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ISRAEL, IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES

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The start of direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians adds a note of re-engagement by the parties. The U.S. role in bringing this about has been significant. Even more, the U.S. role in making progress will be essential, with Israel and Palestine and throughout the region.

Those with experience in the region fall into two camps on the key questions of the future of direct talks. One group believes that the direct talks are either premature or undertaken without sufficient confidence that the parties are ready and able in their own domestic constituencies to make progress. The other believes that the United States

must now show itself to be willing to carry out its “obligation” to see in fact that the parties make progress.

The former involves some hard work in building the domestic constituency in each party’s home base to support the project. With Israel that will require helping shape the current coalition closer to what the Prime Minister in the end will need for success. Or alternatively, we will see a process move in the direction of new elections and a potential shift to the center and center-left. These are difficult requirements. To see success here requires a triumph of hope over reality.

Similarly, on the Palestinian side there is the not too far distant issue of Hamas. The split remains between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA)—essentially the inheritors of the Fatah/PLO leadership of the independence movement. It is unlikely that we will see an early reconciliation. Here the Arab states have been helpful in the past and could be so again in the future. The United States role has been to move from vocal and active protests and harassment of Hamas under the Bush administration to a quiet posture but with no give on the Quartet preconditions for engagement.

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These are a renunciation of violence, agreement to accept previously agreed peace settlement provisions and “recognition” of the State of Israel. The U.S. could help facilitate such a reconciliation, but on its own is probably not capable of effecting it.

Israel’s role is crucial. Since Israel is in indirect, and probably direct, contact with Hamas to assure its own interests, including the exchange of Hamas/Palestinian prisoners for Gilad Shalit, a captured Israeli soldier, it too can and does have a role to play. That role may be positive or negative. On the positive side, it may move from indirect negotiations for a swap to more direct contacts. On the negative, it can continue to insist that there is no way Hamas can become involved.

How much flexibility there exists on either side is yet to be determined. That may well come in time. Some of that will be a calculation on the part of Hamas as to how much it is prepared to pay to be engaged in the end game. Some of it will relate to the kind of deal over future Palestinian governance the key Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, can broker. And finally, a certain amount of that future relationship will be influenced by Iran, a growing supporter of Hamas. Many believe that while Hamas cannot be in at the beginning of the process, the process cannot end without some incorporation of Hamas. This might well take place along lines reasonably closely related to the Quartet conditions. In addition, Hamas takes the position that in the end it will be guided by the will of the Palestinian people. The expression of that will through a referendum is a current part of the Hamas approach to the negotiating process. For them this is coupled with the idea that they should be willing to let the PA, Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) and his team do the negotiating for the Palestinians.

Iran has in recent years not been far away in its influence on the process. In addition to its support for organizations capable of blocking or interrupting the peace process, Iran’s nuclear program has made a major intrusion into the key issue for Israel as it engages in the process – its security in the region. The use of force against Iran by Israel and/or the United States would more than likely set back if not end for a long time any possibility of a settlement of the Palestinian issue.

No one is calling for an Iranian presence at the table – and rightly so. But at the same time it is difficult to ignore Iran as an influence in any number of ways. The remainder of this article is directed toward outlining that influence and examining some of the ways it can be dealt with by the United States.

Iran and the Region

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran took the position that there was no place and no role for Israel in the region.

Over time, differences inside Iran became more apparent in the expression of the Iranian position. Some in and around former President Khatami introduced the concept that Iran would be ready to support whatever might be agreed by the Palestinians. Others, including President Ahmadinejad, espouse views based in Holocaust denial and the expulsion of the State of Israel from the region.

Iran has supported organizations committed to violence in achieving these objectives, not just with rhetoric, but with arms and munitions, training and advice, both directly and through its close links with Syria.

Even more importantly, beginning two decades ago with the revival of the Shah's nuclear program by the current theocratic regime, ostensibly for civil nuclear power production purposes, concerns in the region and the West grew about Iranian interest in a nuclear weapon. This has even begun to overshadow concern about Iran's negative approach to the Middle East peace process.

Israel, which before 1979 had enjoyed good relations with Iran, has become very concerned that a nuclear Iran would pose an existential threat to the country. This concern has been buttressed by the public expressions of leaders like President Ahmadinejad and others regarding Israel and the Holocaust. The linkage with organizations which have and in the future could conduct rocket attacks against Israel has raised the level of concern. Israel has moved in a number of ways to try to counter the impact. Israel remains wedded for a number of reasons to a policy regarding its own nuclear activities of neither affirming nor denying its capabilities. In the past, this approach has been expressed by statements that "Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East." And Israel, when pressed on the question of a nuclear-free Middle East has said that it cannot contemplate such an arrangement unless there is a settlement of the outstanding problems in the region.

