which the United States itself would carry out a strike.

Specifically, Israeli officials are demanding that Iran agree to halt all its enrichment of uranium in the country, and that the suspension be verified by United Nations inspectors, before the West resumes negotiations with Tehran on its nuclear program.

The White House has rejected that demand, Israeli and American officials said on Friday, arguing that Iran would never agree to a blanket ban upfront, and to insist on it would doom negotiations before they even began. The administration insists that Mr. Obama will stick to his policy, which is focused on using economic sanctions to force the Iranian government to give up its nuclear ambitions, with military action as a last resort.

Despite the position of the Israelis and Aipac, the American intelligence agencies continue to say that there is no evidence that Iran has made a final decision to pursue a nuclear weapon. Recent assessments by American spy agencies have reaffirmed intelligence findings in 2007 and 2010 that concluded that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program.

In his tone, at least, Mr. Obama is working to reassure Israel. In an interview published on Friday, Mr. Obama reiterated his pledge to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon — with force, if necessary — and ruled out a policy of accepting but seeking to contain a nuclear-armed Iran. The Israeli government, he said, recognizes that “as president of the United States, I don’t bluff.”

The White House's choice of interviewer — Jeffrey Goldberg, a national correspondent for the magazine The Atlantic — was carefully calculated. Mr. Goldberg is closely read among Jews in America; in 2010, he wrote an article exploring the situations under which Israel would attack Iran.

American Jews are anything but monolithic. More dovish groups, like J Street, are trying to make a case against a pre-emptive Israeli strike. But for the next few days, Aipac will set the tone for an intense debate over the Iranian nuclear threat.

Mr. Obama will not lay down new red lines on Iran, even if he discusses them with Mr. Netanyahu, administration officials said. And he is not ready to accept a central part of Israel's strategic calculation: that an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would be warranted to stop it from gaining the capability to build a nuclear weapon, rather than later, to stop it from actually manufacturing one.

In the interview, Mr. Obama warned Israel of the consequences of a strike and said that it would delay but not prevent Iran from acquiring a weapon. He also said he did not know how the American public would react.

Israel's supporters said they believed that a majority of Americans would support an Israeli military strike against Iran. But polling data paints a murkier picture: while close to 50 percent of Americans say in several polls that they would support Israel, a slightly larger number say they would stay neutral. In some surveys, there is strong support for continuing diplomacy.

Supporters of Israel argue that in the American news media,

Iran's nuclear program has been wrongly framed as Israel's problem, rather than as a threat to the security of the whole world.

"This is about the devastating impact on U.S. and Western security of a nuclear-armed Iran bent on bullying the region into submission," said Josh Block, a former spokesman for Aipac.

Turnout for this year's Aipac conference is expected to surpass all previous records. And the roster of speakers attests to the group's drawing power. In addition to Mr. Obama, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta will speak, as will Congressional leaders including Senator Mitch McConnell, the chamber's Republican leader, and former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader in the House.

On Tuesday, the screens in the Washington convention center will light up with the Republican presidential contenders Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum, who are likely to fault Mr. Obama as not doing enough to prevent Iran from getting a weapon.

"Aipac is the spearhead of the pro-Israel community's efforts to move the American government's red lines closer to Israel's red lines," said Martin S. Indyk, a former American envoy to Israel.

Officials at Aipac declined to comment about the conference or their strategy. But Mr. Block and other former Aipac officials said that, as in previous years, the group would blanket Capitol Hill with its members — all of whom will carry a message about the Iranian nuclear threat.

They will be pushing on an open door. Democrats and

Republicans, divided on so much, are remarkably united in supporting Israel and in ratcheting up pressure on Iran. The Senate voted 100 to 0 last year to pass legislation isolating Iran's central bank, over the objections of the White House.

There are four bills in the House and Senate that call for tougher action against Iran or closer military cooperation between Israel and the United States. Mr. Graham is one of 32 Republican and Democratic sponsors of a resolution that calls on the president to reject a policy of containing Iran.

"The Senate can't agree to cross the street," Mr. Graham said. "Iran has done more to bring us together than anything in the world."

To counter Aipac's message, J Street has circulated a video on Capitol Hill, highlighting American and Israeli military experts who have voiced doubts about the efficacy of a strike on Iran.

"We are saying there needs to be time for enhanced sanctions and diplomacy to work," said Jeremy Ben-Ami, the president of J Street. "We're trying to calm down the drumbeat of war."

Article 2.

