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## Bargaining intensifies over Iran strike

By Victor Kotsev

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So heated and so public has become the debate over whether Israel would and should attack Iran in the fall that the editor-in-chief of the Israeli daily Ha'aretz remarked sarcastically in an editorial: "[Israeli Prime Minister] Benjamin Netanyahu and [Defense Minister] Ehud Barak deserve a medal for their contribution to strengthening Israeli democracy. For the first time a broad and noisy public debate is taking place over whether to go to war, with the encouragement and participation of the prime minister and the defense minister."

The donnybrook among both Israelis and Americans is quickly turning into a free-for-all; the dominant narrative that Jerusalem is feverishly pushing for a strike while Washington is feverishly pushing back, while not necessarily wrong, is proving simplistic.

In both countries there are different camps and sub-camps divided over the issue, which are simultaneously grappling and bargaining with each other, while trying to jointly bargain and grapple with the Iranians. The Iranian camp is equally diverse and divided, and other American allies, such as Saudi Arabia, are bringing their own narrow interests into the dispute. The result: a genuine mess.

It is generally believed that Barak and Netanyahu are the two chief hawks in the Western camp, while United States President Barack Obama is the top dove. Some heavy blows were exchanged among the three in the last weeks. Obama's recent pressure on Barak and Netanyahu, epitomized by a series of visits by top US officials in Jerusalem, resulted in an explosion of rhetoric and positioning.

To name a few key incidents: the hawks retaliated by leaking information on a brand new American National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), which reportedly reverses previous findings, arguing that Iran has accomplished significant progress toward building a nuclear bomb. To quote the Israeli defense minister, "As far as we know it brings the American assessment much closer to ours."

If confirmed, this information about the 2012 NIE would constitute a serious coup for the war camp. Needless to say, the entire American decision-making process is far more complex than just Obama's, and the weight of established bureaucratic procedure is palpable even in the president's office.

Thus, the 2007 NIE, which stipulated that Iran had "halted" its military nuclear program in 2003, arguably tied the hands of former US president George W Bush (whether the latter, previously known as a hawk, was happy to have his hands tied at that point, is the subject of another debate). Similarly - though to the opposite effect - the 2012 NIE could help force Obama's hand to start a war down the road.

At the very least, the leak would make it harder for Obama to keep negotiating with Iran. Ironically, in the immediate American response to the reports we can find some of the very few existing signs that the talks are still alive: White House Spokesman Jay Carney told Ha'aretz on August 9 that the administration would not comment on the information and remains focused on the negotiations.

Still, the White House took only a few days to return the blow, in the face of the top American soldier, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US armed forces General Martin Dempsey. Dempsey's comments that Israel could "delay but not destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities" were widely perceived as a "punch" in the faces of Barak and Netanyahu. [1]

Shortly afterwards, Netanyahu introduced the new Israeli home front defense minister, former Shin Bet (counter-intelligence) chief Avi Dichter, who resigned from his opposition seat in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) in order to join the government.

Importantly, Dichter also joined the so-called security cabinet - the body of eight, now nine, who make important security decisions such as the decision to attack or not to attack Iran. Rumor has it that the security cabinet was split in the middle over the Iranian nuclear program, and that Dichter is likely to support Netanyahu and Barak. [2]

Not only that message to Obama; a series of former Israeli officials and military analysts stepped forward and offered publicly the information that if, essentially, Obama commits to attacking Iran by June 2013 (in the absence of a peaceful resolution to the issue), Israel would agree to hold off from striking on its own in the run-up to the US presidential election in November (which also roughly coincides with the time when bad winter weather sets over Iran, greatly hampering any strike).

Some Americans also made proposals in a similar vein, and one Israeli report even claimed that Obama had accepted the deal. [3] Much of the speculation currently centers on whether there

will be a meeting between the Israeli and American leaders around the time of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in late September.

In many ways, this is a stereotypical Middle Eastern bazaar response when met with the intractable wishes of a powerful (or wealthy) stranger: everything has a price, and the stronger the stranger's desire, the higher the price becomes (some military gear and cash gifts are also reportedly under discussion).

Incidentally, Middle Eastern bargaining is also usually accompanied by flowery story-telling, and both camps have their own apocalyptic scenarios and counter-arguments. Still, Obama might personally profit from such a deal. It would allow him to polish his security credentials - which already received a boost with the killing of Osama bin Laden last year - in the run-up to the vote while simultaneously avoiding a war and kicking the Iranian problem further down the road.

He has often been accused by critics of handling foreign policy issues in the latter way, but if he can persuade both domestic hawks and doves that he is doing their bidding, and that right before the vote, it might work for him spectacularly for once. (If Iran collapses economically meanwhile and surrenders its nuclear program peacefully, he would have hit the jackpot.)

The exchange continues. Amid a flurry of leaks and reports in the Israeli press, which some observers speculate were aimed at preparing the Israeli public psychologically for war, Israeli President Shimon Peres (recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and incidentally one of the architects of Israel's own nuclear program) came to Obama's aid on Thursday.

"Now, it's clear to us that we can't do it alone," Peres said in an interview with the Israeli TV Channel 2. "We can delay [Iran's nuclear program]. It's clear to us we have to proceed together with America. There are questions about coordination and timing, but as serious as the danger is, this time at least we are not alone."

