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On Ehud Barak's Way Out, Statements on Iran He Knows to Be Misleading

By John Glaser

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Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak says he's retiring. But on his way out, he has determined to make hysterical statements about a war on Iran which are totally divorced from reality and which contradict previous statements he's made regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Spencer Ackerman at Danger Room reports ^[1] Barak, in a press statement with US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, said Iran needs to be "coerced" into giving up its ambitions to build a nuclear weapon.

"Of course, we would love to see some heavenly intervention that will stop them, to wake up some morning and learn that they've given up on their nuclear intentions," Barak told reporters at the Pentagon Thursday during a joint press conference with Leon Panetta, his American counterpart. "You cannot build a strategy based on these wishes or prayers. Sanctions are working and they are more hurting than anything I remember from the past vis-a-vis Iran, but I don't believe these kinds of sanctions will bring the ayatollahs to a moment of truth where they sit around a table, look into each other's eyes and decide that the game is over."

... "During the coming year and hopefully before they reach what I have called a 'zone of immunity'" — a point at which Israeli airstrike couldn't meaningfully hinder Iranian nuclear work ^[2] — Iran "will be coerced into putting an end to it this way or another way," Barak said. "The physical attack option is an option that should be there, should remain on the table, never be removed."

Barak is basically saying that Iran is determined to get nuclear weapons, has not yet been deterred from this goal, and needs to be coerced in order to end its quest. But when UN reports and Israeli intelligence confirmed ^[3] that Iran irreversibly diverted large portions of its enriched uranium towards peaceful medical research – a clear indication that it's intentions are not to weaponize – Barak said this set back Iran's nuclear enrichment program almost a year.

And no less than three months ago, Barak acknowledged that Iran's leadership has not made the decision to develop nuclear weapons and that it's nuclear posture is defensive in nature. He told CNN in August:

[Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini] believes that he is penetrated through our intelligence and he strongly feels that if he tries to order [development of a nuclear weapon], we will know it, we and you and some other intelligence services will know about it and it might end up with a physical action against it.

So he prefers to, first of all, make sure that through redundancy, through an accumulation of more lowly enriched uranium, more medium level enriched uranium and more centrifuges and more sites, better protection, that he can reach a point, which I call the zone of immunity, beyond which Israel might not be technically capable of launching a surgical operation.

So Iran is refraining from building nuclear weapons, while responding to the threat environment imposed by the US and Israel by expanding their available low and medium enriched uranium so as to deter aerial bombardments or invasion. As renowned international relations theorist Kenneth N. Waltz recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs* ^[4], “Such a breakout capability might satisfy the domestic political needs of Iran's rulers by assuring hard-liners that they can enjoy all the benefits of having a bomb (such as greater security) without the downsides (such as international isolation and condemnation).” As I wrote at the time ^[5] of Barak's statement:

Here it is admitted that Iran is thinking rationally and defensively. The real concern, Barak says, is allowing Iran to enter a “zone of immunity” wherein it can deter attack or invasion. How dare the ayatollahs deprive Washington and Tel Aviv of the right to attack a weak and defensive Iran!

The whole story about how ‘we need to attack an aggressive Iran determined to get nuclear weapons’ falls apart under Barak's admission above. First, if Iran has no nuclear weapons program (something admitted widely in US and Israeli officialdom), then there is no conceivable imminent threat and thus no attack is justified. If Iran is demonstrably intimidated by the threats from the US and Israel – that is, if it is acting defensively vis-a-vis its nuclear program – then current US/Israeli capabilities are proving sufficient to deter an Iranian attack whether it has a bomb or not (As Lt. Gen. Ronald Burgess, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, told the Senate ^[6] in February: Iran “is unlikely to initiate or intentionally provoke a conflict or launch a preemptive attack”), and thus an attack is not justified.

Finally, what the pro-war crowd can't seem to grasp is that an attack on Iran would be most likely ^[7] to push them towards reconstituting ^[8] their nuclear weapons program.

Even on his way out of politics, Barak can't resist making public comments he knows to be misleading. But then again, that is what the bulk of the Iran debate has been about.