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Obama's Dangerous 'Red Line' on Iran

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Never did the Republican presidential field look more clueless than in the sharp contrast between President Obama's nuanced Iran policy and the collection of GOP war advocates, especially now that the United States and Iran have formally [agreed to resume negotiations](#). Mitt Romney's bombast, even though his actual policy recommendations differ little from Obama's, Rick Santorum's war cries and Newt Gingrich's foaming anti-Muslim rhetoric mark them as clearly unpresidential at best. At worst, they look like Benjamin Netanyahu's Greek chorus.

But let's not let Obama off the hook. Earlier this week, I [wrote](#) about Obama's well-designed putdown of Netanyahu, and he followed that up by treating the Republicans as if they were misbehaving children who don't understand that real people die in real wars. Today I want to write about what's wrong with Obama's policy on Iran.

Some antiwar types cheered when Obama refused to endorse Netanyahu's so-called "red line" for war, namely, that Israel and/or the United States should strike Iran when it develops some nebulous and ill-defined capability to manufacture a weapon—and that's fine. On that Obama is correct. But there are plenty of problems with Obama's own "red line," which he defined as concrete evidence that Iran is moving toward militarizing its nuclear capability, say, by rushing

to refine its stockpile of enriched uranium to weapons grade, kicking out the IAEA inspectors and overtly or covertly going for a nuclear bomb.

Even if Iran were to do all those things, and even if Iran were to acquire a bomb, it's still a terrible idea to go to war. For years, inside the White House, there's been a debate over exactly that: What to do if Tehran acquires, or almost acquires, a bomb? Because it's difficult to talk about in public, especially to an electorate radicalized by the Israel lobby, the neoconservatives and the GOP, the White House has said next to nothing about its discussions over policy toward a "post-nuclear" Iran. In his speech to AIPAC, the president pleased Israel's leaders by saying explicitly that he opposes "containment" of a nuclear Iran, and he emphasized that his policy is to prevent that from happening.

But short of war, and if negotiations fail, there's not much Obama can do to prevent it. So, smart people in the administration know that they'll have to develop a policy to live with it.

So Obama's red line is a dangerous error. He's committing himself to war, or something like it, if Iran gets the bomb or gets close. That's not only dangerous but it's politically stupid, because then if Iran gets the bomb either Obama has to go to war—with awful, unspeakable consequences, or he'll look like he backed down.

Paul Pillar, a former top US intelligence official, [wrote recently](#) in *The Washington Monthly* that war with Iran is a bad idea even if Tehran gets the bomb. In a piece entitled, "We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran," Pillar said:

One must ultimately ask whether the conjectured consequences of an Iranian bomb would be worse than a war with Iran. The conjectures are just that. They are not concrete, not based on nuclear doctrine or rigorous analysis, and not even likely. They are worst-case speculations, and not adequate justifications for going to war.

That's why it's passing odd that [in a full-page ad](#) in the *Washington Post* this week, paid for by the National Iranian American Council, a stellar group of former US military and intelligence officials, including Pillar, joined NIAC is saying: "Preventing a nuclear Iran is rightfully your priority and your red line."

That's too vague, and it lacks Pillar's own courage in stating the obvious: that setting any red lines at all vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear program is a bad idea. If we "can live with" Iran's bomb, then why is that a red line? As Obama clearly told AIPAC, he's ready to use American military force if Iran crosses that red line.

As Leon Panetta, the secretary of defense—who's clearly in over his head—[told AIPAC](#):

"Military action is the last alternative when all else fails. But make no mistake, when all else fails, we will act."

God help us.

The second thing wrong with Obama's Iran policy, which will be tested soon, is that so far he's been unwilling to state the obvious: that Iran will not abandon its nuclear program, and that Iran has every right to enrich uranium on its own soil and through its own technology. Though he's flirted with this idea, and so has Hillary Clinton—Senator John Kerry has said it explicitly—it's time Obama to offer Iran a simple deal: You can enrich uranium, but in exchange we want the right to intensified inspections of Iranian facilities by the IAEA to ensure that the program isn't being militarized.

Negotiations with Iran that say, "Stop enriching uranium, period!" will go nowhere, fast.

Now that the P5+1 have agreed with Iranian diplomats to resume talks, the pressure will be on Obama to make concessions like that in exchange for Iranian concessions. In an election year—for the United States, 2012, and for Iran, 2013—it just isn't likely. Whatever else happens, both sides are probably going to maintain their inflexible no-deals policy through Iran's presidential election in June 2013.

A final word on "containment." Containing a nuclear Iran is a bad idea if it means containing it through a vast military buildup in the Persian Gulf, building a military alliance with Arab nations of the gulf against Iran and adopting a cold war-style approach. A better word than "containment" can be found, inspired by Pillar's idea that the United States can "live with" an Iran that has the bomb. Perhaps, rather than containment, Obama can call it something else, and I'll let the White House's public relations shop figure that out—as long as it means avoiding war and avoiding the creation of a NATO-style "Maginot line" in the Middle East.