

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter [redacted]
Sent: Sunday, March 4, 2012 12:04 PM
To: H
Cc: Abedin, Huma; Cheryl Mills; Jacob J Sullivan (SullivanJJ@state.gov)
Subject: Best thing I have seen on Israel/Iran taking account of Israeli domestic politics, by someone who really knows them

B6

This is long but an extremely valuable read, complete w/ strategy for stopping Israel w/o committing US to a war. It's by Daniel Levy, who directs the Middle East Project at the New America Foundation and is one of the most thoughtful and knowledgeable analysts out there. NB in particular the connection b/w the settler movement and support/opposition for an Israeli strike.

Netanyahu Won't Attack Iran

(Probably.)

The intensity of background spin emanating from Washington and Jerusalem threatens to leave very little to the imagination in advance of the March 5 meeting between U.S. President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Various U.S. officials, current and former, named and anonymous, have shared their **skepticism regarding Israel's ability** to inflict decisive damage on Iran's nuclear-enrichment program, as well as their trepidation at the costs, consequences, and **retaliatory attacks** that might follow from an Israeli strike. These same officials have intelligence-driven doubts as to whether Iran even has any intention of crossing a nuclear threshold to weaponization. Their Israeli counterparts, meanwhile, push home the need for the United States to draw red lines beyond which there will be an American commitment to military action (with former Israeli intel chief Amos Yadlin taking the case to the *New York Times'* **op-ed pages**) and suggest that **Obama would be to blame** in the event of an Israeli strike. Subtle it isn't.

Meanwhile, most of the rest of the world is holding its breath, convinced that yet another military confrontation in the Middle East will have disastrous consequences, especially during such a tumultuous period in the region, including for the global economy, with energy prices already hitting **new and unexpected highs**. Even those regional leaders who might privately welcome a military poke in the eye for Tehran do so against the wishes of their own publics and with uncertainty as to what else might unravel in the wake of a strike.

Curiously missing in this flurry of coverage has been a more considered assessment of the internal dynamics in play for Israeli decision-makers and how those might be most effectively influenced. Too often, the calculations of Israel's leaders are depicted as if this were a collection of think-tankers and trauma victims given a very big and high-tech army to play with. Netanyahu represents the latter, guided by his "**existentialist mindset**" and his 101-year-old

historian father. (The *Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg **drew heavily on the father-son relationship** in his assessment 18 months ago that an Israeli strike on Iran was imminent.) Peter Beinart has **written**, "Benjamin Netanyahu has only one mode: apocalyptic." And the prime minister often depicts contemporary realities as akin to 1938.

In **Shalom Auslander's** new novel, *Hope: A Tragedy*, the lead protagonist, Solomon Kugel, discovers a living and elderly Anne Frank in his attic, at one level seemingly a metaphor for the identity politics of contemporary American Jewry -- we all carry Anne Frank around with us in our heads. Bibi Netanyahu can sometimes sound like an Israeli version of Solomon Kugel, the difference being that in the Israeli "attic" we keep both Anne Frank and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the two apparently merging when it comes to the prime minister's depiction of the threat posed by Iran and how it should be handled.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, by contrast, is portrayed as the rational, calculating calibrator of the "**zone of immunity**" when it comes to Iranian technical progress on the nuclear front and the precision of Israeli bombing thereof. When Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman, in a lengthy and splashy *New York Times Magazine* essay, answered in the affirmative his own question of whether Israel would attack Iran, his assessment relied overwhelmingly on conversations with Barak.

The case for the likelihood of an Israeli strike on Iran largely rests on these twin pillars: Bibi's sense of existential danger and Barak's calculating military mind. But though it is not unreasonable to suggest that historically driven angst and national security considerations will factor significantly in Israeli decision-making, it is wholly misleading to ignore and factor out of the equation Israeli politics, as is consistently the case in media coverage.

Netanyahu operates in a highly political environment. Israel is a rambunctious (though certainly imperfect) democracy, in which reelection is a matter of more than passing interest for any prime minister. While Defense Minister Barak may be a serial risk-taker whose days of electoral viability are behind him, those things are certainly not true of Netanyahu. Bibi has served twice so far as Israel's prime minister and is close to becoming the second-longest-serving PM in Israel's history.

