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Preparations for a Hit against Iran: Stopping Israel's Next War

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach
3/20/2010

“A new war in the region is inevitable.” This is the pronouncement made by Mohammad Seyyed Selim, political scientist and professor at the universities of Cairo and Kuwait. Prof. Selim delivered his forecast on February 13, in a program on Nile TV’s “Cairo Watch,” in which I also participated. The moderator, Mohamed Abdel-Rahim, started off by asking what crisis situations in the region were most acute; Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict were the obvious answers.

That war is on the agenda, Selim noted, is beyond doubt. Israeli political and military leaders have been broadcasting such bellicose intentions loudly enough for the deaf to hear. Yossi Peled said he thought conflict with Hezbollah was inevitable. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman warned the Syrian government that if it were to intervene in an Israeli-Lebanese conflict, it would disintegrate. As if that were not sufficient, the Israeli Mossad had staged a Hollywood-style extravaganza to murder Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai on January 20. Four days later, Netanyahu declared that Israel would maintain control over parts of the West Bank for all eternity. He followed up with the announcement that Israel would designate three sites on the West Bank as part of Israel’s national heritage. These were all deliberately crafted provocations, aimed solely at eliciting a violent response from the other side: perhaps that Hezbollah would kidnap an Israeli soldier, or that Hamas would lob a few rockets across the border to Israel. Fortunately, to date, their response has been measured.

Whenever Israel threatens military action against Hamas, Hezbollah, and/or Syria, it is certain that the actual target is Iran. This was the case in the 2006 war in Lebanon, and in the 2008 year-end aggression against Gaza. (See: “[The Target is Iran: Israel’s Latest Gamble May Backfire](#),”). As a preparation for a hit against the Islamic Republic in both cases, Tel Aviv was attempting to remove from the scene, or at least weaken, those factors in the region which could respond militarily and politically. Israel lost both wars, albeit at a heavy price for the civilians of the targeted populations. Now it is gearing up for renewed attacks, in tandem with an artfully orchestrated international campaign around Iran’s alleged nuclear bomb program.

The targeted nations and political movements are well aware of this fact. It is no coincidence that the leaders of those forces joined in a public display of solidarity on March 4 in Damascus. As pictured in major media, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad hosted talks with Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah. Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and other Palestinian rejection front representatives were also on hand. There is no need to inquire into the agenda of their talks. They are preparing for the worst case scenario: a direct Israeli attack.(1)

Whether or not the ongoing escalation will spark conflict-- one that would quickly spread beyond the region—will depend on several interrelated considerations: first, will the U.S. embrace the suicidal option of endorsing and/or joining an Israeli “preemptive” strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities? As a corollary, will leading Arab states allow themselves to be pummeled into acquiescing to yet another disastrous conflict? Then, will the Iranians fall into the trap being laid for them, and react according to profiles drafted in psychological warfare think-tanks, by responding in terms of brinkmanship? Or will they elude the trap with determined but cool-headed political and diplomatic initiatives? Further, will other world powers, namely Russia and especially China, wield their clout to prevent such a scenario? Finally, will the growing censure of Israeli methods catalyze a change inside Israel itself?

The Casus Belli: Nuclear Energy

Ostensibly, the impetus for renewed calls to attack Iran came after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced on February 11 that scientists had achieved 20% enrichment. There followed the ritual exclamations of condemnation on the part of the major powers, especially those in the 5+1 group (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany who have been engaged in negotiations around the issue).

A week later, the new Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukiya Amano, issued his first report on Iran, which all but the Chinese seized upon like vultures preying on carrion, to claim that it confirmed Tehran’s alleged intentions to build an atom bomb, and to demand new action to force Tehran’s compliance. A worldwide mobilization unfolded, spearheaded by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and flanked by the French and Germans. Chancellor Angela Merkel chimed in with her vow that tougher sanctions would be imposed on Iran. Either such sanctions would be voted up in the U.N. Security Council, or, in the likely event that China refused, they would be imposed outside the U.N. framework. Merkel went out of her way to say that the Europeans should declare independent sanctions (for reasons we will see below). (2) As for Israel, its leaders turned up the volume in their demands for

“crippling sanctions, or else,” meaning: if the international community were not disposed to take effective action against Iran, then Israel would go it alone with a military strike.

