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Subject: March 3 update
Date: Mon, 03 Mar 2014 16:19:47 +0000

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Bloomberg

Obama to Israel -- Time Is Running Out

[Jeffrey Goldberg](#)

Mar 2, 2014 -- When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits the White House tomorrow, President Barack Obama will tell him that his country could face a bleak future -- one of international isolation and demographic disaster -- if he refuses to endorse a U.S.-drafted framework agreement for peace with the Palestinians. Obama will warn Netanyahu

that time is running out for Israel as a Jewish-majority democracy. And the president will make the case that Netanyahu, alone among Israelis, has the strength and political credibility to lead his people away from the precipice. In an hourlong interview Thursday in the Oval Office, Obama, borrowing from the Jewish sage Rabbi Hillel, told me that his message to Netanyahu will be this: "If not now, when? And if not you, Mr. Prime Minister, then who?" He then took a sharper tone, saying that if Netanyahu "does not believe that a peace deal with the Palestinians is the right thing to do for Israel, then he needs to articulate an alternative approach." He added, "It's hard to come up with one that's plausible." Unlike Netanyahu, Obama will not address the annual convention of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobbying group, this week -- the administration is upset with Aipac for, in its view, trying to subvert American-led nuclear negotiations with Iran. In our interview, the president, while broadly supportive of Israel and a close U.S.-Israel relationship, made statements that would be met at an Aipac convention with cold silence. Obama was blunter about Israel's future than I've ever heard him. His language was striking, but of a piece with observations made in recent months by his secretary of state, John Kerry, who until this interview, had taken the lead in pressuring both Netanyahu and the Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, to agree to a framework deal. Obama made it clear that he views Abbas as the most politically moderate leader the Palestinians may ever have. It seemed obvious to me that the president believes that the next move is Netanyahu's. "There comes a point where you can't manage this anymore, and then you start having to make very difficult choices," Obama said. "Do you resign yourself to what amounts to a permanent occupation of the West Bank? Is that the character of Israel as a state for a long period of time? Do you perpetuate, over the course of a decade or two decades, more and more restrictive policies in terms of Palestinian movement? Do you place restrictions on Arab-Israelis in ways that run counter to Israel's traditions?" During the interview, which took place a day before the Russian military incursion into Ukraine, Obama argued that American adversaries, such as Iran, Syria and Russia itself, still believe that he is capable of using force to advance American interests, despite his reluctance to strike Syria last year after President Bashar al-Assad crossed Obama's chemical-weapons red line. "We've now seen 15 to

20 percent of those chemical weapons on their way out of Syria with a very concrete schedule to get rid of the rest,” Obama told me. “That would not have happened had the Iranians said, ‘Obama’s bluffing, he’s not actually really willing to take a strike.’ If the Russians had said, ‘Ehh, don’t worry about it, all those submarines that are floating around your coastline, that’s all just for show.’ Of course they took it seriously! That’s why they engaged in the policy they did.” I returned to this particularly sensitive subject. “Just to be clear,” I asked, “You don’t believe the Iranian leadership now thinks that your ‘all options are on the table’ threat as it relates to their nuclear program -- you don’t think that they have stopped taking that seriously?” Obama answered: “I know they take it seriously.” How do you know? I asked. “We have a high degree of confidence that when they look at 35,000 U.S. military personnel in the region that are engaged in constant training exercises under the direction of a president who already has shown himself willing to take military action in the past, that they should take my statements seriously,” he replied. “And the American people should as well, and the Israelis should as well, and the Saudis should as well.” I asked the president if, in retrospect, he should have provided more help to Syria’s rebels earlier in their struggle. “I think those who believe that two years ago, or three years ago, there was some swift resolution to this thing had we acted more forcefully, fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the conflict in Syria and the conditions on the ground there,” Obama said. “When you have a professional army that is well-armed and sponsored by two large states who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict -- the notion that we could have, in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces, changed the equation on the ground there was never true.” He portrayed his reluctance to involve the U.S. in the Syrian civil war as a direct consequence of what he sees as America’s overly militarized engagement in the Muslim world: “There was the possibility that we would have made the situation worse rather than better on the ground, precisely because of U.S. involvement, which would have meant that we would have had the third, or, if you count Libya, the fourth war in a Muslim country in the span of a decade.” Obama was adamant that he was correct to fight a congressional effort to impose more time-delayed

sanctions on Iran just as nuclear negotiations were commencing: “There’s never been a negotiation in which at some point there isn’t some pause, some mechanism to indicate possible good faith,” he said. “Even in the old Westerns or gangster movies, right, everyone puts their gun down just for a second. You sit down, you have a conversation; if the conversation doesn’t go well, you leave the room and everybody knows what’s going to happen and everybody gets ready. But you don’t start shooting in the middle of the room during the course of negotiations.” He said he remains committed to keeping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and seemed unworried by reports that Iran's economy is improving. On the subject of Middle East peace, Obama told me that the U.S.'s friendship with Israel is undying, but he also issued what I took to be a veiled threat: The U.S., though willing to defend an isolated Israel at the United Nations and in other international bodies, might soon be unable to do so effectively. “If you see no peace deal and continued aggressive settlement construction -- and we have seen more aggressive settlement construction over the last couple years than we’ve seen in a very long time,” Obama said. “If Palestinians come to believe that the possibility of a contiguous sovereign Palestinian state is no longer within reach, then our ability to manage the international fallout is going to be limited.” We also spent a good deal of time talking about the unease the U.S.'s Sunni Arab allies feel about his approach to Iran, their traditional adversary. I asked the president, “What is more dangerous: Sunni extremism or Shia extremism?” I found his answer revelatory. He did not address the issue of Sunni extremism. Instead he argued in essence that the Shiite Iranian regime is susceptible to logic, appeals to self-interest and incentives. “I’m not big on extremism generally,” Obama said. “I don’t think you’ll get me to choose on those two issues. What I’ll say is that if you look at Iranian behavior, they are strategic, and they’re not impulsive. They have a worldview, and they see their interests, and they respond to costs and benefits. And that isn’t to say that they aren’t a theocracy that embraces all kinds of ideas that I find abhorrent, but they’re not North Korea. They are a large, powerful country that sees itself as an important player on the world stage, and I do not think has a suicide wish, and can respond to incentives.” This view puts him at odds with Netanyahu's understanding of Iran. In an interview after he won the premiership, the Israeli leader described the Iranian leadership to me as “a messianic

apocalyptic cult.” I asked Obama if he understood why his policies make the leaders of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries nervous: “I think that there are shifts that are taking place in the region that have caught a lot of them off guard,” he said. “I think change is always scary.”

Below is a complete transcript of our conversation. I’ve condensed my questions. The president’s answers are reproduced in full.

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: You’ve been mostly silent on the subject of the Middle East peace process for months if not more. And the silence has been filled by speculation: You’re not interested, you’re pessimistic, you felt burnt the last time around. What accounts for the silence, and where do you think this is headed?

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: The silence on my part is a direct result of my secretary of state, John Kerry, engaging in some of the most vigorous, active diplomacy that we’ve seen on this issue in many years. And John is not doing that by accident. He’s doing it because as an administration we think that it is in the interest of the Israelis and the Palestinians, but also in the interest of the United States and the world to arrive at a framework for negotiations that can actually bring about a two-state solution that provides Israel the security it needs -- peace with its neighbors -- at a time when the neighborhood has gotten more volatile, and gives Palestinians the dignity of a state.