A tendency characterizing Netanyahu's long term in office, and a counterintuitive one at that, is the degree to which he has been risk-averse, not only in matters of peace, but also in matters of war. No Operation Cast Leads, Lebanon wars, or Syria Deir ez-Zor attack missions under his watch. In fact, he has no record of military adventurism. What's more, Netanyahu hardly appears to be in need of a Hail Mary pass, military or otherwise, to salvage his political fortunes. Polls consistently show that he is a shoo-in for reelection. The right-wing block in Israel currently has a hegemonic grip on Israeli politics, something that seems unlikely to change. Netanyahu secured his own continued **leadership of the Likud** party in Jan. 31's primary. His primacy on the right faces few challenges from either

within the Likud or beyond it. Despite never winning favor with much of the mainstream media, the **messy management** in his own office, and the challenges of coalition balancing (particularly over issues of religion and state), Netanyahu maintains solid approval ratings with a relatively strong economy and can even now bask in Israel's **lowest unemployment numbers** in 32 years.

Although it is fair to speculate that a successful, daring mission to the heart of Iranian airspace would be domestically popular and a boost to the prime minister, such a mission is anything but risk-free. Not only would the specific military action be fraught with uncertainty and potential hiccups, but the fallout from a strike, even one successful in immediate terms, could have far-reaching repercussions and consequences for Israel in the security and diplomatic arenas and by extension, of course, in the domestic political domain. The Hebrew expression *she'yorim shotkim* ("silence when shooting") is used to describe the phenomenon whereby domestic criticism of the government is suspended when military action is under way. The problem for Netanyahu is that all signs point to that rule not applying in this case. Former security establishment figures at the highest levels have **mounted an unprecedented campaign** warning Israel's leader and its public of the follies of launching a solo and premature Israeli military action against Iran. Most outspoken has been recently retired Mossad chief Meir Dagan, who has described a strike on Iran as "**the stupidest thing** I have ever heard." But he has not been alone. Other former IDF chiefs of staff, as well as Shin Bet **and intel leaders**, have joined the cautioning chorus. Many are unlikely to shut up if Bibi defies their counsel. And in the public arena, these voices cannot be dismissed as just so many self-serving chickenhawk politicians. The fallout from an attack on Iran is possibly the biggest threat to Bibi serving a third term.

Another oft-overlooked aspect is the absence of public pressure in Israel for military intervention or of a supposed Iranian threat featuring as a priority issue for Israelis. The pressure to act is top-down, not bottom-up. And to the extent to which there is trepidation among the public, that is a function of fear at the blowback from Israeli military action, rather than fear of Iranian-initiated conflagration. Also to be factored in is the possibility of 2012 being an election year in Israel (though technically the current parliament could serve until October 2013). If Netanyahu does pursue early elections, as many pundits expect, then the political risk associated with an attack increases, heightened by the likelihood of a strike being depicted as an election ploy. What's more, prices at the pump are an issue for Israeli voters, just as they are in the United States.

Especially noteworthy is the extent to which the elements of Netanyahu's coalition further to his right have not embraced or promoted military action against Iran. In fact, they tend to demonstrate a lack of enthusiasm at the prospect. This applies to both the ultra-Orthodox and the greater Israel settler-nationalists. One reason is that they view the Iran issue as peripheral when compared with, say, the pursuit of settlements and an irreversible presence in all of greater Israel. In fact, a strike on Iran is sometimes depicted as presenting a threat to the settlement enterprise, in as much as there is an expectation that part of the fallout would be enhanced pressure on Israel to tamp down

resulting regional anger by displaying more give on the Palestinian front. With so many in the settler movement convinced that the irreversibility of 40-plus years of occupation is within touching distance, the last thing they want now is to rock the boat by creating new and unpredictable challenges to their cause. From the outside, that may seem a stretch, given the American and international timidity with which every new settlement expansion is greeted. Yet concern is voiced in settlement circles when the likes of *Haaretz* Editor in Chief Aluf Benn makes the case for an Itamar (a hard-core ideological settlement) **in exchange for** Natanz (an Iranian nuclear facility) -- an idea that has led some errant Israeli peaceniks to **flirt with joining the pro-war camp** on Iran.

The more settler-centric right is also cognizant of the distraction value served by the Iranian nuclear issue in deflecting attention from its land grabs and entrenchment in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Chances are, settlements won't be making any headlines in next week's Obama-Netanyahu meeting. Thus, removal of Iran from the agenda is a losing proposition for the settler lobby. Netanyahu himself surely appreciates the extent to which this comes in handy, in that focusing on Iran (although not *attacking* Iran) allows Israel to line up together with the West in the camp of the "good guys" for once, as opposed to in the doghouse on the Palestinian issue. Want a sense of just how well this distraction serves the greater Israel cause? Take a look at Goldberg's **latest interview with Obama** for the *Atlantic* -- 4,561 words and not one of them mentions the Palestinians or settlements.