The Nuclear Issue: An Objective Overview

Iran’s achieving levels of uranium enrichment of 20% entailed nothing illegal, according to the IAEA’s own Non-Proliferation Treaty guidelines. NPT signers like Iran have every right to develop enrichment technology for civilian energy production purposes. The new IAEA report (www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2010/gove2010-10.pdf), which the international press blew utterly out of proportion, nowhere stated that Iran had violated NPT guidelines. It said that “While the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material in Iran, Iran has not provided the necessary cooperation to permit the Agency to confirm that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities” (p. 9). Iran, it said, had declined to discuss certain issues with the Agency or to provide related information and access, “asserting that the allegations related to possible military dimensions to its nuclear programme are baseless and that the information to which the Agency is referring is based on forgeries” (p. 9). The IAEA was accusing Iran of having committed a sin of omission, i.e. withholding information which the agency would otherwise have required. The report recorded that “Contrary to the relevant resolutions of the Board of Governors and the Security Council, Iran has continued with the operation of PFEP [Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant] and FEP [Fuel Enrichment Plant] at Natanz, and the construction of a new enrichment plant at Ferdow. Iran has also announced the intention to build ten new enrichment plants” (p. 10). Again, to repeat the point: there is nothing in the NPT that forbids a signatory nation to enrich uranium or to build enrichment facilities. Iran issued an official rebuttal on March 2. (See “Iran’s Nuclear Program: Tehran’s Reply to the IAEA on the ‘Implementation of Safeguards in Iran,’ by the Permanent Mission of Iran to the IAEA, 2.3.2010, www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=17975.)

Proceeding from the assumption that Iran’s program is military, the Security Council has demanded that Iran stop enrichment. To acquire nuclear fuel, Iran is supposed to ship its low enriched uranium abroad, where it would be enriched to a higher degree, then sent back for use. Several versions of this proposal appeared during late 2009/early 2010, among them, one that foresees the establishment of an international uranium enrichment bank with Iranian participation; this might be located in Russia or Kazakhstan, both leaders in nuclear fuel production. Turkey has voiced its willingness to be the site for the transfer of Iranian uranium to be further enriched and shipped home. France and Japan were other options.

Iran has engaged in considerable back-and-forth posturing in response. It agreed in principle to enrichment abroad, but insisted on guarantees for orderly and prompt delivery. It then demanded that the transfer of such uranium be made on Iranian soil. Tehran’s apparently contradictory stance reflects deep mistrust, based on past history: France reneged on a nuclear deal with Iran in the past, and Russia, which completed the Bushehr plant, postponed delivery of nuclear fuel for years, and even to the present day continues rescheduling the final start-up date. In early March, Iran again expressed willingness to cooperate in a plan to have its uranium enriched abroad. This time, Japan was in discussion. On March 17, Iran announced its readiness to exchange 1200 kilograms of low enriched uranium for 120 kilograms of high grade uranium. Iranian sources say they don’t want more proposals, but a concrete Memorandum of Understanding.

The Nuclear Issue: A Historical Overview

Iran did not start developing nuclear technology yesterday. In 1974, at the time of Shah Reza Pahlavi, a close ally of the West, Iran had outlined an ambitious program for introducing nuclear energy as a motor for economic development. The plan called for the installation of 23,000 MWe by 1994, equivalent to 40% of projected national energy consumption, through plants purchased from France, the U.S. and Germany. The famous Bushehr plant dates back to this era, when the German firm KWU had the contract. Iran participated in enrichment facilities in other countries, and was to purchase its enriched uranium abroad. (3)

This prompts the question: If the U.S. and Europe not only okayed an Iranian nuclear program, but organized and financed it under the Shah, why is this a casus belli today? Prof. Selim's explanation is that the target of Western attacks against Iran's program is not the physical program itself, but rather the scientific and technological know-how that it entails. Iranian scientists today possess this know-how, and that is what the Israelis, among others, object to. Israel in fact not only bombed the Iraqis' Osirak reactor in 1981, but, more importantly, conducted a systematic campaign of targeted assassinations throughout the 1980s against leading Iraqi scientists, deploying hit squads to kill them whenever they ventured abroad for scientific conferences, etc. (4) The program launched under the Shah would have given Iran nuclear energy, but under the tight control of his Western sponsors. Therefore, it was no risk. Today it is a different story, a story entitled technological apartheid.