In the meantime, and for a number of years, Israelis have contemplated and spoken about the use of military force to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. For some time, Israeli intelligence projections have also stressed the notion that Iran is only a year away from a military nuclear capability. The definition of what that might actually mean has been uncertain and may have varied from time to time. But the import has been clear: Israel would take military action to prevent such a situation

from arising. At times, Israel has also reportedly urged the United States to take the lead and carry out such an action on its own. The United States has not wavered in its security commitment to Israel. At the same time it has become clear that President Bush and now reportedly President Obama have said to Israel that they would not support such an approach and counseled against it. The United States has continued also to state that "no options" are off the table.

Timing and Intent

What might be done about this nexus of issues? They raise serious problems for Israel. They are also, while not a central part of the peace process, issues which have an inescapable connection with and therefore an influence over what might happen at the negotiating table and at the direct talks.

Three central questions are important here. Where is Iran going with its nuclear program? Is there time to resolve the issue? If so, what can be done about it?

We know much about Iran's nuclear program and we are unsure of other aspects. Most outside observers agree that Iran is pursuing a civil nuclear power program. They harbor a degree of uncertainty about military intentions. These in turn are stimulated by the secrecy in the Iranian program, intelligence material showing an interest in nuclear warheads and a related set of questions posed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's atomic watchdog. Iran is a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It has accepted IAEA inspection and monitoring. Iran has from time to time entered into negotiation with key European players—France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom—along with China and latterly with the United States. Those discussions

have gone quiescent for the moment. Their objective is to assure that Iran complies with its NPT obligations and does not produce a nuclear weapon. There are differences over how to accomplish this and under what conditions. The United Nations Security Council has required Iran to stop enriching uranium, at least temporarily, and imposed sanctions.

On October 1, 2009 the United States and others proposed through the IAEA an arrangement which would use Iranian-produced low enriched uranium to fabricate fuel elements for a reactor in Tehran which produces medical isotopes. This approach was accepted provisionally then rejected by Iran and then revived with the assistance of Brazil and Turkey. An almost opposite course on acceptance and rejection has been followed by the United States. The proposal, should it eventually be agreed upon, has not only the possibility of marking a first step toward a broader nuclear arrangement with Iran. But perhaps more importantly, it could facilitate the opening of a dialogue between Iran and the international negotiating group. This could be a dialogue within which the U.S. and Iran might be able to proceed bilaterally to discuss the range of issues between them.

Timing is everything in diplomacy and other pursuits. Two items reflect cogently on this question. A U.S. National Intelligence Estimate, now several years old, noted that in 2003 there was significant evidence that Iran was not proceeding with a weapons program. A new report is supposed to be under preparation. Public information varies on the potential findings on this critical question. Recently, a senior U.S. official said that should Iran undertake to build a weapon now, and do so on a "crash" basis, it would take at least a year to accomplish the task. Further, it was made clear that Iran has not made such a decision. Many

believe also that we would know about such a decision because the IAEA inspectors would have to be expelled by Iran in the course of pursuing a "crash" option.

Three Options

That leaves the question of what might be done. In recent weeks there has been a new spate of articles about military action by both Israel and the United States. One even postulated the use of nuclear weapons against Iran's program.

There are essentially three distinct options for going forward, with perhaps some variants among them.

One is to accept the fact that Iran cannot be stopped. This would require taking steps to delay, deter and stop any further proliferation in the region and beyond driven by Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. That might involve security guarantees by the United States to regional states. It might also involve a continuing robust U.S. presence in and around the region, at sea and otherwise, to make such a deterrent posture credible and palpable. But it would not answer Israel's concerns or our own. Many see this kind of future containment as preemptively capitulatory. While at the end of the day it may become an option, it is not now. Some elements of it might be put in place with other options.

A second approach is to use military force. The current interpretation of this is to use aerial strikes based on past Israeli precedents in attacking the Iraqi reactor called Osirak and the Syrian reactor at Deir ez-Zor. Some have postulated other approaches, by sea and by ground.

The Iranian program is well defended, well buried and may be well hidden.

The arguments in favor of this approach are based on a lack of time to act, an assertion that Iranian counters to this approach can be handled, and that no other approach shows possibilities of being effective or as effective.