The Washington Post

Before attacking Iran, Israel should learn from its 1981 strike on Iraq

Colin H. Kahl

March 2 -- On June 7, 1981, eight Israeli F-16 fighter jets, protected by six F-15 escorts, dropped 16 2,000-pound bombs on the nearly completed Osirak nuclear reactor at the Tuwaitha complex in Iraq. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon saw the reactor as central to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's quest to build nuclear weapons, and they believed that it posed an existential threat to Israel.

The timing of the strike was justified by intelligence reports suggesting that Osirak would soon become operational. Two days later, Begin explained the raid to the public: "We chose this moment: now, not later, because later may be too late, perhaps forever. And if we stood by idly, two, three years, at the most four years, and Saddam Hussein would have produced his three, four, five bombs . . . another Holocaust would have happened in the history of the Jewish people."

Three decades later, eerily similar arguments can be heard regarding the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. Last May, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a joint session of the U.S. Congress that "the hinge of history may soon turn, for the greatest danger of all could soon be upon us: a militant Islamic regime armed with nuclear weapons." In a Feb. 2 speech in Israel, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Barak channeled Begin in making the case for possible military action against Iran, arguing that "those who say 'later' may find that later is too late." And late last month, Barak sought to discredit Israeli President Shimon Peres's reported opposition to a possible strike on Iran by pointing to his dissent during the 1981 attack.

When Netanyahu meets with President Obama on Monday and addresses the annual meeting of AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, later that day, we should expect additional dire assessments and warnings of military action.

For Israelis considering a strike on Iran, Osirak seems like a model for effective preventive war. After all, Hussein never got the bomb, and if Israel was able to brush back one enemy hell-bent on its destruction, it can do so again. But a closer look at the Osirak episode, drawing on recent academic research and memoirs of individuals involved with Iraq's program, argues powerfully against an Israeli strike on Iran today.

To begin with, Hussein was not on the brink of a bomb in 1981. By the late 1970s, he thought Iraq should develop nuclear weapons at some point, and he hoped to use the Osirak reactor to further that goal. But new evidence suggests that Hussein had not decided to launch a full-fledged weapons program prior to the Israeli strike. According to Norwegian scholar Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, a leading authority on the Iraqi program, “on the

eve of the attack on Osirak . . . Iraq's pursuit of a nuclear

weapons capability was both directionless and disorganized.”

Moreover, as Emory University political scientist Dan Reiter details in a 2005 study, the Osirak reactor was not well designed to efficiently produce weapons-grade plutonium. If Hussein had decided to use Osirak to develop nuclear weapons and Iraqi scientists somehow evaded detection, it would still have taken

several years — perhaps well into the 1990s — to produce enough plutonium for a single bomb. And even with sufficient fissile material, Iraq would have had to design and construct the weapon itself, a process that hadn't started before Israel attacked.

The risks of a near-term Iraqi breakthrough were further undercut by the presence of French technicians at Osirak, as well as regular inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. As a result, any significant diversion of highly enriched uranium fuel or attempts to produce fissionable plutonium would probably have been detected.

By demonstrating Iraq's vulnerability, the attack on Osirak actually increased Hussein's determination to develop a nuclear deterrent and provided Iraq's scientists an opportunity to better organize the program. The Iraqi leader devoted significantly more resources toward pursuing nuclear weapons after the Israeli assault. As Reiter notes, "the Iraqi nuclear program increased from a program of 400 scientists and \$400 million to one of 7,000 scientists and \$10 billion."

Iraq's nuclear efforts also went underground. Hussein allowed the IAEA to verify Osirak's destruction, but then he shifted from a plutonium strategy to a more dispersed and ambitious uranium-enrichment strategy. This approach relied on undeclared sites, away from the prying eyes of inspectors, and aimed to develop local technology and expertise to reduce the reliance on foreign suppliers of sensitive technologies. When inspectors finally gained access after the 1991 Persian Gulf War, they were shocked by the extent of Iraq's nuclear infrastructure and how close Hussein had gotten to a bomb.

Ultimately, Israel's 1981 raid didn't end Iraq's drive to develop nuclear weapons. It took the destruction of the Gulf War, followed by more than a decade of sanctions, containment, inspections, no-fly zones and periodic bombing — not to mention the 2003 U.S. invasion — to eliminate the program. The international community got lucky: Had Hussein not been dumb enough to invade Kuwait in 1990, he probably would have gotten the bomb sometime by the mid-1990s.