Nuclear Power Israel

The issue that the IAEA document (and the international and regional discussion it has ignited) should have put on the table -- but did not -- is Israel. When reading that report and reviewing the sanctimonious pronouncements by heads of state about how this bloody Persian Gulf monster must be stopped, any politically informed person or party must object and ask: but what about Israel? Why, one should ask, don't we have or demand such periodic reports on the progress of Israel's nuclear program? Why doesn't U.S. President Obama or Secretary of State Clinton compel Israel to prove to the international community that it has no intentions of developing a nuclear weapons program? Obviously, because it already has one and everyone knows it. Israel has refused to adhere to the IAEA guidelines or to sign the NPT. It has pursued the policy of "ambiguity:" never admitting it has nuclear weapons, but always asserting it would never be the first to deploy them. Current estimates hold that Israel has nuclear weapons and 250 or so warheads to deliver them.

This "don't ask/don't tell" policy regarding Israel's nuclear capability has been accepted by the international community. When U.S. President Barack Obama was asked to name a nuclear power in the region, he could only hem and haw.

Thus, when Israel, the sole nuclear power in the region, begins to rattle its sabres, fear sweeps the neighborhood. On Nile TV, the question arose: Well, what if Iran, in response to the Israeli bomb, were to develop a nuclear weapons capability? What would that mean for Israel? In reality: nothing. Even if Iran were to test a nuclear weapon, that would not necessarily

destabilize the region, Prof. Selim said. He recalled the dynamic during the Cold War, and in the later development of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and India; this did not lead to war, but rather to deterrence. I had heard the exact same argument from an Israeli strategic analyst during a conference in Berlin in 2006 on Iran. He had stated the obvious: if Iran has nuclear weapons, for us Israelis that is no problem. We have a credible deterrent.

Now it appears that U.S. policy-shaping circles have also begun to debate the merits of a containment policy, were Iran to achieve such a capability. Zbigniew Brzezinski was quoted by the New York Times saying he thought containment would function because the Islamic Republic “may be dangerous, assertive and duplicitous, but there is nothing in their history to suggest they are suicidal.”

(www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/weekinreview/14sanger.html) The same issue is featured in Foreign Affairs magazine.

So the panic and frenzy generated by reports of a possible Iranian bomb are vastly exaggerated.(5)

Could Israel Go To War?

There is no doubt that the current Israeli establishment is exploiting hysteria around Iran’s nuclear program to pursue war against Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria, and the Islamic Republic itself. This does not mean they would or could win these wars. Were the Israeli establishment (God forbid) to attack Iranian nuclear sites with aerial bombardments all Hell would break loose. Iran would not roll over and die. Enough scenarios in the public realm make clear that such an adventure would be militarily futile and politically suicidal. A recent war games scenario conducted in the U.S. drove this point home again. (See “War Games shows how attacking Iran could backfire,” by Warren P. Strobel, www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/02/21/.)

There remains the political question: Could war against Iran be thinkable under the Obama Administration? To attack, Israel would need a green light from the Pentagon. The Nile TV moderator wanted to know: Would they get it? Prof. Selim thought it was indeed possible, an answer which reflected the widespread disappointment in the Arab world with Obama’s actions—as opposed to his words in highfalutin speeches. I said, yes, anything is possible, including under an Obama regime, but not inevitable, for one simple reason: Although it is the U.S. President, as Commander in Chief, who ultimately makes the decision, there are other powers in the Washington establishment who shape policy. Just as the world witnessed under the reign of the psychologically labile President George W. Bush, who was personally and politically committed to war, other factors came into play to thwart his worst designs. The NIE report of October 2007, which asserted that Iran no longer had any nuclear weapons program, threw a monkey wrench into the neocons’ war plans and postponed war.

Similarly now, military spokesmen from the U.S. have tendered their opinion that Tehran is not in possession of such weapons, and others have warned outright against the Israeli use of force. U.S. General David Petraeus told Reuters on February 3 that a strike against Iran “could be used to play nationalist tendencies.” US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen warned Israel against “unintended consequences” of an attack. During his early March visit to Israel,

Vice President Joe Biden also told Tel Aviv hold off on any military adventure. Whatever more radical tendencies in Washington may exist, the military establishment, which is already overburdened with the disastrous engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, will maintain the hardnosed view that war against Iran, from a purely military-strategic viewpoint, would be folly.