I think John has done an extraordinary job, but these are really difficult negotiations. I am very appreciative that Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas have taken them very seriously. There have been very intense, detailed and difficult conversations on both sides.

GOLDBERG: And you’re keeping up to date on all of this?

OBAMA: Absolutely. John reports to me almost weekly about progress and occasionally asks for direction. It doesn’t serve anybody’s purposes for me to be popping off in the press about it. In fact, part of what both the Israelis and the Palestinians and us agreed to at the beginning of these negotiations was that we wouldn’t be characterizing them publicly until we were able to report on success or until the negotiations actually broke down.

We are coming to a point, though, over the next couple of months where the parties are going to have to make some decisions about how they move forward. And my hope and expectation is, despite the incredible political

challenges, that both Prime Minister Netanyahu and Abbas are able to reach past their differences and arrive at a framework that can move us to peace.

GOLDBERG: Let me read you something that John Kerry told the American Jewish Committee not long ago: “We’re running out of time. We’re running out of possibilities. And let’s be clear: If we do not succeed now -- and I know I’m raising those stakes -- but if we do not succeed now, we may not get another chance.” He has also suggested strongly that there might be a third intifada down the road and that if this peace process doesn’t work, Israel itself could be facing international isolation and boycott. Do you agree with this assessment? Is this the last chance?

OBAMA: Well, look, I’m a congenital optimist. And, obviously, this is a conflict that has gone on for decades. And humanity has a way of muddling through, even in difficult circumstances. So you never know how things play themselves out.

But John Kerry, somebody who has been a fierce advocate and defender on behalf of Israel for decades now, I think he has been simply stating what observers inside of Israel and outside of Israel recognize, which is that with each successive year, the window is closing for a peace deal that both the Israelis can accept and the Palestinians can accept -- in part because of changes in demographics; in part because of what's been happening with settlements; in part because Abbas is getting older, and I think nobody would dispute that whatever disagreements you may have with him, he has proven himself to be somebody who has been committed to nonviolence and diplomatic efforts to resolve this issue. We do not know what a successor to Abbas will look like.

GOLDBERG: Do you believe he’s the most moderate person you’re going to find?

OBAMA: I believe that President Abbas is sincere about his willingness to recognize Israel and its right to exist, to recognize Israel’s legitimate security needs, to shun violence, to resolve these issues in a diplomatic fashion that meets the concerns of the people of Israel. And I think that this is a rare quality not just within the Palestinian territories, but in the Middle East generally. For us not to seize that opportunity would be a mistake. And I think John is referring to that fact.

We don't know exactly what would happen. What we know is that it gets harder by the day. What we also know is that Israel has become more isolated internationally. We had to stand up in the Security Council in ways that 20 years ago would have involved far more European support, far more support from other parts of the world when it comes to Israel's position. And that's a reflection of a genuine sense on the part of a lot of countries out there that this issue continues to fester, is not getting resolved, and that nobody is willing to take the leap to bring it to closure. In that kind of environment, where you've got a partner on the other side who is prepared to negotiate seriously, who does not engage in some of the wild rhetoric that so often you see in the Arab world when it comes to Israel, who has shown himself committed to maintaining order within the West Bank and the Palestinian Authority and to cooperate with Israelis around their security concerns -- for us to not seize this moment I think would be a great mistake. I've said directly to Prime Minister Netanyahu he has an opportunity to solidify, to lock in, a democratic, Jewish state of Israel that is at peace with its neighbors and --

GOLDBERG: With permanent borders?

OBAMA: With permanent borders. And has an opportunity also to take advantage of a potential realignment of interests in the region, as many of the Arab countries see a common threat in Iran. The only reason that that potential realignment is not, and potential cooperation is not, more explicit is because of the Palestinian issue.

GOLDBERG: I want to come to Iran in a moment, but two questions about two leaders you're going to be dealing with pretty intensively. Abu Mazen [Abbas] -- all these things you say are true, but he is also the leader of a weak, corrupt and divided Palestinian entity that is already structurally semi-powerless. Do you think he could deliver anything more than a framework agreement? Is this the guy who can lead the Palestinian people to say, "OK, no more claims against Israel, permanent peace, permanent recognition?"

OBAMA: Look, I think it has to be tested. The question is: What is lost by testing it? If in fact a framework for negotiations is arrived at, the core principles around which the negotiations are going to proceed is arrived at, I have no doubt that there are going to be factions within the Palestinian

community that will vigorously object in the same way that there are going to be those within Israel who are going to vigorously object.

But here's what I know from my visits to the region: That for all that we've seen over the last several decades, all the mistrust that's been built up, the Palestinians would still prefer peace. They would still prefer a country of their own that allows them to find a job, send their kids to school, travel overseas, go back and forth to work without feeling as if they are restricted or constrained as a people. And they recognize that Israel is not going anywhere. So I actually think that the voices for peace within the Palestinian community will be stronger with a framework agreement and that Abu Mazen's position will be strengthened with a framework for negotiations.

There would still be huge questions about what happens in Gaza, but I actually think Hamas would be greatly damaged by the prospect of real peace. And the key question, the legitimate question for Israel, would be making sure that their core security needs are still met as a framework for negotiations led to an actual peace deal.

And part of what John Kerry has done has been to dig into Israel's security needs with the help of General John Allen, the former commander in Afghanistan. And they have developed, based on conversations with the Israeli Defense Forces about their defense needs, they've come up with a plan for how you would deal with the Jordan Valley, how you would deal with potential threats to Israel that are unprecedented in detail, unprecedented in scope. And as long as those security needs were met, then testing Abbas ends up being the right thing to do.

GOLDBERG: My impression watching your relationship with Netanyahu over the years is that you admire his intelligence and you admire his political skill, but you also get frustrated by an inability or unwillingness on his part to spend political capital -- in terms of risking coalition partnerships -- in order to embrace what he says he accepts, a two-state solution. Is that a fair statement? When he comes to Washington, how hard are you going to push him out of his comfort zone?

OBAMA: What is absolutely true is Prime Minister Netanyahu is smart. He is tough. He is a great communicator. He is obviously a very skilled politician. And I take him at his word when he says that he sees the

necessity of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I think he genuinely believes that.

I also think that politics in Israel around this issue are very difficult. You have the chaos that's been swirling around the Middle East. People look at what's happening in Syria. They look at what's happening in Lebanon. Obviously, they look at what's happening in Gaza. And understandably a lot of people ask themselves, "Can we afford to have potential chaos at our borders, so close to our cities?" So he is dealing with all of that, and I get that.

What I've said to him privately is the same thing that I say publicly, which is the situation will not improve or resolve itself. This is not a situation where you wait and the problem goes away. There are going to be more Palestinians, not fewer Palestinians, as time goes on. There are going to be more Arab-Israelis, not fewer Arab-Israelis, as time goes on.

And for Bibi to seize the moment in a way that perhaps only he can, precisely because of the political tradition that he comes out of and the credibility he has with the right inside of Israel, for him to seize this moment is perhaps the greatest gift he could give to future generations of Israelis. But it's hard. And as somebody who occupies a fairly tough job himself, I'm always sympathetic to somebody else's politics.