Iran's nuclear program is more advanced than Hussein's was in 1981. But the Islamic republic is still not on the cusp of entering the nuclear club. As the IAEA has documented, Iran is putting all the pieces in place to have the option to develop nuclear weapons at some point. Were Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to decide tomorrow to go for a bomb, Iran probably has the technical capability to produce a testable nuclear device in about a year and a missile-capable device in several years. But as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the Senate Arms Services Committee on Feb. 16, it does not appear that Khamenei has made this decision.

Moreover, Khamenei is unlikely to dash for a bomb in the near future because IAEA inspectors would probably detect Iranian efforts to divert low-enriched uranium and enrich it to weapons-grade level at declared facilities. Such brazen acts would trigger a draconian international response. Until Iran can pursue such efforts more quickly or in secret — which could be years from now — Khamenei is unlikely to act.

Also, an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure would be more risky and less effective than the Osirak raid. In 1981, a relatively small number of Israeli aircraft flew 600 miles across

Jordanian, Saudi and Iraqi airspace to hit a single, vulnerable, above-ground target. This was no easy feat, but it is nothing compared with the complexity of a strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

Such an attack would probably require dozens of aircraft to travel at least 1,000 miles over Arab airspace to reach their targets, stretching the limits of Israeli refueling capabilities. Israeli jets would then have to circumvent Iranian air defenses and drop hundreds of precision-guided munitions on the hardened Natanz enrichment facility, the Fordow enrichment site deep in a mountain near Qom, the Isfahan uranium-conversion facility, the heavy-water production plant and plutonium reactor under construction at Arak, and multiple centrifuge production facilities in and around populated areas of Tehran and Natanz.

These same aircraft would not be able to reengage any missed targets — they would need to race back to defend Israel against retaliation by Iran and its proxies, including Lebanese Hezbollah and possibly Hamas.

Unlike an attack by the U.S. military, which has much more powerful munitions and the ability to sustain a large-scale bombing campaign, an Israeli assault would probably be a one-off strike with more limited effects.

No wonder that Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently told CNN that an Israeli attack would set the program back only “a couple of years” and “wouldn't achieve their long-term objectives.” (Because a U.S. strike would potentially be more effective, the administration

has kept that option on the table even as it has cautioned against an Israeli attack.)

Should Israel rush to war, Iran might follow Hussein's example and rebuild its nuclear program in a way that is harder to detect and more costly to stop. And while there seems to be consensus among Iranians that the country has a right to a robust civilian nuclear program, there is no domestic agreement yet on the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Even the supreme leader has hedged his bets, insisting that Iran has the right to pursue technological advances with possible military applications, while repeatedly declaring that possession or use of nuclear weapons would be a "grave sin" against Islam.

After an Israeli strike, that internal debate would be settled — hard-line arguments would win the day.

Short of invasion and regime change — outcomes beyond Israel's capabilities — it would be nearly impossible to prevent Iran from rebuilding its program. Iran's nuclear infrastructure is much more advanced, dispersed and protected, and is less reliant on foreign supplies of key technology, than was the case with Iraq's program in 1981.

Although Barak often warns that Israel must strike before Iran's facilities are so protected that they enter a "zone of immunity" from Israeli military action, Iran would be likely to reconstitute its program in the very sites — and probably new clandestine ones — that are invulnerable to Israeli attack. An Israeli strike would also end any prospect of Iran cooperating with the IAEA, seriously undermining the international community's ability to detect rebuilding efforts.

Barely a week after the Osirak raid, Begin told CBS News that the attack “will be a precedent for every future government in Israel.” Yet, if history repeats itself, an Israeli attack would result in a wounded adversary more determined than ever to get a nuclear bomb. And then the world would face the same terrible choices it ultimately faced with Iraq: decades of containment to stall nuclear rebuilding efforts, invasion and occupation — or acquiescence to an implacable nuclear-armed foe.

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Article 3.

The Christian Science Monitor

War talk on Iran forces the issue: Is Israel a formal US ally?

Editorial Board

March 2, 2012 -- President Obama listens to a lecture from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel at the White House during their meeting last May.

According to polls, Americans remain wary of supporting the

idea of either Israel or the United States – or both together – attacking Iran's nuclear facilities.

Perhaps one reason for this hesitancy is the fact that Israel, in a historic choice to rely on itself for defense, has never become an official US ally.

America has no treaty obligation to come to Israel's defense as it does with many countries in Europe and Asia. This little-known fact may loom large in a meeting Monday between President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The two men have long differed on how to deal with Iran, especially as a preemptive attack raises more difficult questions than for a traditional war raises. A lack of a formal Israeli-US defense alliance makes it difficult to reconcile their current differences, despite the long friendship and close military cooperation between the two countries.

