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Israel Policy Forum

On Iran: How to Repair the Widening American-Israeli Rift

Ephraim Sneh

The Islamist takeover in the Middle East and North Africa has created perilous strategic turbulence in the region. Consequently, it is now critically important that the United States and its few allies cooperate closely. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in recent weeks for US-Israel relations regarding Iran's nuclear program. The disagreement about attacking Iran's nuclear facilities has turned into ugly bickering, much of it disguised. This is harmful for both Israel and the United States.

To heal this rift – which is necessary to effectively address the Iranian threat – we must understand the following basic facts:

1. The Israeli fear of a nuclear Iran is genuine. It is not a political trick of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or Defense Minister Ehud Barak. A nuclear Iran would bolster and encourage extremist militant forces across the region. The moderates would be discouraged, intimidated and invariably weakened to the point where they would be unable to negotiate with Israel. In just a few years, Israel will be surrounded by three 'Pakistan-like' countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. All three would possess nuclear weapons and be dominated politically by Islamists. In such a scenario, Israel would lose its strategic advantage in the region. It would lose its lead as a country of entrepreneurship and excellence, as foreign investment would decline and talented young Israelis would build their future abroad. No responsible Israeli leader will allow such a nightmare to become a reality. The hateful declarations of Iran's leaders, committed to wiping the Jewish state off the map, do not assuage Israelis' fears.

2. **Economic sanctions cannot convince the regime in Teheran** to abandon its nuclear project. However, sanctions *can* bring about the collapse of the regime if they are vigorously implemented and enforced.
 3. **An American military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities would be more effective than an Israeli one.** But disparaging Israel's capabilities and its military ingenuity, undermining its deterrence effect, is a grave mistake.
 4. **Israel's operational window is closing.** If Israel has to cope alone with the Iranian threat, its window of operational opportunity is narrower than the American one. It has to act sooner.
 5. **An Israeli military strike in the next two months, contravening repeated demands by the U.S. President to postpone it, would be counterproductive.** The damage of defying the President would be greater than the damage sustained by allowing the Iranian regime an additional few months of advancing toward acquiring the bomb. Such a strike may broaden the gap between the U.S. and Israel and weaken the alliance, which all previous Israeli Prime-Ministers have safeguarded as a strategic asset of Israel.
 6. **The United States has failed to prevent countries like Pakistan or North Korea from obtaining nuclear weapons.** This record feeds Israeli skepticism about a U.S. success in the case of Iran. This skepticism prevails despite the clear rhetoric and unquestionable commitments of the President and the Secretaries of State and Defense to prevent a nuclear Iran.
 7. **The fact that the Israeli Prime Minister and the Republican presidential candidate share the same political benefactor feeds suspicions** in the Obama administration about Netanyahu's motives for attacking Iran a few weeks before the U.S. presidential elections.
 8. **The regional perspective cannot continue ignoring the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict.** This issue can no longer be swept under the rug. Maintaining the status quo is politically comfortable in the short-run, but it will be combustible and devastating in the long run. Achieving the two-state solution will preserve Israel as a Jewish, democratic state. It will end Israel's regional isolation. It will rebuild America's standing and influence in the Arab and Muslim world. Furthermore, these last two outcomes will strengthen America's and Israel's hands in thwarting Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions.
- These eight basic facts combine to produce a complex reality. When fully understood, they can pave the way to restoring U.S.-Israeli harmony. There is no symmetry between the United States, the super-power, and its tiny ally, Israel. But the "package" required from each side in order to mend fences has to include the following mutual commitments:
1. Israel will not attack Iran in 2012.
 2. The United States will hold a joint intelligence estimate session with Israel in the early spring of 2013. If the conclusion of this joint estimate is that there is no substantial slow-down of the Iranian nuclear project, the U.S. will take military action to destroy this project.
 3. The United States will oppose any attempt to intervene in Israel's strategic capacities and will prevent any monitoring of Israel's own strategic installations. At the same time, the United States will uncompromisingly support Israel's right to preserve and develop its indigenous military capacities.
 4. Israel will accept an American invitation to attend a peace conference that will be convened in the U.S. no later than mid-2013. This gathering will address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, aiming to resolve it once and for all with an agreed-upon timetable for implementation.

These four commitments would serve the interests of both the United States and Israel. They would enable the U.S. to resume its leadership role of peacemaking in the Middle East. And they would provide a basis for binding the U.S. and Israel together as they face these challenging times.

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