I have not yet heard, however, a persuasive vision of how Israel survives as a democracy and a Jewish state at peace with its neighbors in the absence of a peace deal with the Palestinians and a two-state solution. Nobody has presented me a credible scenario.

The only thing that I've heard is, "We'll just keep on doing what we're doing, and deal with problems as they arise. And we'll build settlements where we can. And where there are problems in the West Bank, we will deal with them forcefully. We'll cooperate or co-opt the Palestinian Authority." And yet, at no point do you ever see an actual resolution to the problem.

GOLDBERG: So, maintenance of a chronic situation?

OBAMA: It's maintenance of a chronic situation. And my assessment, which is shared by a number of Israeli observers, I think, is there comes a point where you can't manage this anymore, and then you start having to make very difficult choices. Do you resign yourself to what amounts to a permanent occupation of the West Bank? Is that the character of Israel as a

state for a long period of time? Do you perpetuate, over the course of a decade or two decades, more and more restrictive policies in terms of Palestinian movement? Do you place restrictions on Arab-Israelis in ways that run counter to Israel's traditions?

GOLDBERG: You sound worried.

OBAMA: Well, I am being honest that nobody has provided me with a clear picture of how this works in the absence of a peace deal. If that's the case -- one of the things my mom always used to tell me and I didn't always observe, but as I get older I agree with -- is if there's something you know you have to do, even if it's difficult or unpleasant, you might as well just go ahead and do it, because waiting isn't going to help. When I have a conversation with Bibi, that's the essence of my conversation: If not now, when? And if not you, Mr. Prime Minister, then who? How does this get resolved?

This is not an issue in which we are naive about the challenges. I deal every day with very difficult choices about U.S. security. As restrained, and I think thoughtful, as our foreign policy has been, I'm still subject to constant criticism about our counterterrorism policies, and our actions in Libya, and our lack of military action in Syria.

And so if I'm thinking about the prime minister of Israel, I'm not somebody who believes that it's just a matter of changing your mind and suddenly everything goes smoothly. But I believe that Bibi is strong enough that if he decided this was the right thing to do for Israel, that he could do it. If he does not believe that a peace deal with the Palestinians is the right thing to do for Israel, then he needs to articulate an alternative approach. And as I said before, it's hard to come up with one that's plausible.

GOLDBERG: You told me in [an interview](#) six years ago, when you were running for president, you said, "My job in being a friend to Israel is partly to hold up a mirror and tell the truth and say if Israel is building settlements without any regard to the effects that this has on the peace process, then we're going to be stuck in the same status quo that we've been stuck in for decades now." That was six years ago. It's been the official position of the United States for decades that settlements are illegitimate.

OBAMA: Right.

GOLDBERG: If this process fails, do you see this becoming more than the rhetorical position of the United States? Whether that has impact on the way you deal with the United Nations questions, an impact on the aid that the U.S. provides Israel?

OBAMA: Here's what I would say: The U.S. commitment to Israel's security is not subject to periodic policy differences. That's a rock-solid commitment, and it's one that I've upheld proudly throughout my tenure. I think the affection that Americans feel for Israel, the bond that our people feel and the bipartisan support that people have for Israel is not going to be affected.

So it is not realistic nor is it my desire or expectation that the core commitments we have with Israel change during the remainder of my administration or the next administration. But what I do believe is that if you see no peace deal and continued aggressive settlement construction -- and we have seen more aggressive settlement construction over the last couple years than we've seen in a very long time -- if Palestinians come to believe that the possibility of a contiguous sovereign Palestinian state is no longer within reach, then our ability to manage the international fallout is going to be limited.

GOLDBERG: Willingness, or ability?

OBAMA: Not necessarily willingness, but ability to manage international fallout is going to be limited. And that has consequences.

Look, sometimes people are dismissive of multilateral institutions and the United Nations and the EU [European Union] and the high commissioner of such and such. And sometimes there's good reason to be dismissive. There's a lot of hot air and rhetoric and posturing that may not always mean much. But in today's world, where power is much more diffuse, where the threats that any state or peoples face can come from non-state actors and asymmetrical threats, and where international cooperation is needed in order to deal with those threats, the absence of international goodwill makes you less safe. The condemnation of the international community can translate into a lack of cooperation when it comes to key security interests. It means reduced influence for us, the United States, in issues that are of interest to Israel. It's survivable, but it is not preferable.

GOLDBERG: Let's go to Iran. Two years ago, you told me in an interview that, "I think both the Iranian and the Israeli governments

recognize that when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say.” You know, I don’t have to tell you, that many of your Arab and Israeli friends are worried, post-Syria -- the incident in which you drew a red line and there was no military enforcement of it -- they’re worried about your willingness to use force under any circumstance. But put them aside for a second. How do you think the Iranian regime saw your reluctance to use force against [Bashar al-]Assad? And does this have any impact on the way they’re dealing with the current nuclear negotiations? It’s a linkage argument.

OBAMA: Let’s be very clear about what happened. I threatened kinetic strikes on Syria unless they got rid of their chemical weapons. When I made that threat, Syria denied even having chemical weapons. In the span of 10 days to two weeks, you had their patrons, the Iranians and the Russians, force or persuade Assad to come clean on his chemical weapons, inventory them for the international community, and commit to a timeline to get rid of them.

And the process has moved more slowly than we would like, but it has actually moved, and we’ve now seen 15 to 20 percent of those chemical weapons on their way out of Syria with a very concrete schedule to get rid of the rest. That would not have happened had the Iranians said, "Obama’s bluffing, he’s not actually really willing to take a strike." If the Russians had said, “Ehh, don’t worry about it, all those submarines that are floating around your coastline, that’s all just for show.” Of course they took it seriously! That’s why they engaged in the policy they did.

Now, the truth is, some of our commentators or friends in the region, their complaint is not that somehow we indicated an unwillingness to use military force in the region -- their complaint is that I did not choose to go ahead, even if we could get a deal on chemical weapons, to hit them anyway as a means of getting rid of Assad, in what has increasingly become a proxy war inside of Syria.

GOLDBERG: So just to be clear: You don’t believe the Iranian leadership now thinks that your “all options are on the table” threat as it relates to their nuclear program -- you don’t think that they have stopped taking that seriously?

OBAMA: I know they take it seriously.

GOLDBERG: How do you know they take it seriously?

OBAMA: We have a high degree of confidence that when they look at 35,000 U.S. military personnel in the region that are engaged in constant training exercises under the direction of a president who already has shown himself willing to take military action in the past, that they should take my statements seriously. And the American people should as well, and the Israelis should as well, and the Saudis should as well.

Now, that does not mean that that is my preferred course of action. So let's just be very clear here. There are always consequences to military action that are unpredictable and can spin out of control, and even if perfectly executed carry great costs. So if we can resolve this issue diplomatically, we absolutely should.