The Israeli leader, who enjoys wide popularity in the US, has been pressing Mr. Obama to openly threaten Iran with a military strike. And he wants the US to accept Israel's lower threshold for launching an attack, which would be at the point of Iran simply developing a capability to make an atomic bomb. The pro-Israel lobby in Congress, too, is pushing a bill that would endorse this Israeli view.

In sharp contrast, Obama appears to prefer a different "red line" for an attack on Iran – at the point when Iran actually assembles a bomb. And he prefers to let tighter sanctions and diplomacy play out longer.

His position reflects not only a view that the US is not as

vulnerable to Iranian missiles as Israel but also the president's overall strategy to have the US intervene less often militarily in global affairs while it restores its economy.

And Obama prefers regional problems to be solved primarily by a region's players, with the US only in a supporting role. (His personal relations with Mr. Netanyahu are also difficult because the president has not been able to persuade Israel to help create a Palestinian state by compromising on the building of Jewish settlements.)

Netanyahu complicates this dispute over Iran by sending contradictory signals on Israel's basic military doctrine.

Last month, he reiterated a longstanding Israeli stance by saying, "When it comes to our fate, we must rely only on ourselves." To many Jews, this view reflects the lesson of the Holocaust – that they cannot rely on others to save them. Yet Israel also knows it may not have the military means to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities unless the US is involved. And it could also lack the defensive capability to withstand an Iranian counterattack.

In 1981, Israel was able to destroy Iraq's nuclear capability in an aerial attack, and in 2007, it destroyed a Syrian nuclear facility – both without US help. But it has also long relied on billions of dollars in US military aid as well as American military technology, such as missile defenses. The two militaries often hold joint exercises, and Israel is a "partner" in a NATO outreach program called Mediterranean Dialogue.

US and Israeli officials often refer to each other's country as an "ally." But the US also uses that term for many countries with whom it has no formal defense treaty. Ever since the 1930s, for

example, the US has implicitly been an ally of Saudi Arabia's monarchy in return for access to Saudi oil.

The lack of a defense treaty with Israel also makes it difficult for US relations with Turkey, which is an official NATO ally. Turkey, for example, is hosting a new NATO missile-defense shield designed to thwart Iranian missiles. But the Islamic government in Ankara also insists that the shield not be used to help Israel. NATO appears to be honoring the request.

Finding a peaceful way to neutralize Iran's nuclear threat requires that Israel and the US first bring greater clarity to their own relationship.

Is the US willing to shed its longtime attempt to be a mediator in Middle East problems by formally supporting Israel in a military attack? And is Israel ready to abandon its post-Holocaust desire for military self-reliance by becoming an official US ally?

Obama and Netanyahu will need to answer these questions, not only for each other, but for their own people.

Article 4.

Foreign Policy

America's Israel Obsession

Shmuel Rosner

March 2, 2012 -- In mid-December of last year, Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, "with all due respect," declined a request to write an op-ed for the New York Times. In his rejection letter, Netanyahu's senior advisor, Ron Dermer, claimed to have counted up Times (and International Herald Tribune) articles and concluded that of the 20 articles related to Israel published between September and November 2011, 19 portrayed Israel in a negative light. It would seem, he wrote, "as if the surest way to get an op-ed published in the New York Times these days, no matter how obscure the writer or the viewpoint, is to attack Israel."

If one puts aside for a moment the question of pro- or anti-Israel bias, it does seem that the surest way to get an op-ed published anywhere in the United States is to write something about Israel. Since I received a request to write this article for Foreign Policy, I've visited the FP site daily and counted the articles on different topics and countries. You can try it yourself using the search engine: Israel was written about more than Britain, Germany, Greece, India, or Russia. And next week it will be written about even more, as Netanyahu comes to Washington to make yet another speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and meet with U.S. President Barack Obama to discuss Iran strategy and other matters.

Counting mentions of Israel in various American forums is an old habit of mine. Four years ago, in the run-up to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, I begged the candidates to "resist the temptation" to constantly talk about Israel or express their profound love for the Jewish state. I wrote then:

Last week in the vice-presidential debate, Israel's name was mentioned 17 times. China was mentioned twice, Europe just

once. Russia didn't come up at all. Nor Britain, France, or Germany.

