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Counterpunch

Bomb, Bomb, Bomb Iran

by VIJAY PRASHAD
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Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu seemed inspired by the Road Runner cartoons, Glenn Beck and Reverend Gene Scott. The bizarre, almost hand drawn, "bomb" in one of his hands was complemented by the red marker in another: man enough, Bibi suggested, to draw his own red lines. He doesn't need the Americans.

The last time someone came to the UN General Assembly and did one of these amateur presentations, the US went to war. Poor Colin Powell would come to regret his February 5, 2003 speech where he laid out one exaggeration and falsehood after another that led to the US war on Iraq. As Powell put it two years later, "I'm the one who presented it on behalf of the United States to the world, and it will always be a part of my record. It was painful. It is painful now." Bibi is not one to apologize. His is the swagger of the non-combatant, eager to send others to war, eager for others to taste its misery.

What was Netanyahu's case against Iran? That Iran is close to having a nuclear bomb. This is an old saw from Bibi. In 1992, as a Member of the Knesset, Netanyahu predicted that Iran was "three to five years" from a nuclear weapon. He was wrong in 1992, and he is wrong now. Take the case of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) recent reports on Iran. The Director General of the IAEA provided a report to the IAEA's Board of Governors on August 30, 2012. If you are able to get through the bureaucratic and legalistic verbiage, you'll get to the two important sentences: (1) that the IAEA is confident about "the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran"; and

(2) that the IAEA can “conclude that all nuclear materials in Iran is in peaceful activities.” By the IAEA’s standards, Iran has not diverted its materials to nuclear weapons use. In other words, Iran remains on track with a program that President Eisenhower’s administration championed, Atoms for Peace (at his 1953 speech to the UN General Assembly).

Indeed, it was under the Eisenhower program that the US leased Iran 13.2 pounds of low enriched uranium to get the program going. On March 5, 1957, the US and Iran signed an agreement “for cooperation in research in the peaceful use of atomic energy.” Eleven years later, on July 1, 1968, Iran signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and by 1974 Iran completed the IAEA’s Safeguards Agreement. India’s successful nuclear weapons test in 1974 intrigued the Shah of Iran, who, it is said, considered, but did not develop, a covert nuclear program. India did not sign the NPT, tested nuclear weapons once more in 1998, and despite receiving nuclear materials through the 2006 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement continues to be outside the NPT regime. The hypocrisy of this need not be explicated.

Avner Cohen’s [*Israel and the Bomb*](#) (Columbia, 1998) documents Israel’s nuclear weapons program from the Dimona project before 1967 to its crossing the nuclear threshold before the Six Day War, and into the construction and development of the Negev Nuclear Research Center. The book also highlights the correspondence between Israeli Ambassador to the US Yitzhak Rabin and US Deputy Secretary of State Paul Warnke, where it becomes clear how the US colluded with Israel to mask its nuclear weapons program and accepted its reasons for ignoring the NPT. Rabin asks Warnke, “What is your definition of nuclear weapons?” Warnke replies with two points, “the definition of what is and what is not a nuclear weapon, and what is and what is not introduction into the area.” The first part of the definition is fairly clear-cut: if Israel has the components of the bomb, regardless of its state of assembly it would count as a weapon. The second part allows Israel “ambiguity,” with Warnke elaborating on the idea of “introduction” with the remark “that is your term and you will have to define it.” They agreed that if Israel does not test its weapons publically, then they would not be considered to be a nuclear weapons state.

The ambiguity around the term “introduce” is the reason why Shimon Peres told Khaled Dawoud in 1999, “Israel has not tested any nuclear weapons, and without the test, you cannot even introduce. It is a commitment that Israel gave to the world and the United States of America and we are very serious. Israel said that we are ready to sign the ban on nuclear tests. Not only did we not do a nuclear test, but we are not going to have one. These are guarantees that Israel is not going to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East.” Israel’s own red line is “introduce.” Iran is being given a much lower threshold.

What is the real reason for the antipathy against Iran’s nuclear program? It is certainly not the question of a nuclear program under NPT rules and with IAEA inspections. There is no smoke here, nor fire. An honest reading of the IAEA materials shows that there is little anticipation that Iran is close to or even interested in a nuclear weapons program. Meanwhile, outside the NPT and outside IAEA inspections, Israel already has a nuclear

weapons program even if it hasn't, to its own standard, *introduced* nuclear weapons to the region.

The real reason is not whether Iran can have a nuclear program (or even nuclear weapons), but *who* can do so. Four countries have nuclear weapons programs outside the NPT: India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan. Three of them are US allies and one of them sneaked under the barriers when no one was looking (the US was then obsessed with Iraq). Iran cannot have a nuclear program because, we are told, it might move this into a weapons direction and because it threatens its neighbors. This is a legitimate fear, but it is not unusual to Iran. One forgets that Cuba, for six decades, has lived with the fear of annihilation, with the political class in the US routinely and casually passing a death sentence on the beleaguered island. The question of an "existential threat," as the Israelis put it, has been held over Cuba without any eyebrows raised in Washington. The principle at work here is no longer that countries that threaten their neighbors should not have nuclear weapons. The point seems to be allies of the US/Israel are acceptable; non-allies are unacceptable. This is not a principled objection to Iran's nuclear policy, but a political one.

If Israel was serious about the principle of a nuclear-free Middle East, it would immediately sign onto the most important proposal made in this UN General Assembly session thus far: when Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi called for the creation of a Nuclear Weapons Free zone in the region by the end of 2012. The problem is that Morsi's proposal will be blocked by two powers: the US and Israel. A Nuclear Weapons Free Zone would mean that the US would not be able to bring its nuclear weapons to its bases in the Middle East and nor can it use depleted uranium in the weapons that its ships carry into the Gulf. "The only solution is to get rid of nuclear weapons," Morsi said, "and all weapons of mass destruction." However, "we also emphasize the right of all countries of the region to the peaceful use of nuclear energy within the framework of the NPT, with a commitment to honor their obligations in this respect and provide the necessary guarantees to the countries of the region so as to remove any doubts surrounding their intentions."

Morsi's sensible suggestion is buried beneath the shoddy coverage in the US media that concentrates on Ahmadinejad's antics (although he was uncharacteristically subdued this year) and on Bibi's baseless threats. The UN Charter emphasizes that its role is to fight for disarmament, not simply conflict prevention. The Charter is closer to Allen Ginsberg's advice to the US about atom bombs (in [Howl](#)) than it is to the cynical use made of its chamber by Colin Powell in 2003 and now Netanyahu.