Another alternative being debated in Washington is regime change. CFR president Richard N. Haas raised this in Newsweek in late January, arguing that “The United States, European governments, and others should shift their Iran policy toward increasing the prospects for political change.” Measures would include outspoken support for the Iranian opposition, sanctions, and new funding for documenting human rights abuses, etc. Iranian-American Trita Parsi appears to have come over to this viewpoint as well; if not overt support, which would be counterproductive, he calls for waiting it out until things change inside Iran. (6) A number of well-known neocons like David Frum and William Kristol, are talking up regime change. (7) If it is true that the leader of the terrorist Jundullah group in Iran has been financially and politically controlled by the U.S., this means covert operations are already well underway. Such operations would tend to backfire, and merely exacerbate tensions between the U.S. and Iran. Iranian history warns against attempted regime changes from abroad.

Israelis Descend on Germany

In its campaign to mobilize political opinion against the “perceived” Iranian danger, the Israeli establishment has opened all stops. Significantly, it was Germany that the Israeli elite chose for its full court press in Europe. On January 19, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Berlin, together with Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Industry, Trade, and Labor Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, Technology Minister Daniel Hershkowitz, and National Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau. The group met with the German cabinet in a joint session which both termed “historic.” In their press conference, Netanyahu and Merkel confirmed that the focus of their talks had been Tehran’s nuclear program, and Germany’s “historic responsibility” to guarantee Israel’s security. Israeli President Simon Peres (father of the Israeli nuclear weapons program), followed on January 26, and was granted the special honor of addressing the Bundestag,

Peres had many things to say, but the leitmotif of his statements to the Bundestag and in newspaper interviews was unambiguous: “It is wrong to consider Iran only as a threat to Israel. The country is a danger for the entire world,” he told the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (January 23, 2010). “The Iranians want to dominate the Near and Middle East,” and cast their ambitious glance also into Latin America. “It is a new imperialism, which is religiously motivated and embellished at the same time,” said, adding that “there can be no compromise with religious fanatics like those in Tehran.” Asked what would happen if Iran had the bomb, Peres answered, “The Near East would 100% sure arm itself with nuclear weapons: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt would follow behind. The day that the Iranians were to have atomic weapons, it would be too late to stop this development.” Ergo, the need for action. And Germany is obligated to agree: “The special relationship between Germany and Israel rests more on values than interests. It is a moral alliance.”

Assuming they were addressing a sympathetic audience, the Israelis pressed for tough sanctions, if not more. But all did not go quite according to the script. Not only did demonstrators protest the joint cabinet meeting, but the Goldstone Report on the Gaza war appeared in a complete German translation just as the Israelis arrived. In his interview to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Peres betrayed deep insecurity regarding the deterioration of Israel's image in Germany and the world. Asked for his views of the younger generation, he referred to polls "which surprised me: in them, some Germans consider Israel more dangerous than Iran." He said Germany and Israel were bound to fight anti-Semitism, racism, etc., worldwide, but that they should not forget that "Israel at the same time is still endangered. This the young Germans do not understand." Asked outright if his country were losing respect worldwide (outside the U.S.), Peres retorted, "That's not true. On the contrary: Israel is the most beloved country in the world," a claim he backed up by pointing to excellent relations with the Catholic church and the Evangelicals (who "are the biggest Zionists ever"), cooperation with populous nations like India and China, and so on. He also stated, "The best place for Jews is Israel; that also goes for Germany." When interviewers Frankenberger and Roessler insisted that Israel had lost sympathies in Europe, Peres admitted there "might" be problems with some countries, "but name me one country in the whole world that has as much support as Israel..." Then, confronted on the Gaza war, Peres lashed out, "The Goldstone Report is a scandal" and charged the U.N. with being "a political organization with an automatic majority against Israel." The Gaza war, he concluded, was a highly complicated affair. "But we are accused of having killed Arab civilians deliberately. That is crazy!"

Are Sanctions Possible, and Effective?

The Israeli deployment to Berlin was the opening salvo of a campaign aimed at arm-twisting reluctant members of the U.N. Security Council to impose tougher sanctions on Iran. Netanyahu went to Moscow, while Barak went with Moshe Yaalon and Stanley Fischer to Beijing. Clinton took off for a parallel tour through the Persian Gulf and then to Latin America.