Needless to say, my advice has not been heeded. In December 2011, I listened to the Republican presidential candidates compete to prove their friendship with Israel at a meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition. (Mitt Romney promised to visit Israel before visiting any other country; Newt Gingrich said that he would move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on the first day of his presidency.) In early January, like many other journalists from many other foreign countries, I traveled to Iowa to cover the Republican caucuses and had to wonder again about writers from other countries:

Do they not feel neglected amid all this talk about my country? In the more than one dozen campaign events I attended, I didn't hear one word about Japan or Russia or Germany or France or Italy. Europe was mentioned occasionally, as in, "President Obama wants the United States to become like Europe, and we have to stop him." China was mentioned sporadically; Brazil, maybe once. Israel? Every time.

There's more than one reason that Israel became a topic of such constant conversation among American writers, opinion-makers, politicians, and policy wonks. Undeniably, Israel is interesting. It is conveniently located in an area that is continuously a producer of dramatic news, a place to which journalists can easily travel and from which they can easily write -- the one country in the Middle East that doesn't violently prevent the media from doing its job. Then there's the "special relationship" factor: Israel is a U.S. ally, and a strong and vocal lobby of both Jews and Christians is working to preserve the two countries'

ties. It is a place for which many Americans have special affinity for religious reasons, meaning that any story on Israel is likely to generate both pageviews and impassioned comments. There's also the politics: Israel is a tool with which candidates for office hammer one another. That's to say nothing of the fact that American Jews, while a tiny minority of the U.S. population, are well represented among journalists.

This makes Israel not just a topic of constant conversation, but can also make the conversation itself quite bizarre to the untrained eye. News sites, blogs, and busy writers can dedicate their time to arguing about the content of some tweets of the new New York Times Jerusalem correspondent; weeks of enraged debate can be wasted on foolish comments made by left-leaning think-tank bloggers. Don't get me wrong: In both cases I'm with those thinking the tweets and the comments were outrageous. But I also must admit that this level of scrutiny and never-ending discussion is rarely given to other countries and that most readers without a high level of interest in Israel-related matters would probably quickly get bored and lost in the petty details of these debates and others.

Israel is to American writers what football is to the general public: Everybody seems to be an expert, or at least believe he or she is one. It's not just the number of mentions and articles written about my country that is perplexing; it's also the number of uninformed comments and unworthy observations. One notable case -- the one that seemed to have irked the prime minister -- was a New York Times op-ed claiming that Israel is only interested in promoting gay rights as a way of "pinkwashing" away its sins against the Palestinians. Another example, by columnist Eric Alterman writing in the Forward,

made the ludicrous claim that Israel is becoming a "theocracy."

There's of course the old journalistic saw that "if it bleeds it leads," and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has spilled more than enough blood. But far bloodier conflicts around the world get only a fraction of the coverage that the smallest developments in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process garner. More consequential issues can't possibly compete with the hype and the controversy following every trivial "progress" or "setback" in this ongoing, never-ending story. Take a quick look at the list of the bloodiest world conflicts, and compare the coverage they are getting with the coverage that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict receives in almost every American publication. How much have you read in the New York Times about violence in Honduras recently? How much did you hear about Syria's autocratic regime before the latest eruption of murderous infighting? Have you gotten the proper coverage and analysis of the recent growing tensions in the South Caucasus?

This raises the question of whether all the attention showered on Israel and the Palestinians has brought them one inch closer to resolution of the conflict. Or did it make a complicated situation even worse, by giving the sides more reasons to invest much of their energy on spin and public manipulation, instead of solving the real problems?

Naturally, Israeli leaders would prefer less attention be paid to the conflict with the Palestinians and more to feel-good "start-up nation" kinds of stories. Then there are other issues on which attention is both a blessing and a curse at the same time -- notably Iran.

Israel's policy on Iran is built around pushing the world toward action (be it sanctions or attack), and it depends upon the attention the story is getting from the media. Click-bait headlines like "Will Israel Attack Iran?" ensure that the issue stays front and center in the minds of U.S. policymakers.

On the other hand, the more attention the "Israeli" angle of this story gets, the more it appears that Iran's nuclear program is really just a local concern and not the global threat that the Israeli leadership wants to portray it as. The more Iran's nuclear program is perceived as an "Israeli" issue, the greater the risk that Israel will be blamed for the negative consequences of the tension, such as higher oil prices. There's also the very real danger that, should it come to war, Americans will view the destruction of Iran's nuclear capability as something Israel should handle on its own, rather than supporting an international coalition that would have a much better chance of neutralizing the threat.