And the fact that in painstaking fashion, over the course of several years, we were able to enforce an unprecedented sanctions regime that so crippled the Iranian economy that they were willing to come to the table and, in fact, helped to shape the Iranian election, and that they are now in a joint plan of action that for the first time in a decade halts their nuclear program -- no centrifuges being installed; the 20 percent enriched uranium being drawn down to zero; Arak on hold; international inspectors buzzing around in ways that are unimaginable even a year ago -- what that all indicates is that there is the opportunity, there is the chance for us to resolve this without resorting to military force.

And if we have any chance to make sure that Iran does not have nuclear weapons, if we have any chance to render their breakout capacity nonexistent, or so minimal that we can handle it, then we've got to pursue that path. And that has been my argument with Prime Minister Netanyahu; that has been my argument with members of Congress who have been interested in imposing new sanctions. My simple point has been, we lose nothing by testing this out.

GOLDBERG: You said something to David Remnick a few weeks ago that really struck me: "If we were able to get Iran to operate in a responsible fashion -- not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries, and not developing a nuclear weapon -- you could see an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare."

I think I understand what you mean, but in the Gulf -- and this goes to the question of why our allies are uneasy -- in the Gulf you have a king of Saudi Arabia who has been asking for years for you to "cut the head off the snake," referring to Iran. They're hearing this -- they're reading this and hearing you say, "live with the snake." Do you understand why they're uneasy about your approach, or your broader philosophical approach, or are they overinterpreting this opening to Iran?

OBAMA: Here's what I understand. For years now, Iran has been an irresponsible international actor. They've sponsored terrorism. They have threatened their neighbors. They have financed actions that have killed people in neighboring states.

And Iran has also exploited or fanned sectarian divisions in other countries. In light of that record, it's completely understandable for other countries to be not only hostile towards Iran but also doubtful about the possibilities of Iran changing. I get that. But societies do change -- I think there is a difference between an active hostility and sponsoring of terrorism and mischief, and a country that you're in competition with and you don't like but it's not blowing up homes in your country or trying to overthrow your government.

GOLDBERG: And you feel there's a real opportunity to achieve a genuine breakthrough?

OBAMA: Here's my view. Set aside Iranian motives. Let's assume that Iran is not going to change. It's a theocracy. It's anti-Semitic. It is anti-Sunni. And the new leaders are just for show. Let's assume all that. If we can ensure that they don't have nuclear weapons, then we have at least prevented them from bullying their neighbors, or heaven forbid, using those weapons, and the other misbehavior they're engaging in is manageable.

If, on the other hand, they are capable of changing; if, in fact, as a consequence of a deal on their nuclear program those voices and trends inside of Iran are strengthened, and their economy becomes more integrated into the international community, and there's more travel and greater openness, even if that takes a decade or 15 years or 20 years, then that's very much an outcome we should desire.

So again, there's a parallel to the Middle East discussion we were having earlier. The only reason you would not want us to test whether or not we

can resolve this nuclear program issue diplomatically would be if you thought that by a quick military exercise you could remove the threat entirely. And since I'm the commander in chief of the most powerful military on earth, I think I have pretty good judgment as to whether or not this problem can be best solved militarily. And what I'm saying is it's a lot better if we solve it diplomatically.

GOLDBERG: So why are the Sunnis so nervous about you?

OBAMA: Well, I don't think this is personal. I think that there are shifts that are taking place in the region that have caught a lot of them off guard. I think change is always scary. I think there was a comfort with a United States that was comfortable with an existing order and the existing alignments, and was an implacable foe of Iran, even if most of that was rhetorical and didn't actually translate into stopping the nuclear program. But the rhetoric was good.

What I've been saying to our partners in the region is, "We've got to respond and adapt to change." And the bottom line is: What's the best way for us actually to make sure Iran doesn't have a nuclear weapon?

GOLDBERG: What is more dangerous: Sunni extremism or Shia extremism?

OBAMA: I'm not big on extremism generally. I don't think you'll get me to choose on those two issues. What I'll say is that if you look at Iranian behavior, they are strategic, and they're not impulsive. They have a worldview, and they see their interests, and they respond to costs and benefits. And that isn't to say that they aren't a theocracy that embraces all kinds of ideas that I find abhorrent, but they're not North Korea. They are a large, powerful country that sees itself as an important player on the world stage, and I do not think has a suicide wish, and can respond to incentives. And that's the reason why they came to the table on sanctions.

So just to finish up, the most important thing that I have said to Bibi and members of Congress on this whole issue is that it is profoundly in all of our interests to let this process play itself out. Let us test whether or not Iran can move far enough to give us assurances that their program is peaceful and that they do not have breakout capacity.

If, in fact, they can't get there, the worst that will have happened is that we will have frozen their program for a six-month period. We'll have much greater insight into their program. All the architecture of our sanctions will

have still been enforced, in place. Their economy might have modestly improved during this six-month to one-year period. But I promise you that all we have to do is turn the dial back on and suddenly --

GOLDBERG: You think that will be easy to turn on?

OBAMA: Well, partly because 95 percent of it never got turned off. And we will be in a stronger position to say to our partners, including the Russians, the Chinese and others, who have thus far stuck with us on sanctions, that it is Iran that walked away; it wasn't the U.S., it wasn't Congress, it wasn't our new sanctions that jettisoned the deal. And we will then have the diplomatic high ground to tighten the screws even further. If, on the other hand, it is perceived that we were not serious about negotiations, then that ironically is the quickest path to sanctions unraveling, if in fact Iran is insincere.

GOLDBERG: One more question on Iran: If sanctions got them to the table, why wouldn't more sanctions keep them at the table?

OBAMA: The logic of sanctions was to get them to negotiate. The logic of the joint action plan is to freeze the situation for a certain period of time to allow the negotiators to work. The notion that in the midst of negotiations we would then improve our position by saying, "We're going to squeeze you even harder," ignores the fact that [President Hassan] Rouhani and the negotiators in Iran have their own politics. They've got to respond to their own hardliners. And there are a whole bunch of folks inside of Iran who are just as suspicious of our motives and willingness to ultimately lift sanctions as we are suspicious of their unwillingness to get rid of their nuclear program.

There's never been a negotiation in which at some point there isn't some pause, some mechanism to indicate possible good faith. Even in the old Westerns or gangster movies, right, everyone puts their gun down just for a second. You sit down, you have a conversation; if the conversation doesn't go well, you leave the room and everybody knows what's going to happen and everybody gets ready. But you don't start shooting in the middle of the room during the course of negotiations.

So the logic of new sanctions right now would only make sense if, in fact, we had a schedule of dismantling the existing sanctions. And we've kept 95 percent of them in place. Iran is going to be, net, losing more money with the continuing enforcement of oil sanctions during the course of this

joint plan of action than they're getting from the modest amount of money we gave them access to.

And, by the way, even though they're talking to European businesses, oil companies have been contacting Iran and going into Iran, nobody has been making any deals because they know that our sanctions are still in place.

They may want to reserve their first place in line if, in fact, a deal is struck and sanctions are removed. That's just prudent business.

But we've sent a very clear message to them and, by the way, to all of our partners and the P5 + 1 [the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany], that they better tell their companies that their sanctions are still in force, including U.S. unilateral sanctions. And we're going to enforce them, and we've been enforcing them during the course of these discussions so far.

GOLDBERG: I was reading your Nobel Peace Prize [acceptance speech](#) last night, and I wanted to quote one thing you said: "I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later."