The U.S. Secretary of State did her best to convince the Saudis that they should jump on the anti-Iran bandwagon, but the response was tepid. Clinton also urged the Saudis to use the oil weapon vis-a-vis China, that is, to promise Beijing larger fuel supplies in a bid to win the Chinese over to sanctions. The Jordan Times quoted a Saudi foreign policy official on February 17 to the effect that the Kingdom did not see the value of sanctions, and ruled out any military action. "We do not want a military strike," he said; "A military strike, we still believe, will be very counterproductive." Instead, Riyadh urged the U.S. to regain credibility by finally doing something on the Palestinian-Israeli front. In Brazil, she received a cold shoulder when she proposed that President Lula de Silva join in punitive actions against Iran. The Brazilian president insisted Iran had the same right as his country to nuclear energy technology.

At the time of this writing it is highly unlikely that the U.N. Security Council could agree on "crippling sanctions" against Iran. A draft prepared by the UK, France, the US, and Germany, then shared with Russia and China in early March considered toothless financial sanctions: the Iranian Central Bank would remain immune, but any new banks set up abroad would be affected. Russia ruled out any restrictions of military sales (such as the S-300 missiles it is to deliver) and China maintained its opposition. China, whose political leadership was not amused by Obama's

plans for weapons sales to Taiwan or his gracious hospitality towards the Dalai Lama, could wield its veto right, and that would be the end of that. Aside from China's principled stance against interference into the internal affairs of a sovereign nation, it has other good reasons to reject sanctions: Iran is a major supplier of its oil and gas, and China is Iran's number one foreign trade partner, accounting for 14% of its imports and exports in 2008. China and Iran are the two external poles of the land-bridge rail corridors across Eurasia, which are creating the transportation infrastructural networks for integrating the economies of the vast land mass.

If China were to forego its veto right and merely abstain in a UNSC vote, still there is no guarantee that the U.S. would get the required 9 out of 15 votes from among the non-permanent members, to pass a resolution. Rotating member Brazil sees eye to eye with Iran on both ideological and economic planes, and has no reason to endorse sanctions. Nor does Turkey. Lebanon, also a rotating member, finds itself on Israel's hit list alongside Iran.

If the Security Council were to fail to reach an agreement on new sanctions, then the losers could go for actions outside that venerable and discredited body. Angela Merkel's option, to sanction Iran on the basis of a coalition of the willing, could come onto the table.

Would sanctions work? Yes and no. To be sure, Iran has suffered under economic embargo conditions over the past 30 years since the Islamic Revolution. The all-too-frequent airplane crashes reported in Iran are often the result of outmoded, decrepit aircraft and the lack of adequate spare parts for repair. Now talk of new measures spread in the climate of a possible new war has encouraged some economic players to opt out. Several important firms, among them the German Siemens, have recently pulled out of Iran out of fear of a new conflict and/or concern about the economic/political fallout of increased regional tensions. Siemens chief executive Peter Löscher, made the announcement while Peres was in Berlin. Under U.S. pressure, German credit guarantees for Iran have been steadily dwindling over past years, though some smaller firms have remained. Germany is still Iran's foremost trading partner in Europe. Paolo Scaroni, chief executive of the Italian energy firm ENI, announced on February 4 that it would leave Iran, after completion of current contracts to develop gas fields. (8) Sanctions would likely end up hurting the population, not the government.

A Rational Way Out

Neither sanctions nor a new Israeli military assault in the region represent any solution to the problem. Either move would only worsen conditions. A new war would spell catastrophe for all.

If there is to be a rational way out, the U.S. is going to have to develop a policy for the region. Right now, in lieu of a policy, it is running a three-ring circus: in one ring is the giant America, flexing its muscles to hold back mad dog Israel on a leash with a muzzle; in the next ring are a trio of monkeys clipping the tail of peacock Iran, while Russian bears and Chinese pandas taunt them; and in the third ring is a dog-and-pony show featuring a Palestinian and an Israeli, endlessly going through the motions of the peace process dance. Meanwhile U.S. and allied military patrol the circus grounds to ensure that no one interrupt the performances.

A serious policy would entail a package comprised of one-on-one negotiations with Iran to reach a workable solution to the nuclear issue, and a commitment to overcome the 60-year-old Arab-Israeli conflict by exerting international political and economic pressure to force Israel to come to terms with reality. To draft a policy one would have to take the region as a whole into consideration and recognize Iran's potentially positive role as a major economic and geostrategic factor. Removing Iran's pariah status requires settling the nuclear issue in a mutually satisfactory fashion. In addition to the nuclear program, Iran is under attack for its support of rejectionist Palestinian forces and their allies (Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria). Were a comprehensive, just peace to be achieved between Israel and the Palestinians, that could change. There was a time when official Iranian policy was that Tehran would accept whatever the Palestinians agreed upon. Rhetoric notwithstanding, that could become the case again. Syria is also ready for peace, on condition the Golan Heights are returned, and so on.