The overrepresentation of Israel in the American public square is at times a headache and at times a cause for celebration. Some might argue that the high level of U.S. support for Israel couldn't survive without it. In any event, keeping a low profile -- often a necessity for effective diplomacy -- is impossible for Israel. And it will be all the more so next week when both Obama and Netanyahu speak before 10,000 cheering AIPAC delegates -- a crowd that never tires of discussing Israel and its troubles.

Shmuel Rosner, a Tel Aviv-based columnist, is political editor of the Jewish Journal.

The Economist

Putin's Russia

Mar 3rd 2012 -- HE GAVE it all he had. He quoted from Martin Luther King—"I have a dream" —before moving on to Lermontov's poem Borodino—"By Moscow then we die/As have our brethren died before!"—and then seamlessly into Vyacheslav Molotov—"The fight continues. The victory will be ours." He worked the crowd hard: his voice roared, his face twitched. 100,000 people brought in from all over Russia cheered.

Public campaigning does not come naturally to Vladimir Putin, former KGB man, former Russian president and current Russian prime minister; preferring to wield power behind closed doors, a staged photo opportunity is more his mark. When, last September, he announced in the same Moscow arena that he would swap jobs with Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, and return to the Kremlin after the March 4th election, he was distinctly low key.

Since the outcome was predetermined, there was at first not

much by way of a campaign. But after a wave of protests against his job swap, and the subsequent rigging of December's parliamentary elections, Mr Putin has been forced into a much more combative mode; Russia is under threat, he says, calling on his supporters to mobilise for a final battle against enemies foreign and domestic.

The threat to Russia is imaginary; the threat to Mr Putin and his system is real. It can be seen in the way he has become the subject of jokes. Stunts such as diving for (planted) ancient amphoras have been met with ridicule. State television's decision to report a foiled assassination plot against him in the week of the election provoked cynical laughter. The colourful, almost festive protest marches against him have attracted celebrities (openly) and the wives of government officials (secretly).

A few days after Mr Putin's rally, "the enemy" encircled the Kremlin. On a snowy Sunday afternoon some 20,000 Muscovites held hands along the 16-kilometre ring road, sporting the white ribbons that have become the symbol of protest. Motorists honked support. Their good-natured resolve was an eloquent rejection of Mr Putin's power. As Vyacheslav Pozgalev, a new member of parliament, puts it: "We are going through a velvet revolution in people's minds."

Bid time return

The protests will do nothing to change the result of the presidential election. Mr Putin's poll ratings of over 40%, possibly abetted by a bit of rigging, will ensure a first-round victory. But it will be a far cry from the triumph of his first

ascension to the presidency in 2000. Back then he was a symbol of hope and change, one that a country recovering from the tumult, insecurity and hardship of the 1990s happily turned to. “We are building a new Russia. It’s going to have better roads and fewer fools,” a cheerful 25-year-old called Lyudmila Guseva told your correspondent at the time.

She and the company she works for—Severstal, a steel producer in Cherepovets, in the north-west of Russia—have indeed done well under Mr Putin. The factory has installed new machinery and a new Western-style management system. “I have a ten-year old son, a good salary, a car and a house in the country. I am happy with what I have achieved. Why should I not vote for him?” asks Ms Guseva now.

She gives two reasons for supporting Mr Putin—one assiduously promulgated by the Kremlin, one engineered by it. The first is a fear of losing what has been achieved; the second the lack of a convincing alternative candidate.

State propaganda has demonised the 1990s—the period which laid a foundation for growth and for Mr Putin’s own career—as the darkest period in Russian history. In his endorsement of Mr Putin the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church likened the 1990s to the Napoleonic invasion (shades of Borodino again), Hitler’s aggression and civil war. Mr Putin’s campaign is based almost entirely on the idea that his departure would throw the country back into such chaos.

And the Kremlin debars any plausible opponents. Three of the men running against Mr Putin—Gennady Zyuganov of the

Communist Party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the clown nationalist, and Sergei Mironov, the leader of Just Russia, a party initially created by the Kremlin as fake competition for Mr Putin's United Russia—have for years been in the business of losing elections. The only fresh face is that of Mikhail Prokhorov, a liberal business tycoon. He actually has his own agenda, but was allowed to run despite this handicap because his support is seen as very narrow.