The arguments against this approach are that there is time to try other options some which have not yet been tried, that the use of force itself is not likely to be effective in destroying the program and that the Iranian reactions to these cannot be easily countered.

With respect to the effectiveness of a military attack, the Iran nuclear program has been buried in part, scattered, and hidden also in populated areas. The certainty of getting all of the targets including eliminating all of the defense systems, even with multiple strikes, is low. Intelligence may not reveal all of the targets.

In addition, Iran has many ways of responding. One might be to use such an attack as the reason and indeed the driver to go for a nuclear weapon. Iran might shut down its own oil and gas exports to all except close friends. Efforts to block the Strait of Hormuz, with its high intensity sea-borne oil and gas shipments, might be another. Direct retaliation against Israel by rocket attack from Hizbullah and Hamas cannot be excluded. Similarly, the negative impact on Muslims around the world would not serve U.S. interests. Asymmetrical terrorist attacks could well be stepped up. Al-Qa'eda would certainly exploit such an attack to build its recruiting of cadres and strengthen its affiliates as well as use them for further attacks around the globe. The impact on the Arab-Israeli peace process could well be severe.

This list while not complete constitutes the main risks.

A third option involves negotiation and diplomacy, buttressed with pressure and persuasion, including both sanctions and inducements.

The current approach, aside from the October 1 proposal, demands an Iranian cessation of enrichment and a response to outstanding questions from the IAEA with acceptance of IAEA safeguards on the entire program. There have been indications that after a period of full transparency and good performance on the part of Iran, further enrichment activities consistent with civil nuclear needs would be allowed. Certainly that would need to be defined further and more clearly through negotiations.

Further, to establish confidence in Iran's program would require more robust inspection based on the IAEA Additional Protocol. An effective trade off might be to offer Iran acceptance of continuing enrichment under multinational supervision and ownership inside Iran in return for enhanced inspection. Iran has apparently just broached a similar idea regarding enrichment to Russia as a potential multinational partner.

Dialogue with Iran would also be beneficial to the U.S. and Iran if the scope were broadened to include many if not all of the outstanding issues. It should be entered into without preconditions on either side. Some of the high priority issues to be addressed with Iran include Afghanistan and Iraq, drug trafficking, regime change, outstanding financial claims, and the development of future relations. There is a clear need to do so on the basis of equality, mutual respect and dignity.

Conclusion

While the linkage between Iran and the Middle East peace process is mainly indirect, the impact could be severe. Israel has been reported to have told the U.S. no progress with the Palestinians, or indeed Syria and Lebanon, could be made until the Iranian nuclear issue was dealt with. The U.S. side has made it clear that failure to make progress toward a satisfactory conclusion of the Middle East peace process is hampering the U.S. engagement and threatening its troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There is no easy choice between which comes first—Israel-Palestine and Israel-Syria or Iran nuclear and related issues. They will have to be addressed in tandem. The use of force against Iran would make any settlement between Israel and the Arabs much more difficult. On Iran nuclear issues, diplomacy supported by a strong military posture and by careful articulation of pressures and inducements, opens the door for progress in the interest of both sides. Diplomacy can also assist us in understanding whether a proposal that provides all that Iran is ostensibly asking for, while at the same time builds the strongest safeguards against the misuse of that activity to build a nuclear weapon, will be acceptable or not. If yes, then the process can move forward with confidence. If not, then we have confirmation that our worst fears are justified and we will need to increase the pressure to find a mutually acceptable answer.

There is some time to open discussions on the Iranian issues and that time should be used wisely. In addition, there are openings for a negotiating option not heretofore developed—more effective inspection in return for safeguarded enrichment—which could offer opportunities for progress and even a mutually beneficial conclusion.

We have learned to our distress that the use of force, other than as a last resort in self-defense, carries with it enormous liabilities and costs in lives and treasure. And while there is no certainty in diplomacy, there is a strong certainty that force is not an effective substitute for diplomacy. Similarly, there is a certainty that if diplomacy is not tried, diplomacy cannot solve the problem.

The complexities of the Middle East once again require that we lead as a great power. They also require that we address a plethora of issues—and that we do so with strategy and a clear head. We don't have a choice about whether we "walk or chew gum." Both are imperative and we should use the time we now have to move ahead on these question so critical to our own security and national interests.

The views expressed in US/MEPolicy Briefs are not necessarily shared by the U.S./Middle East Project or the editors.

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