I was really struck by that last sentence. I'm wondering at what point in Syria does it become too much to bear? I'm not talking about the bifurcated argument, boots on the ground or nothing, but what does Assad have to do to provoke an American-led military response? Another way of asking this is: If you could roll back the clock three years, could you have done more to build up the more-moderate opposition groups?

OBAMA: I think those who believe that two years ago, or three years ago, there was some swift resolution to this thing had we acted more forcefully, fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the conflict in Syria and the conditions on the ground there.

When you have a professional army that is well-armed and sponsored by two large states who have huge stakes in this, and they are fighting against a farmer, a carpenter, an engineer who started out as protesters and suddenly now see themselves in the midst of a civil conflict -- the notion that we could have, in a clean way that didn't commit U.S. military forces, changed the equation on the ground there was never true.

We have supported military assistance to a moderate opposition in Syria, and we have done so at a pace that stretches the limits of what they can

absorb. But the fact of the matter is if you are looking at changing the military facts on the ground, the kind of involvement, the kind of involvement on the part of U.S. military forces that would have been required would have been significant enough that there would have been severe questions about our international authority to do so. You don't have a UN mandate; congressional authority -- we saw how that played out even on the narrow issue of chemical weapons.

And there was the possibility that we would have made the situation worse rather than better on the ground, precisely because of U.S. involvement, which would have meant that we would have had the third, or, if you count Libya, the fourth war in a Muslim country in the span of a decade. Having said all that -- the situation in Syria is not just heartbreaking, but dangerous.

Over the last two years I have pushed our teams to find out what are the best options in a bad situation. And we will continue to do everything we can to bring about a political resolution, to pressure the Russians and the Iranians, indicating to them that it is not in their interests to be involved in a perpetual war.

I'm always darkly amused by this notion that somehow Iran has won in Syria. I mean, you hear sometimes people saying, "They're winning in Syria." And you say, "This was their one friend in the Arab world, a member of the Arab League, and it is now in rubble." It's bleeding them because they're having to send in billions of dollars. Their key proxy, Hezbollah, which had a very comfortable and powerful perch in Lebanon, now finds itself attacked by Sunni extremists. This isn't good for Iran. They're losing as much as anybody. The Russians find their one friend in the region in rubble and delegitimized.

And so there continues to be an opportunity for us to resolve this issue politically. The international community as a whole and the United States as the sole superpower in the world does have to try to find a better answer to the immediate humanitarian situation.

And we are doing everything we can to see how we can do that and how we can resource it. But I've looked at a whole lot of game plans, a whole lot of war plans, a whole bunch of scenarios, and nobody has been able to persuade me that us taking large-scale military action even absent boots on the ground, would actually solve the problem.

And those who make that claim do so without a lot of very specific information. I'm sympathetic to their impulses, because I have the same impulses. There is a great desire not just to stand there, but to do something. We are doing a lot; we have to do more. But we have to make sure that what we do does not make a situation worse or engulf us in yet another massive enterprise at a time when we have great demands here at home and a lot of international obligations abroad.

[Article 2.](#)

The Washington Post

Putin's error in Ukraine is the kind that leads to catastrophe

[David Ignatius](#)

2 Mar, 2014 -- Napoleon is said to have cautioned during an 1805 battle: "When the enemy is making a false movement we must take good care not to interrupt him." The citation is also sometimes rendered as "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake." Whatever the precise wording, the admonition is a useful starting point for thinking about the Ukraine situation.

[Vladimir Putin has made a mistake invading Crimea](#), escalating a crisis for Russia that has been brewing for many months. It might have been beneficial if President Obama could have dissuaded him from this error. But Putin's move into Crimea appeared to spring from a deeper misjudgment about the reversibility of the process that led to the breakup of Soviet Union in 1991. The further Russia wades into this revanchist strategy, the worse its troubles will become.

The Russian leader's nostalgia for the past was on display at the Sochi Olympics. As [David Remnick wrote](#) last week in the New Yorker, Putin regards the fall of the Soviet Union as a "tragic error," and the Olympics celebrated his vision that a strong Russia is back. That attitude led Putin to what [Secretary of State John Kerry described on Sunday](#) as a "brazen act of aggression" and a "[violation of international obligations](#)."

[Kerry called on Putin](#) to "undo this act of invasion." The Russian leader would save himself immense grief by following Kerry's advice, but that seems unlikely. His mistake in Sevastopol may lead to others elsewhere,

though hopefully Putin will avoid reckless actions. But the more Putin seeks to assert Russia's strength, he will actually underline its weakness. Perhaps inevitably, given Washington's political monomania, the big subject over the weekend wasn't Putin's criminal attack on Crimea but whether Obama had encouraged it by being insufficiently muscular. There are many valid criticisms to be made of Obama's foreign policy, especially in Syria, but the notion that Putin's attack is somehow the United States' fault is perverse.

For two months the Obama administration has been prodding the European Union to take the Ukraine crisis more seriously. I'm told that U.S. reporting showed that Putin was impatient with Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, and wanted him to crack down even harder on the protesters in Kiev's Maidan Square. Putin's distaste for Yanukovich has been obvious since he fled the capital a week ago.

What Putin misunderstands most is that the center of gravity for the former Soviet Union has shifted west. Former Soviet satellites such as Poland and the Czech Republic are prosperous members of the E.U. The nations that made up what was once Yugoslavia have survived their bloody breakup, and most have emerged as strong democracies. Ukraine was set to join this movement toward the European Union last November when Yanukovich suddenly suspended trade and financial talks with the E.U. and accepted what amounted to a \$15 billion bribe from Putin to stay in Russia's camp. To the tens of thousands of courageous Ukrainians who braved the cold and police brutality to protest, Yanukovich's submission to Moscow looked like an attempt to reverse history.

The opportunity for Putin is almost precisely opposite his atavistic vision of restoration. It is only by moving west, toward Europe, that Russia itself can reverse its demographic and political trap. Year by year, the Russian political system becomes more of a corrupt Oriental despotism — with Moscow closer to Almaty than Berlin. The alternative is for Ukraine to pull Russia with it toward the West.

As [former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) explained in a 2008 book, "If Ukraine moves to the West, first to the EU and eventually to NATO, the probability that Russia will move toward Europe is far greater. . . . Russians will eventually say, 'Our future will be safest, our control over

the Far East territories most assured . . . if there is a kind of Atlantic community that stretches from Lisbon to Vladivostok.’ ”

Putin’s Russia may well make more mistakes: We may see a cascading chain of error that brings Russian troops deeper into Ukraine and sets the stage for civil war. Those are the kind of miscalculations that lead to catastrophic consequences, and Obama would be wise to seek to deter Russian aggression without specifying too clearly what the U.S. ladder of escalation might be.

But Americans and Europeans should agree that this is a story about Putin’s violation of the international order. I’d be happy if we could interrupt Russia’s mistakes, but so far Putin insists on doing the wrong thing.

[Article 3.](#)

Zócalo Public Square ([Arizona State University](#))

Why Obama Shouldn’t Fall for Putin’s Ukrainian Folly

Anatol Lieven

March 2, 2014 -- We’re now witnessing the consequences of how grossly both Russia and the West have overplayed their hands in Ukraine. It is urgently necessary that both should find ways of withdrawing from some of the positions that they have taken. Otherwise, the result could very easily be civil war, Russian invasion, the partition of Ukraine, and a conflict that will haunt Europe for generations to come.