First, Iran: What the Iranians want is nothing out of the ordinary. Tehran demands a square deal with the West, in the form of a direct dialogue with Washington, and/or in the 5+1 format on an equal footing. If the issue is honest concern about Iran's military ambitions, then they should settle it through a workable compromise, allowing Iran to trade its low-grade uranium for high-grade. Where, when, and how are the subject of talks, not the precondition. This approach may be gaining ground among some in Germany. Volker Perthes of the Berlin-based Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, wrote an OpEd for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on March 7, entitled, "The West should make an approach to Iran." He proposed accepting Iran's bid to keep 800 kilos of enriched uranium there under IAEA control, then exchange it for fuel rods. The West should seek cooperation with Iran in stabilizing Afghanistan and fighting drugs. In his view, if Iran did cross the threshold to military use, the U.S. missile defense systems in the region would provide a regional shield. (Several reports have stressed that the deployment aims at preventing Israel from moving militarily.)

Then, Israel: A solution to the decades-long conflict requires a totally new approach. Prof. Selim believes the time has come for the Arabs to redefine the relationship of forces, essentially junking all the proposals that have yielded nothing but betrayed hopes over the past years. It is time for the Arabs to stop making concessions in exchange for nothing. The most recent example of the capitulationist syndrome came in the Arab League's acceptance (under massive U.S. and Western pressure) of indirect talks with the Israelis, even without a halt to Israeli settlements. Then, just as Joe Biden arrived for talks in Israel, the government announced approval for 1,600 new homes in Arab East Jerusalem. Apologies for the "timing" of the announcement only added insult to injury. The Palestinians then had to declare they would reject any talks. But, for how long?

Vice President Biden's sharp rebuke, followed by Clinton's telephone blast at Netanyahu, was an important signal; it communicated to the Israelis that there are limits to how they can treat their leading ally and a superpower. To shift Israeli policy, however, the U.S. must move beyond rebukes. According to the March 17 New York Times, this crisis between Israel and the U.S., characterized by many as the worst in decades, is prompting Washington to consider an independent approach. The idea is that such a new American plan would catalyze a shift inside Israel, leading to the formation of a new ruling coalition. (www.nytimes.com/2010/03/18/world/middleeast/18diplo.html)

Shaking up the internal Israeli equation is indeed what is required. But how? Economic pressure, in the form of a total freeze on all U.S. aid to Israel, combined with a suspension of E.U. privileges to Israel, would have an effect. Whatever the elements of the new approach being mulled in Washington, clearly a complete stop of all settlement activity is a prerequisite. Instead of sabotaging the Hamas, the U.S. should facilitate the Fatah-Hamas rapprochement (which Prof. Selim believes could succeed) to allow for a united Palestinian front including democratically elected forces, to represent their people. The criminal blockade of Gaza must be lifted. Without such actions, there can be no illusion of credibility on the part of a “new” U.S. approach. Such gestures are indicative of what the Arabs require to redefine the relationship of forces. If the two-state solution is policy, that means an end to the occupation. Reportedly, the Quartet meeting in Moscow on March 18 touched on these issues.

Judging by past performance, any Israeli government would reject such demands out of hand, just as Netanyahu has continued to refuse a halt to settlement expansion. But, as one leading think-tanker put, the “time of truth” has come in U.S.-Israeli relations. Washington does have the power, if it wants to use it.

Subjectively, the time could not be more propitious for a concerted international drive to force a transformation in Tel Aviv. Israel’s standing in the world has been vanishing like snow under a hot spring sun, as even President Peres was forced to recognize. Israeli diplomats no longer feel free to travel abroad, fearing that international arrest warrants might be slapped on them as perpetrators of war crimes committed during the Gaza war. As reported in the March 15 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the Israeli government has launched a desperate public relations campaign, through a website for “Public Diplomacy and the Diaspora,” aimed at preparing Israelis to project a positive image of their country while travelling abroad. If citizens have to study government-issued brochures handed out at the airport, to learn how to defend the reputation of Israel, then the moral crisis the country has entered is quicksand.