You can't go home again

Fear and a lack of choice may carry the election for Mr Putin, but they cannot disguise the growing discontent across different classes, ages and regions. For those who have done less well than Ms Guseva over the past 12 years but still remember Soviet times, the 1990s are becoming less relevant. Polls show that the fastest decline in Mr Putin's support is among poorer people over 55 years of age; they feel Mr Putin has not honoured his promises, and are tired of waiting. The conspicuous display of riches by corrupt bureaucrats heightens their sense of injustice. The number of people who no longer trust Mr Putin has risen to 40%, and people tell pollsters that the country is stagnating. "The regime is losing its legitimacy in the eyes of the population," says Lev Gudkov of the Levada Centre, a social-research outfit. Mr Putin's victory will only make things worse.

Mr Pozgalev, a former governor of Vologda, an ethnic Russian region that includes Cherepovets, identified the mood swing while campaigning for United Russia in last year's elections. "I was meeting voters and I suddenly realised that it did not matter what I was saying—they were simply not listening. They did not object to what I said: they ignored it." In the Vologda

region—where, unlike in Moscow, the vote was rigged only a little—United Russia got about 30%.

Although Mr Putin has distanced himself from United Russia, his promises and speeches are now met with the same indifference. The problem is not what Mr Putin says, but that he is the person saying it. People are tired of him. More fundamentally, they are fed up with the personalised system that he presides over. It looks not just corrupt but increasingly anachronistic. Ever more Russians want legitimate institutions. They want to know power can change hands. And because this is exactly what Mr Putin cannot offer, the conflict between him and them is irreconcilable.

Mikhail Dmitriev of the Centre for Strategic Research (CSR), who predicted today's stand-off, argues that it has come about because the middle class has emerged as a political force. Having first become consumers, they are now becoming citizens.

When Mr Putin first came to power, Russia's electorate was relatively homogenous in its incomes and requirements. As defined by CSR, the middle class made up some 15% of the population. Having begun to develop in the 1970s and 1980s, it had been knocked back first by the collapse of the Soviet economy, then by the 1998 financial crisis. Mr Putin's promise to build a strong, paternalistic state appealed to its members as much as to everyone else. They voted for him and hardly protested when he destroyed the few symbols of their liberal aspirations—such as NTV, a private television channel—or squeezed small political parties out of parliament.

High oil prices allowed the Kremlin to court the traditionalist, paternalistic part of Russia while keeping taxes low, to the benefit of the middle class. By the end of the 2000s Russia's middle class had become richer and bigger, making up some 25% of the population and nearly 40% of the workforce—and those proportions were higher in big cities. As they shopped in IKEA, ate out in restaurants and holidayed in Europe (see chart) their habits and expectations began to change; but even as their size grew, their access to representation did not.

Accustomed to choice and respect as consumers, they have found their contacts with the state ever more irksome. Getting a driving licence or registering a car involves bribes and humiliation. Driving involves more bribes and the fresh humiliation of bureaucrats in black cars with blue flashing lights pushing everyone off the road. Corrupt officials deem properties “derelict” while secretly allocating them to friendly developers. The demands for an independent judiciary, the protection of property rights and an efficient bureaucracy spring not from political theory but from painful experience.

Although these problems are longstanding, double-digit income growth soothed the sting for quite a while. And after the economic crisis of 2009 removed that anaesthetic, the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev provided something of a placebo. With his tweets and iPad, he appealed to the most modern part of the middle class, promising liberalisation and institutional change, whereas Mr Putin continued to appeal to the traditionalists. What some Western observers mistook for true conflict between them was for the most part a carefully contrived balancing act.

By the summer of 2011, the emptiness of Mr Medvedev's promises had become apparent. When Mr Putin announced the latest job swap a quarter of the Russian population felt insulted, according to the Levada Centre. Many began to realise quite how old they would be in 2024, when the last term for which Mr Putin might run would finally draw to a close.

In the December elections the disgruntled followed the advice of Alexei Navalny, an influential blogger and anti-corruption crusader, and voted for any party other than "the party of crooks and thieves", as he labelled United Russia. When the Kremlin rigged the Moscow results people came out onto the street not in defence of the parties they had voted for, but in defence of the votes themselves. They were demanding respect. When Mr Putin ignored their demand for "fair elections" their slogan became "Russia without Putin".

Watch it for the rubble

A poll by the Levada Centre found a wide range of ages, incomes and political preferences among the protesters; they are not just the young, well-off middle class. What they have in common is their level of education: 70% were graduates.

Andrei Zorin, a cultural historian at Oxford, sees a pattern repeating itself, one that played a role in both the rise of communism and its fall. First the state helps to create and sustain an educated class with European values. Then that class gets emancipated and starts to destabilise the system which created it. Eventually the system collapses—with the educated class largely buried in the rubble.