The only country that could possibly benefit from such an outcome is China. As with the invasion of Iraq and the horrible mismanagement of the campaign in Afghanistan, the U.S. would be distracted for another decade from the question of how to deal with its only competitive peer in the world today. Yet given the potentially appalling consequences for the world economy of a war in Ukraine, it is probable that even Beijing would not welcome such an outcome.

If there is one absolutely undeniable fact about Ukraine, which screams from every election and every opinion poll since its independence two decades ago, it is that the country’s population is deeply divided between

pro-Russian and pro-Western sentiments. Every election victory for one side or another has been by a narrow margin, and has subsequently been reversed by an electoral victory for an opposing coalition.

What has saved the country until recently has been the existence of a certain middle ground of Ukrainians sharing elements of both positions; that the division in consequence was not clear cut; and that the West and Russia generally refrained from forcing Ukrainians to make a clear choice between these positions.

During George W. Bush's second term as president, the U.S., Britain, and other NATO countries made a morally criminal attempt to force this choice by the offer of a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine (despite the fact that repeated opinion polls had shown around two-thirds of Ukrainians opposed to NATO membership). French and German opposition delayed this ill-advised gambit, and after August 2008, it was quietly abandoned. The Georgian-Russian war in that month had made clear both the extreme dangers of further NATO expansion, and that the United States would not in fact fight to defend its allies in the former Soviet Union.

In the two decades after the collapse of the USSR, it should have become obvious that neither West nor Russia had reliable allies in Ukraine. As the demonstrations in Kiev have amply demonstrated, the "pro-Western" camp in Ukraine contains many ultra-nationalists and even neo-fascists who detest Western democracy and modern Western culture. As for Russia's allies from the former Soviet establishment, they have extracted as much financial aid from Russia as possible, diverted most of it into their own pockets, and done as little for Russia in return as they possibly could. Over the past year, both Russia and the European Union tried to force Ukraine to make a clear choice between them—and the entirely predictable result has been to tear the country apart. Russia attempted to draw Ukraine into the Eurasian Customs Union by offering a massive financial bailout and heavily subsidized gas supplies. The European Union then tried to block this by offering an association agreement, though (initially) with no major financial aid attached. Neither Russia nor the EU made any serious effort to talk to each other about whether a compromise might be reached that would allow Ukraine somehow to combine the two agreements, to avoid having to choose sides.

President Viktor Yanukovich's rejection of the EU offer led to an uprising in Kiev and the western and central parts of Ukraine, and to his own flight from Kiev, together with many of his supporters in the Ukrainian parliament. This marks a very serious geopolitical defeat for Russia. It is now obvious that Ukraine as a whole cannot be brought into the Eurasian Union, reducing that union to a shadow of what the Putin administration hoped. And though Russia continues officially to recognize him, President Yanukovich can only be restored to power in Kiev if Moscow is prepared to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and seize its capital by force. The result would be horrendous bloodshed, a complete collapse of Russia's relations with the West and of Western investment in Russia, a shattering economic crisis, and Russia's inevitable economic and geopolitical dependency on China.

But Western governments, too, have put themselves in an extremely dangerous position. They have acquiesced to the overthrow of an elected government by ultra-nationalist militias, which have also chased away a large part of the elected parliament. This has provided a perfect precedent for Russian-backed militias in turn to seize power in the east and south of the country.

The West has stood by in silence while the rump parliament in Kiev abolished the official status of Russian and other minority languages, and members of the new government threatened publicly to ban the main parties that supported Yanukovich—an effort that would effectively disenfranchise around a third of the population.

After years of demanding that successive Ukrainian governments undertake painful reforms in order to draw nearer to the West, the West is now in a paradoxical position: If it wishes to save the new government from a Russian-backed counter-revolution, it will have to forget about any reforms that will alienate ordinary people, and instead give huge sums in aid with no strings attached. The EU has allowed the demonstrators in Kiev to believe that their actions have brought Ukraine closer to EU membership—but, if anything, this is now even further away than it was before the revolution.

In these circumstances, it is essential that both the West and Russia act with caution. The issue here is not Crimea. From the moment when the Yanukovich government in Kiev was overthrown, it was obvious that

Crimea was effectively lost to Ukraine. Russia is in full military control of the peninsula with the support of a large majority of its population, and only a Western military invasion can expel it.

This does not mean that Crimea will declare independence. So far, the call of the Crimean parliament has been only for increased autonomy. It does mean, however, that Russia will decide the fate of Crimea when and as it chooses. For the moment, Moscow appears to be using Crimea, like Yanukovich, in order to influence developments in Ukraine as a whole. It also seems unlikely that the government in Kiev will try to retake Crimea by force, both because this would lead to their inevitable defeat, and because even some Ukrainian nationalists have told me in private that Crimea was never part of historic Ukraine. They would be prepared to sacrifice it if that was the price of taking the rest of Ukraine out of Russia's orbit.

But that is not true of important Ukrainian cities with significant ethnic Russian populations, such as Donetsk, Kharkov, and Odessa. The real and urgent issue now is what happens across the eastern and southern Ukraine, and it is essential that neither side initiates the use of force there. Any move by the new Ukrainian government or nationalist militias to overthrow elected local authorities and suppress anti-government demonstrations in these regions is likely to provoke a Russian military intervention. Any Russian military intervention in turn will compel the Ukrainian government and army (or at least its more nationalist factions) to fight. The West must therefore urge restraint—not only from Moscow, but from Kiev as well. Any aid to the government in Kiev should be made strictly conditional on measures to reassure the Russian-speaking populations of the east and south of the country: respect for elected local authorities; restoration of the official status of minority languages; and above all, no use of force in those regions. In the longer run, the only way to keep Ukraine together may be the introduction of a new federal constitution with much greater powers for the different regions.

But that is for the future. For now, the overwhelming need is to prevent war. War in Ukraine would be an economic, political, and cultural catastrophe for Russia. In many ways, the country would never recover, but Russia would win the war itself. As it proved in August 2008, if Russia sees its vital interests in the former USSR as under attack, Russia will

fight. NATO will not. War in Ukraine would therefore also be a shattering blow to the prestige of NATO and the European Union from which these organizations might never recover either.

A century ago, two groups of countries whose real common interests vastly outweighed their differences allowed themselves to be drawn into a European war in which more than 10 million of their people died and every country suffered irreparable losses. In the name of those dead, every sane and responsible citizen in the West, Russia, and Ukraine itself should now urge caution and restraint on the part of their respective leaders.

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[Article 4.](#)

The Washington Post

President Obama's foreign policy is based on fantasy

[Editorial Board](#)

3 Mar, 2014 -- FOR FIVE YEARS, President Obama has led a foreign policy based more on how he thinks the world should operate than on reality. It was [a world in which "the tide of war is receding"](#) and the United States could, without much risk, radically reduce the size of its armed forces. Other leaders, in this vision, would behave rationally and in the interest of their people and the world. Invasions, brute force, great-power games and shifting alliances — these were things of the past. Secretary of State John F. Kerry displayed this mindset on ABC's "This Week" Sunday when he said, of Russia's invasion of neighboring Ukraine, "[It's a 19th century act in the 21st century.](#)"

That's a nice thought, and we all know what he means. A country's standing is no longer measured in throw-weight or battalions. The world is too interconnected to break into blocs. A small country that plugs into cyberspace can deliver more prosperity to its people (think Singapore or Estonia) than a giant with natural resources and standing armies.