In this moral confrontation, the Goldstone Report is a precious asset. The United Nations General Assembly voted on February 26 (98 to 7, with 31 abstentions, 56 not voting) to extend the call to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, by 5 months, to carry on investigations into the report’s findings. The E.U. declared on March 10 it would endorse the Goldstone Report. Tel Aviv’s pathetic attempt to quash it by furnishing pro forma responses instead of conducting an honest inquiry into the allegations has faltered utterly. Then, after reports of the Mossad’s spectacular show in the Dubai assassination grabbed headlines throughout Europe, governments in Berlin, Paris, London, and so forth had to make an ostentatious display of protest. (Whether or not the intelligence services of these countries had actually played along with the Mossad, making passports and identities available to their friendly Israeli secret services, the fallout in the public realm has been such as to totally blacken the already tarnished image of the Mossad and Israel itself.)

International pressure can become a powerful weapon, as seen in the response to the Gaza war. And such pressure from outside Israel can contribute to strengthening those inside the country which have mustered the civil courage to speak out. To date, those forces inside Israel, no matter how outspoken or militant, have not yet managed to unite in a single, national political

movement capable of challenging and eventually replacing the status quo. As German journalist and Middle East expert Peter Scholl-Latour has often remarked, the tragedy is that there is no one political party inside Israel which is really for peace. That remains to be created.

It may yet come into being. If so, it will come into being as a result of a profound crisis that shatters the self-confidence of the Israeli elite, a crisis triggered by growing awareness internationally of the fact that the Israeli establishment has engaged, yes, in war crimes in Gaza, in violations of international law by its Mossad hit squads, in continuing violations of human rights against the occupied Palestinian population, and so on and so forth. As I argue in my book (8), the Israeli elite and popular mindset must face these facts and must change. Israel needs such a healthy crisis, a crisis of moral, political, military, and cultural dimensions, which casts into doubt the historical justification of the Zionist experience, and thus the *raison d'être* of Israel. That process of profound critical rethinking among some Israeli intellectuals (like Ilan Pappé and Avraham Burg) is underway. Now is the time for international political action to move the process forward.

Notes

1. Prior to that gathering, they had each made public what Israel should expect in that event. Syrian Foreign Minister al-Muallem was quoted by Al Jazeera on February 7, saying, "If war breaks out in the region ... it will be widespread even if it is waged against [only] southern Lebanon or Syria." He warned Israel that if it attacked, "the war will move into your cities." It was not Hezbollah, but the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri who said, "there won't be division in Lebanon... We will stand against Israel. We will stand with our own people," PressTV reported on February 1.
2. The British had earlier put military action on the table. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in January hearings on the intelligence failures leading to war against Iraq in 2003, not only reaffirmed the correctness of his stance then, but added that the same applied to Iran today. Prime Minister Gordon Brown's subsequent testimony in early March only seconded his judgment.
3. Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani, "Iran," in *Nuclear Power in Developing Countries: An Analysis of Decision Making*, Edited by James Everett Katz and Onkar S. Marwah, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, Toronto, 1982, pp. 201-219.
4. See my book, *Through the Wall of Fire, Armenia – Iraq – Palestine: From Wrath to Reconciliation*, edition fischer, 2009, Part Two, and *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*, Raymond William Baker, Shereen T. Ismael, and Tareq Y. Ismael, Pluto Press, 2010.
5. Many Arab nations have responded to Iran's mastery of the technology by saying they, too, want this power source of the present and future. See *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East: In the shadow of Iran*, an IISS strategic dossier, May 20, 2008.
6. "Beyond Sanctions: How To Solve The Iranian Riddle," TIME, March 15, 2010.
7. Richard Haas, "Enough Is Enough," Newsweek, January 22, 2010, www.newsweek.com/id/231991. Steven Clemens of the New America Foundation and David Frum of FrumForum, www.videonitytimes.com/video/2010/02/18/opinion/1247467090180/bloggingheads-iran-regime-change.html and William Kristol, "Iranian regime change: An Obama achievement we could believe in," www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/11/AR2010021102723.html.

8. See New York Times, “In Response to Iran’s Nuclear Program, German Firms Are Slowly Pulling Out,” February 3, Reuters, “German firms in no rush to follow Siemens Iran exit,” January 27, and Washington Post, “Italy’s ENI to pull out of Iran,” February 4, 2010.

9. See Note 3 above.