That is what happened to the Soviet intelligentsia, nurtured in

state research institutes. Today's equivalent (often the children of yesterday's intelligentsia) has also grown up in the folds of an authoritarian state, but this time in fancy bars, art galleries and a glossy media milieu. For much of the 2000s this creative class eschewed politics for the make-believe world of fashion and entertainment magazines such as Afisha ("The Playbill"). But now politics have come into fashion.

These young creatives have only vague ideas about the tastes and preferences of much of the rest of the Russian population. But they have acted as a catalyst for broader-based discontent. Although metropolitan protest, with its carnival of witty slogans and hipsters, may seem foreign, and its individualistic values suspect, the root of the grievance is felt across Russia: the injustice and dishonesty of the system and the widening gap between the interests of the rulers and the ruled.

Thus in Vologda the new governor, Oleg Kuvshinnikov, who comes from Cherepovets, is trying frantically to demonstrate a change of style. He charges around the region meeting people, delegating responsibilities and resources to the municipal level and making symbolic gestures—such as opening a lavish mansion used for state visits to newly weds. All this is designed to create an impression of openness and change. But the only way to avoid a full-blown political crisis, says Mr Kuvshinnikov, is through a thoroughgoing devolution of power.

On March 5th, the day after the election, another protest is planned. There are signs of radicalisation among the protesters, and a greater appetite for repression in the Kremlin. Mr Putin has pre-emptively blamed the protesters for any trouble, saying they are spoiling for a fight. Violence would allow him to call a

moratorium on further protests and crack down on the movement's leaders.

Dealing with the discontent of the broader part of the country will be a lot harder. Although Mr Putin can squeeze the media, he cannot ban the internet, which has a national penetration rate of almost 50%, and nearly 70% in Moscow. "It has become an essential part of people's pastimes. Taking it away would be like confiscating a television set," Mr Dmitriev says. Nor can he spend his way out of trouble. Financing Mr Putin's generous pre-election spending promises will be hard. The country already needs an oil price of \$130 a barrel to keep its budget in balance. A growth rate of only 3.5% and a continuing flight of capital won't help.

Unable either to reform or preserve his system, Mr Putin will probably try to do both. He may attempt some economic liberalisation, bring back elections for regional governors and allow political parties to register. But the reforms are likely to be half-hearted and repression ineffective.

Some power to some of the people

The protest movement's next steps are little clearer. If the past two months have generated a sense of euphoria, they have also revealed the movement's limitations. The protesters mistrust all political parties and organisations, says Mr Dmitriev, making it hard for them to channel their protest into formal politics. They are happy to organise themselves into civil-society groups, observe elections for fairness and participate in politics on a municipal level, even possibly a regional one. They are not prepared to delegate their power to representatives—at least not

yet. Kirill Rogov, a columnist who is one of the protesters' ideological voices, says this may be one of the movement's strengths: the need for institutions such as honest elections is greater than the demand for political parties.

Mr Rogov thinks that if Mr Putin were to call an early parliamentary election (which he may feel he has to) it would further polarise the elite and bring out new figures and parties. Unless the liberal-minded middle class can consolidate—something that it has been unable to do for the past decade—the likely winner would be some left-leaning populist, a Russian Hugo Chávez with a penchant for nationalism. A plausible candidate for the role might be Dmitry Rogozin, a recently appointed deputy prime minister. Unlike the urban middle class, his electorate would be more than happy to hand him what power it has; and he could count on support from the communists, nationalists and the military-industrial complex.

Alexei Kudrin, a former finance minister who has sided with the call for early elections, says a lurch to the left could be a necessary evil on the path to democracy. He himself wants the votes of the liberal middle class, and might make common cause with Mr Prokhorov, who has already launched a party. Mr Rogov argues that the agenda will be set by citizens, both in Moscow and in the regions. In an honest election many might prefer someone like Mr Navalny to any former Kremlin official. Although best known for his anti-corruption campaigning and his nationalism, Mr Navalny's central idea is the devolution of power to the regions and municipalities. This is almost certain to be a growing trend in Russian politics, since it appeals both to Moscow and the provinces.

Whether or not decentralisation is the way of the future, there remain risks aplenty in the present. Beyond the volatile politics there is a still fragile economy. A flare up of violence in the north Caucasus could lead to a surge of nationalism and rioting in the cities. Mr Putin can no more maintain an even status quo than he can turn back the clock to 2000. However many of Sunday's votes for Mr Putin may be cast out of fear of change, change is the one thing that is now inevitable.