Unfortunately, Russian President Vladimir Putin has not received the memo on 21st-century behavior. Neither has China's president, [Xi Jinping](#), who is engaging in gunboat diplomacy against Japan and the weaker nations of Southeast Asia. Syrian president [Bashar al-Assad](#) is waging a very 20th-century war against his own people, sending helicopters to drop exploding barrels full of screws, nails and other shrapnel onto apartment buildings where families cower in basements. These men will not be deterred by the disapproval of their peers, the weight of world opinion or even disinvestment by Silicon Valley companies. They are concerned primarily with maintaining their holds on power.

Mr. Obama is not responsible for their misbehavior. But he does, or could, play a leading role in structuring the costs and benefits they must consider before acting. The model for Mr. Putin's occupation of Crimea was his incursion into Georgia in 2008, when George W. Bush was president. Mr. Putin paid no price for that action; in fact, with parts of Georgia still under Russia's control, he was permitted to host a Winter Olympics just around the corner. China has bullied the Philippines and unilaterally staked claims to wide swaths of international air space and sea lanes as it continues a rapid and technologically impressive military buildup. Arguably, it has paid a price in the nervousness of its neighbors, who are desperate for the United States to play a balancing role in the region. But none of those neighbors feel confident that the United States can be counted on. Since the Syrian dictator crossed Mr. Obama's red line with [a chemical weapons attack](#) that killed 1,400 civilians, the dictator's military and diplomatic position has steadily strengthened.

The urge to pull back — to concentrate on what Mr. Obama calls “[nation-building at home](#)” — is nothing new, as former ambassador [Stephen Sestanovich](#) recounts in his illuminating history of U.S. foreign policy, “[Maximalist](#).” There were similar retrenchments after the Korea and Vietnam wars and when the Soviet Union crumbled. But the United States discovered each time that the world became a more dangerous place without its leadership and that disorder in the world could threaten U.S. prosperity. Each period of retrenchment was followed by more active (though not always wiser) policy. Today Mr. Obama has plenty of company in his impulse, within both parties and as reflected by public opinion. But

he's also in part responsible for the national mood: If a president doesn't make the case for global engagement, no one else effectively can.

The White House often responds by accusing critics of being warmongers who want American "boots on the ground" all over the world and have yet to learn the lessons of Iraq. So let's stipulate: We don't want U.S. troops in Syria, and we don't want U.S. troops in Crimea. A great power can become overextended, and if its economy falters, so will its ability to lead. None of this is simple.

But it's also true that, as long as some leaders play by what Mr. Kerry dismisses as 19th-century rules, the United States can't pretend that the only game is in another arena altogether. Military strength, trustworthiness as an ally, staying power in difficult corners of the world such as Afghanistan — these still matter, much as we might wish they did not. While the United States has been retrenching, the tide of democracy in the world, which once seemed inexorable, has been receding. In the long run, that's harmful to U.S. national security, too.

As Mr. Putin ponders whether to advance further — into eastern Ukraine, say — he will measure the seriousness of U.S. and allied actions, not their statements. China, pondering its next steps in the [East China Sea](#), will do the same. Sadly, that's the nature of the century we're living in.

[Article 5.](#)

Asharq Al Awsat

Turkey's local elections are an important barometer

[Samir Salha](#)

2 Mar, 2014 -- Turkey is facing three successive elections: municipal, presidential and parliamentary. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) will fight to keep hold of power, while opposition parties will fight to dislodge the ruling party, even at the cost of a minority government and the restoration of the tense atmosphere that existed in the early 2000s. In the days after the municipal elections scheduled for March 30, 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the prime minister, will have to make a choice. If his AKP secures a strong election victory over its opponents in the municipal

elections, he could choose to run for president in the August 2014 elections, the first direct presidential elections in Turkish history. Or he could call for early parliamentary elections next year in an attempt to restore what he has lost in terms of power and influence, particularly if the AKP does not have a strong showing in March's municipal polls. If Erdoğan is greeted with failure on March 30, he will immediately pursue the scenario that entails amending the AKP bylaws which limit the tenure of its political leadership—whether in parliament or government—to three successive terms. This is an obstacle that Erdoğan himself placed in his own path in the name of inter-party democracy, development, and granting the AKP youth the opportunity to assume leadership positions. The forthcoming days will doubtlessly be full of surprises for Turkey. Only a few will go to the polls in Turkey to cast their votes in the municipal elections. Despite this, Turkey's political parties will be fixated on snatching victory over the other side.

In these three elections, the rivalry will be between competing ideologies, rather than capabilities, qualifications or electoral promises. In fact, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's electoral campaigning throughout Turkey's cities, his discourse, his manner of handling issues, and the general public's reaction to him all reflect the ideological division within the political arena today, no matter how those in government or the opposition try to conceal it.

We will also soon understand whether Fethullah Gülen's group will be easy prey for Erdoğan and the AKP. We will see whether the AKP will be able to isolate this group easily, particularly in light of the long decades of work undertaken by the Gülen movement and the vast network of relations it has built inside and outside of Turkey. Will Erdoğan be able to defeat Gülen's followers, or will they teach the prime minister a lesson, playing their political cards and entering into alliances with opposition parties?

In April 2014, Turkey will enter a new political debate as it deals with the results of the local elections. The announcement of the official election results, including voter turnout and the total number of votes, will likely not be enough for any one side to claim victory. Parties will point to the number of cities they won, or the number of total votes they received. Istanbul's voters are likely to opt for the AKP, whereas İzmir will most likely vote for the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). However, the real competition will be in the capital, Ankara, which for years has

fallen squarely into the AKP camp. But the CHP, with its Right-wing nationalist background, has launched a strong bid to retake the capital city from Erdoğan and his party.

One important thing to mention is that these municipal elections will be held across thirty major Turkish cities, which make up eighty percent of vote. For the AKP, success means winning at least 40 percent of the vote—compared to the 39 percent it won in the 2009 local elections. For the opposition, however, the standard of success is how they benefit and use a number of major issues, not least the Gezi Park protests, the government corruption scandal, the AKP's foreign policy retreat, and its amendments of four laws that concern the country's social, cultural and security strength. The two sides are aware that the forthcoming period represents an unprecedented opportunity, and so they are moving full speed ahead to try and take advantage of this.

Many Turkish voters seem to have already made up their mind and are just waiting for election day to see how the rest of the country voted. At this point, only an extremely serious political or security event will have any effect on electoral calculations. But does the Gülen's movement have any other surprises up its sleeve to knock Erdoğan off his game as the elections approach? That is the question.

Another concern that will shift into a real impasse for Erdoğan and his party is the share of the vote secured by the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and its ability to use a strong local election showing as a political and constitutional bargaining chip with Erdoğan over the Kurdish issue and the fate of Kurdistan Workers' Party leader Abdullah Öcalan, who remains imprisoned on İmralı Island.