Finally, in the "maybe Netanyahu won't attack after all" column, Israel's leadership is aware that its nonmembership in various nuclear accords and its assumed weapons-of-mass-destruction capacity will be dragged more harshly into the spotlight following an Israeli strike -- not something that is likely to lead to precipitous Israeli disarmament, but unwanted, unpleasant, and unpredictable, nonetheless.

So, an Israeli strike is far from inevitable. But let's go a step further. A more granular appreciation of the Israeli scene may help identify points of influence to focus on if war opponents are to diminish the prospect of precipitous Israeli action.

First there is the role of Barak. The above political considerations do not apply to him. He is the antidote to Netanyahu's risk-aversion and, in this instance, strengthens all of Netanyahu's worse tendencies. Alongside Barak, Israel's three security agencies (the IDF, Mossad, and Shin Bet) have undergone changes at the top over the past year. The previous chiefs were (**according to reports**) outspoken in their opposition to a strike on Iran. The new chiefs are apparently less robust in asserting that position. Israel might consider that not acting in the current circumstances will lead to a sense of "crying wolf" and that Israeli threats down the line would begin to lose credibility. And to take military action now would be in keeping with **Israel's response posture** to date toward the Arab Spring -- a porcupine-like hunkering down and displaying of quills and, in this case, a reaffirmation of what Israel likes to call its power of deterrence.

Obama might opt for developing a strategy that confronts all this head-on. He should begin by focusing his political calculations and risk-avoidance instincts laser-like on March 5's guest -- Netanyahu. Even the most junior politician in Israel knows that Netanyahu is a character who can be pressured, especially when he is anyway uncertain, as in this instance. So, keep making the case for the downsides associated with military action, how dicey and perilous the consequences could be, especially in the context of regional turbulence. Drive that message home in the military-to-military dialogue (as seems to be happening), thereby strengthening the collective spines and anti-solo-strike predilections of Israel's new security chiefs, and pursue a carefully calibrated freezing out of the troublemaker Barak.

At the same time, work Netanyahu's coalition allies by encouraging all their pre-existing neuroses about where a strike might lead on other fronts, notably in the Palestinian arena. Given the **intensity of traffic** between Jerusalem and Washington, have those U.S. senior officials, especially the uniformed ones, briefing the other members of Israel's security cabinet and, if necessary, their rabbinical sages. Finally give maximum impetus to renewed nuclear talks, following Iranian chief negotiator **Saeed Jalili's recent letter** to EU foreign-policy chief Catherine Ashton. (Israel is **already trying to sabotage** renewed negotiations via enrichment-suspension preconditions.) If a diplomatic avenue is shown to have some traction, then this will be an additional factor complicating any immediate Israeli move to action. Ultimately, the U.S. narrative on Iran should shift gears more comprehensively by right-sizing the Iran threat, de-emphasizing the nuclear issue, and acknowledging Iran's **diminished status post-Arab Spring** -- but that is a project for after Nov. 6.

The other alternative is for the president to give the Israeli leader what he is apparently clamoring for -- a deeper U.S. commitment to act militarily if Iran crosses certain red lines. That might look like a win-win at first glance. Obama avoids the prospect of another war or cleaning up after an Israeli strike during this reelection season, gets Congress and Republican candidates off his back on Iran, and can even wrap his **newfound belligerence** in the claim that he has consistently promised that all options are on the table. Netanyahu, meanwhile, stays within his comfort zone -- no hard choices, no risks, and a smooth reelection, while driving U.S. policy further in his direction and claiming a win in Washington (again). Obama appears to have set off on this path in that new interview with Goldberg, emphasizing that U.S. policy on Iran **"includes a military component,"** adding for good measure "I don't bluff."

If indeed Netanyahu is less keen on a strike than his posturing would have us believe, and if 2012 for Israel's leadership is in fact less about "zones of immunity" that Iranian facilities may acquire and more about "zones of impunity" that a U.S. election year confers on Israeli policy toward Iran, then perhaps this has been the Israeli intention all along: to checkmate the United States by locking it into a logic of confrontation down the road. Israel's

position has, after all, been relatively clear in preferring a "stars and stripes" rather than a "blue and white" label on the military taming of Iran.

If Obama pursues such a formula and this helps avoid war in the tricky months ahead, it is not to be sneezed at. But at the same time, there is a very real downside to this approach. It carries the promise of greater problems and escalation ahead -- making a negotiated solution ultimately less likely, possibly provoking Iran, and placing Israel in the very unwise position of cheerleading America into a war.

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