It had been widely accepted that Peres was the most prominent Israeli opponent of a strike, but this was his official joining the fray, and his comments reverberated loudly. Ha'aretz published a cartoon of him jumping out of a birthday cake - he turned 89 earlier this month - and firing at Netanyahu and Barak with a sub-machine gun. Moreover, when the prime minister's people protested that the president had "forgotten his place", former Israeli president Yitzhak Navon, 93, jumped to Peres's defense.

Add to their camp a number of former security heavyweights - most importantly, the legendary spy chief Meir Dagan - and it is very hard to claim that the doves in Israel lack historically grounded or authoritative voices.

Nevertheless, it is hard to call who will have the last say. What is truly remarkable about the Israeli debate is that it goes contrary to all military doctrines of the Jewish State, which rely heavily on the element of surprise.

Consequently, some observers have concluded that the Israeli behavior is a complex bluff designed to focus the international attention better on the Iranian nuclear program - a remarkably

successful bazaar strategy. Others, however, contend that all the noise actually serves to desensitize the listeners and to create an environment in which the most surprising action paradoxically ends up being the one most frequently discussed - namely, an attack.

Still others caution that Barak and Netanyahu themselves are uncertain which it is, and a war might start without anybody truly wishing it. (Though the latter may sound incredible, there are plenty of historical paradigms for it.)

Ironically though predictably, a lot comes down to the interplay of economics and cold geostrategic calculations. Thus, for example, it could be that some in the corridors of power in Washington would like to see a war between Israel and Iran - if only to test how a future hypothetical missile exchange between the US and China might play out.

As Robert Haddick writes in Foreign Policy,

The outcome of an Israel-Iran missile war will have profound implications for military strategies and investments in Asia. The expansion and modernization of China's ballistic and cruise missile forces is a recurring topic in the Pentagon's annual reports on China's military power. In a recent study CSIS performed for the Pentagon, it noted the vulnerability of US military bases in the Pacific to missile attack and recommended increased missile defenses and dispersal of airfields and aircraft around the region.

Should a lopsided outcome occur in an Israel-Iran missile war, military planners on all sides would likely scramble to reassess their assumptions. Should Arrow and the US Navy's missile defense systems sweep a large Shahab-3 raid from the skies, American planners would undoubtedly gain confidence in their ability to sustain a forward presence in the Western Pacific in the face of China's growing missile forces.

By contrast, should Iran succeed in pummeling Tel Aviv and other targets in Israel, US policymakers would likely develop doubts about the long-term future of their forward-basing plans in the Pacific. The outcome of a missile war would also affect the long-running debate over funding the Pentagon's troubled effort to build limited defenses against intercontinental missiles. [4]

On the other hand, economic considerations seem to be the primary factor holding back a strike. The potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the catastrophic effect the resultant spike in the price of oil may have on world economy has received much attention.

Less known are the effects to the Israeli economy in particular. According to one recent report, the Jewish State stands to lose as much as US\$42 billion over the five years following the war. [5] Even just the threats are reportedly hurting Israeli businesses, with foreign customers requesting additional guarantees. [6]

The hawks, of course, will argue that the costs of Iran producing a nuclear bomb would likely be higher, yet this is not an argument that can easily be verified - or, in all likelihood, quantified in specific amounts of money. Moreover, it could be that Tehran's own economic woes, given enough time, will bring the ayatollahs to their knees and prevent a war.

As a result of the ever-harsher sanctions to which the Islamic Republic is subjected, Iranian oil production is down (exports even more so), the Iranian currency has collapsed in value and the prices of most goods have skyrocketed. Many ordinary citizens are now priced out of foods such as meat, creating much anger and misery.

While the government is reportedly mulling a "multi-tiered exchange rate" akin to that introduced by Venezuela in 2010 in order to subsidize indirectly basic commodities, it is particularly telling that, according to some accounts, it has started to censor images of chicken from movies and TV.

Such an Orwellian situation attests to great distress, as do the ever-uglier Iranian counter-threats. On Friday, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called Israel "a malignant cancer, an insult to humanity", and expressed his hope for "a new Middle East, with no memory of the American or Zionist presence". A high-ranking Iranian general chimed in, saying that he would welcome an Israeli strike since it would give the Iranians an excuse to "get rid of Israel forever".

It is inconceivable that the hardship will not reach the Iranian nuclear program soon, if it isn't doing so already. Still, whether this will happen soon enough to prevent a war, and how much time is on the clock, is not known.

***Notes:***

1. US punched Bibi, Barak in the face, Ynet, August 15, 2012.
2. Netanyahu's pick for home front defense minister - a vote in favor of Iran strike, Ha'aretz, August 15, 2012 (registration required).
3. Obama set to assure Israel that, if all else fails, US will attack Iran by June 2013 — TV report, The Times of Israel, August 14, 2012.
4. This Is Not a Test, Foreign Policy, August 17, 2012.
5. War with Iran could cost Israeli economy \$42 billion, The Times of Israel, August 19, 2012.
6. 'Debate over Iran strike is bad for business', Jerusalem Post, August 20, 2012.