

WEANING OURSELVES OFF WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST? OR PREPARING FOR ISRAEL'S WAR?

Gary Sick speculates that all the seeming confusion in the Obama Administration's policy on Iran may be an attempt to create political space to shift our policy on Iran. After laying out some Leon Panetta flip-flops in December and the latest scientist assassination and the "False Flag" response, he describes Obama's political problem with trying to shift relations with Iran.

The Obama administration has three problems with the Iran issue.

First, it is an election year, and the Congress is determined to impose total sanctions against Iran's petroleum sector. In a sense, this is the ultimate stage of the sanctions process. For 16 years, the United States and its allies have piled more and more sanctions on Iran for the avowed purpose of getting Iran to change course on its nuclear program. It didn't work. When the sanctions started, Iran had zero centrifuges. Sixteen years and many sanctions later, Iran has about 8,000 operational centrifuges and a substantial stock of low enriched uranium.

In this process of ever-accelerating sanctions, we have arrived at a point where sanctions begin to blur into actual warfare. If the sanctions succeed in their purpose of cutting off nearly all oil exports from Iran, that is the equivalent of a blockade of Iran's oil ports, an act of war.

It was always said that the failure of

sanctions would leave nothing but war as an option. It was not always appreciated that, at a certain level, sanctions and warfare would converge. With the latest sanctions rider on the Defense Authorization Bill, reluctantly signed into law by President Obama, the Congress has maneuvered the executive branch into a tacit declaration of war.

Second, it is my judgment that the Obama administration has looked hard at the potential effects of getting dragged into a war with Iran and has decided that a return to the negotiating track is essential.

But third, the Netanyahu government distrusts the diplomatic track. Israel signals as strongly as possible that it is prepared to strike unilaterally if necessary; and it uses those threats as leverage to keep the situation at a constant crisis pitch, while pressing for the most extreme sanctions. Israel's influence is not to be underestimated, particularly in an election year and with an Israeli prime minister who makes no attempt to conceal his disdain for President Obama.

As illuminating as I think Sick's speculation to be, even there the story is muddled. He links to Jim Lobe's post describing that an Israeli-US joint defense operation planned for March has been delayed. The CNN story reporting that suggests the US postponed the operations just before Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey visited Israel. But as Laura Rozen reported, Israel, not the US, postponed the exercise.

A major U.S.-Israeli missile defense exercise that had been planned to take place in the spring has been postponed due to a request by the Israeli Defense Ministry, American and Israeli officials

told Yahoo News Sunday.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak issued a request to the Pentagon last month that the planned joint exercise be postponed, a U.S. official told Yahoo News Sunday.

"It was Barak," the U.S. official said on condition of anonymity.

The Jewish Telegraph Agency's Ron Kampeas **reported** earlier Sunday that the exercise was being postponed, ostensibly because of "Israeli budget cuts."

But American officials are privately concerned that the Israeli request for a postponement of the exercise could be one potential warning sign that Israel is trying to leave its options open for conducting a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities in the spring. In that case, it would not wish American forces to then be on the ground, the thinking goes.

Meanwhile, a key Knesset committee chairman ended a meeting today by accusing Bibi Netanyahu, who was at the meeting, of lying about the economy, diplomacy, and the defense budget. (h/t Laura)

Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee chairman Shaul Mofaz put an end to a committee meeting that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was participating in Monday afternoon, yelling at the prime minister. He later told reporters, "The citizens of Israel should know that their prime minister is a liar."

An hour earlier, a spokesman from the Prime Minister's Office put out a statement alleging that Mofaz said IDF Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz did not report truthfully about the defense budget and expenses. Mofaz

vehemently denied making the statement.

[snip]

What Netanyahu did in the committee, the Kadima MK added, “no prime minister has ever allowed himself to do ... He is lying to Israel about the economy, lying about diplomacy, and as of today he is also lying about the most sensitive parts of the defense budget.”

It sounds like they've got false flag operations going on even within the Knesset in Israel!

And rather than executing some kind of master chess move, the Administration seems, instead, to be desperately pushing both sides not to start a war—with less success convincing Israel.

U.S. officials briefed on the military's planning said concern has mounted over the past two years that Israel may strike Iran. But rising tensions with Iran and recent changes at Iranian nuclear sites have ratcheted up the level of U.S. alarm.

“Our concern is heightened,” a senior U.S. military official said of the probability of an Israeli strike over U.S. objections.

[snip]

The planned closing of Israel's nuclear plant near Dimona this month, which was reported in Israeli media, sounded alarms in Washington, where officials feared it meant Israel was repositioning its own nuclear assets to safeguard them against a potential Iranian counterstrike.

Despite the close relationship between the U.S. and Israel, U.S. officials have consistently puzzled over Israeli intentions. “It's hard to know what's bluster and what's not with the

Israelis," said a former U.S. official.

And while Sick portrays this as three-dimensional chess, there are at least two more key dimensions. First, there's the election, with key Bibi allies like Sheldon Adelson dumping huge money into a now-aborted attempt to take Mitt out. All that money—and not just the money in Newt's SuperPAC—will soon be focused on Obama. And as Sick knows better than anyone, this crowd won't necessarily stop at political ads.

Then there's the Chinese, who thus far have balked at the latest round of sanctions, all the more so as the US sanctioned a Chinese firm last week. And even as the Obama Administration has struggled to pressure Iran in an effort to prevent Israel from starting a war, China and Saudi Arabia have been getting cozy.

Top oil exporter Saudi Arabia said Monday it inked an agreement with China to enhance cooperation between the two countries in the development and use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes.

The deal, signed Sunday, sets a legal framework that strengthens scientific, technological and economic cooperation between Riyadh and Beijing, according to a joint statement. It seeks to enable cooperation in areas like maintenance and development of nuclear power plants and research reactors, manufacturing and supply of nuclear fuel elements.

[snip]

Saudi Arabia plans to spend more than \$100 billion on 16 nuclear reactors planned to be built by 2030 to meet its growing domestic energy needs, the kingdom's former Saudi intelligence chief and former ambassador to Washington, Prince Turki Al Faisal, said last year.

The cooperation agreement between Saudi Arabia and China comes amid intensifying international pressure on Iran over its controversial atomic energy program, which the Islamic republic says is only for peaceful purposes, while the U.S. and other Western states suspect it's aimed at developing nuclear weapons capabilities.

Ultimately, of course, China will do what it needs to make sure its energy needs aren't hindered by American global and Israeli regional hegemonic goals. Which means it may well hold the most important cards—and could well aim to bring out a realignment while we're distracted. Unlike Americans, after all, the Chinese are noted for their skill at playing multi-dimensional chess.

It's not clear what's going on—or whether even the Obama Administration knows what's going on. It might well work out with some space for new efforts in the Middle East. But it's not sure we'd be the ones to benefit from it.