In any case, the corruption accusations first made against Erdoğan and his party two months ago have dispelled his dream of remaining in power in the long term under the pretext that there is no political alternative and based on the self-acclaimed accomplishments he secured for Turkey, both at home and abroad.

All the talk today is about Erdoğan, who reportedly sleeps for only four hours a night and spends the rest of his time preparing the AKP for the forthcoming local elections. Erdoğan is insisting on viewing the municipal elections as the decisive word on whether the AKP will secure another ten years in power or whether he will stand for the presidency in six months.

Will the prime minister—having expressed shock at the magnitude and gravity of the alleged plot against him—be able to unify the AKP and then successfully mobilize the Turkish street against a conspiracy that he says does not just target him personally, but all of Turkey?

Since 2002, Erdoğan's model of leadership and administration has been viewed as a successful example of governance. This is why he is urging those concerned about their country's interests and fate to back him and his party when they head to the polls in March, saying that this would teach the so-called deep state and its foreign backers a lesson.

The February 7, 2012, crisis when the Istanbul Special Prosecutor ordered intelligence chief Hakan Fidan to give testimony as a suspect in a terrorist investigation paved the way for the bigger December 17, 2013, explosion: the corruption probe that initiated the break between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen. This new status quo will define the political fate of the Turkish prime minister. However, what is practically out of the question is to imagine Erdoğan taking the opportunity to simply withdraw silently from political life.

Erdoğan is now facing one of two options, with the particulars to be decided by the results of the municipal elections. If his party secures an overwhelming victory, it will encourage him to prepare to present himself as a presidential candidate to succeed Abdullah Gül in August 2014.

However, should the opposition strike a strong blow against the AKP then we could expect Erdoğan to pursue the Samson Option, announcing early parliamentary elections before the expected date of mid-2015.

[Article 6.](#)

Al Jazeera

Is AIPAC doomed?

Philip Giraldi

3 Mar 2014 -- The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual conference begins on March 2 and will conclude with an address by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on March 4. The organisers boast that the meeting of "America's Pro-Israel Lobby" will attract "more than 14,000 pro-Israel Americans, more than two-thirds of Congress, [and]

more than 2,200 students from 491 campuses". There will be speeches by Senator John McCain and by Secretary of State John Kerry. As part of the group's lobbying effort, the attendees will descend en masse on the Capitol Hill offices of Senators and Congressmen, delivering the message that AIPAC is alive and well in spite of some recent very public setbacks. They will demand that the United States continue to pressure Iran with new sanctions even as the White House is searching for a way to avoid another potentially catastrophic war in the Middle East. They will argue that Iran is a danger to the entire world and must be reduced to a level where it cannot even contemplate either offensive or retaliatory defensive action against Israel, to include the dismantling of its nuclear programme and destruction of its ballistic missiles with a range exceeding 500 km. AIPAC will claim record levels of fundraising and grassroots support. Indeed, its endowment totals \$100m, its annual budget is nearly \$70m and it has more than 200 employees, making it the most powerful and best funded foreign policy lobby in the US. But largely invisible amid the self-congratulating and lobbying process will be any sense of what the actual US vital interests might be vis-a-vis Israel. The powerful Israel lobby, of which AIPAC is a part, has long argued that the foreign policy and security interests of Washington and Tel Aviv are identical, or to use the currently fashionable expressions, there is no space between the two and the US will always "have Israel's back".

Washington's political class has wholeheartedly and uncritically adopted both the Israel-centric jargon and also Tel Aviv's skewed perceptions of Middle Eastern realities, producing the unique spectacle of a great global power doing everything possible to placate a tiny client state. Pandering to Israel will be on full display at the AIPAC conference. But amid all the celebration AIPAC's leadership knows that it can no longer produce a napkin and have the signatures of 70 senators on it within a day. Nor does its steady flow of "information memos" sent to the legislature and the media command the same respect they once did. AIPAC can no longer draft legislation favourable to Israel, send it over to Congress and expect a finished bill to emerge, passed with a unanimous vote. It has suffered major defeats through its open support for bombing Syria and for legislation increasing sanctions on Iran, the former opposed overwhelmingly by an aroused war-weary public and the latter stalled in a

suddenly nervous Congress. AIPAC also opposed the appointment of Chuck Hagel as Defence Secretary due to his alleged "anti-Israel record", though it did not do so openly and only lobbied the issue quietly on Capitol Hill. It was, nevertheless, a defeat. Even The New York Times is taking note that AIPAC is now very much on the defensive, forcing it to respond to the Times commentary with an op-ed of its own defending its position on Iran, an uncharacteristic move for a group that is accustomed to operate in the shadows. The rift has come about because reality and illusion have parted company. The reality is that the US cannot afford another war in the Middle East, either financially or in terms of the unintended consequences that wrecked the Iraqi and Afghan interventions. It has only one compelling vital interest in the region and that is to keep energy resources flowing and a war with Iran would instead deliver a shock to a world economy that is still in recovery. Against that is the illusion that Israel is some kind of strategic asset or global partner for the US. Apart from the pressure being exerted by groups like AIPAC, Americans are becoming increasingly aware that Washington has no compelling reason to sacrifice its own interests to sustain the freedom for Israel to behave as it wishes. Nor does it have any justification to protect it from its neighbours, any more than it has a responsibility to do so for any other country in the Middle East. And there is a growing understanding that the lopsided relationship, not only hugely expensive in dollar terms, motivates terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to attack Americans. This is not to say that the US cannot play a positive role and act in support of the best interests of all its friends in the Middle East, which it would accomplish by becoming genuinely an honest broker with a demonstrated interest in regional stability rather than in regime change. AIPAC's tunnel vision only permits it to see one "closest ally" and that must be Israel. Every other country is therefore reduced to a second rate player whose interests must coincide with those of Tel Aviv or be disregarded.

The persistence of the AIPAC argument, which also idealises Israel's rather flawed and corrupt democracy to help make its case for a "special relationship", has done grave damage to US interests throughout the Muslim world. As has sometimes been noted, Washington had no enemies in the post-colonial Middle East before Israel was founded in 1948. Now it has few friends.

Inside Story US 2012 - What role does the pro-Israel lobby play? Washington's close embrace with Tel Aviv has been fostered by a mainstream media unwilling to be too critical of Israel's actions. But this long established unanimity of viewpoint involving both media and its symbiotic punditry is beginning to erode as alternative sources of information continue to proliferate, which is why the leadership of AIPAC must seriously be concerned. The shift in opinion is both permanent and growing in magnitude, including numerous younger Jews and Jewish liberals who have been speaking out to tell AIPAC that it does not speak for them, particularly given its record of uncritical support for increasingly hard line Israeli governments.

A better informed American public increasingly averse to foreign military adventures is becoming aware that issues formerly seen in Manichean terms are actually a good deal more complicated and then there is the experience factor. Recent US engagement in Iraq, Libya, and Egypt, all supported by Israel and its supporters for various reasons, are increasingly being regarded as in no way beneficial to the US, quite the contrary. This explains the lack of fervour for a repeat performance in Syria or against Iran. It also means that AIPAC has found itself on the wrong side of history in terms of the desires of the American people, surely not a good place to be for a Washington lobby.

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