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## Netanyahu to Obama: Stop Iran—Or I Will

by Jeffrey Goldberg

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In an interview conducted shortly before he was sworn in today as prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu laid down a challenge for Barack Obama. The American president, he said, must stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons—and quickly—or an imperiled Israel may be forced to attack Iran's nuclear facilities itself.

“The Obama presidency has two great missions: fixing the economy, and preventing Iran from gaining nuclear weapons,” Netanyahu told me. He said the Iranian nuclear challenge represents a “hinge of history” and added that “Western civilization” will have failed if Iran is allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

In unusually blunt language, Netanyahu said of the Iranian leadership, “You don't want a messianic apocalyptic cult controlling atomic bombs. When the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the entire world should start worrying, and that is what is happening in Iran.”

History teaches Jews that threats against their collective existence should be taken seriously, and, if possible, preempted, he suggested. In recent years, the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has regularly called for Israel to be “wiped off the map,” and the supreme Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, this month called Israel a “cancerous tumor.”

But Netanyahu also said that Iran threatens many other countries apart from Israel, and so his mission over the next several months is to convince the world of the broad danger posed by Iran. One of his chief security advisers, Moshe Ya'alon, told me that a nuclear Iran could mean the end of American influence in the Middle East. "This is an existential threat for Israel, but it will be a blow for American interests, especially on the energy front. Who will dominate the oil in the region—Washington or Tehran?"

Netanyahu said he would support President Obama's decision to engage Iran, so long as negotiations brought about a quick end to Iran's nuclear ambitions. "How you achieve this goal is less important than achieving it," he said, but he added that he was skeptical that Iran would respond positively to Obama's appeals. In an hour-long conversation, held in the Knesset, Netanyahu tempered his aggressive rhetoric with an acknowledgement that nonmilitary pressure could yet work. "I think the Iranian economy is very weak, which makes Iran susceptible to sanctions that can be ratcheted up by a variety of means." When I suggested that this statement contradicted his assertion that Iran, by its fanatic nature, is immune to pressure, Netanyahu smiled thinly and said, "Iran is a composite leadership, but in that composite leadership there are elements of wide-eyed fanaticism that do not exist right now in any other would-be nuclear power in the world. That's what makes them so dangerous."

He went on, "Since the dawn of the nuclear age, we have not had a fanatic regime that might put its zealotry above its self-interest. People say that they'll behave like any other nuclear power. Can you take the risk? Can you assume that?"

Netanyahu offered Iran's behavior during its eight-year war with Iraq as proof of Tehran's penchant for irrational behavior. Iran "wasted over a million lives without batting an eyelash ... It didn't sear a terrible wound into the Iranian consciousness. It wasn't Britain after World War I, lapsing into pacifism because of the great tragedy of a loss of a generation. You see nothing of the kind."

He continued: "You see a country that glorifies blood and death, including its own self-immolation." I asked Netanyahu if he believed Iran would risk its own nuclear annihilation at the hands of Israel or America. "I'm not going to get into that," he said.

Neither Netanyahu nor his principal military advisers would suggest a deadline for American progress on the Iran nuclear program, though one aide said pointedly that Israeli time lines are now drawn in months, "not years." These same military advisers told me that they believe Iran's defenses remain penetrable, and that Israel would not necessarily need American approval to launch an attack. "The problem is not military capability, the problem is whether

you have the stomach, the political will, to take action,” one of his advisers, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told me.

Both Israeli and American intelligence officials agree that Iran is moving forward in developing a nuclear-weapons capability. The chief of Israeli military intelligence, Major General Amos Yadlin, [said earlier this month](#) that Iran has already “crossed the technological threshold,” and that nuclear military capability could soon be a fact: “Iran is continuing to amass hundreds of kilograms of low-enriched uranium, and it hopes to exploit the dialogue with the West and Washington to advance toward the production of an atomic bomb.”

American officials argue that Iran has not crossed the “technological threshold”; the director of national intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair, [said recently](#) that Israel and the U.S. are working with the same set of facts, but are interpreting it differently. “The Israelis are far more concerned about it, and they take more of a worst-case approach to these things from their point of view,” he said. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Michael Mullen, recently warned that an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities would undermine stability in the Middle East and endanger the lives of Americans in the Persian Gulf.

The Obama administration agrees with Israel that Iran’s nuclear program is a threat to Middle East stability, but it also wants Israel to focus on the Palestinian question. Netanyahu, for his part, promises to move forward on negotiations with the Palestinians, but he made it clear in our conversation that he believes a comprehensive peace will be difficult to achieve if Iran continues to threaten Israel, and he cited Iran’s sponsorship of such Islamist groups as Hezbollah and Hamas as a stumbling block.

Ya’alon, a former army chief of staff who is slated to serve as Netanyahu’s minister for strategic threats, dismissed the possibility of a revitalized peace process, telling me that “jihadists” interpret compromise as weakness. He cited the reaction to Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza four years ago. “The mistake of disengagement from Gaza was that we thought like Westerners, that compromise would defuse a problem—but it just encouraged the problem,” he said. “The jihadists saw withdrawal as a defeat of the West ... Now, what do you signal to them if you are ready to divide Jerusalem, or if you’re ready to withdraw to the 1967 lines? In this kind of conflict, your ability to stand and be determined is more important than your firepower.”

American administration sources tell me that President Obama won’t shy from pressuring Netanyahu on the Palestinian issue during his first visit to Washington as prime minister, which is scheduled for early May. But Netanyahu suggested that he and Obama already see eye-to-eye on such crucial issues as the threat posed by Hamas. “The Obama administration

has recently said that Hamas has to first recognize Israel and cease the support of terror. That's a very good definition. It says you have to cease being Hamas."

When I noted that many in Washington doubt his commitment to curtailing Jewish settlement on the West Bank, he said, in reference to his previous term as prime minister, from 1996 to 1999, "I can only point to what I did as prime minister in the first round. I certainly didn't build new settlements."

Netanyahu will manage Israel's relationship with Washington personally—his foreign minister, [Avidor Lieberman, of the anti-Arab Israel Beiteinu party](#), is deeply unpopular in Washington—and I asked him if he could foresee agreeing on a "grand bargain" with Obama, in which he would move forward on talks with the Palestinians in exchange for a robust American response to Iran's nuclear program. He said: "We intend to move on the Palestinian track independent of what happens with Iran, and I hope the U.S. moves to stop Iran from gaining nuclear weapons regardless of what happens on the Palestinian track."

In our conversation, Netanyahu gave his fullest public explication yet of why he believes President Obama must consider Iran's nuclear ambitions to be his preeminent overseas challenge. "Why is this a hinge of history? Several bad results would emanate from this single development. First, Iran's militant proxies would be able to fire rockets and engage in other terror activities while enjoying a nuclear umbrella. This raises the stakes of any confrontation that they'd force on Israel. Instead of being a local event, however painful, it becomes a global one. Second, this development would embolden Islamic militants far and wide, on many continents, who would believe that this is a providential sign, that this fanaticism is on the ultimate road to triumph.

"Third, they would be able to pose a real and credible threat to the supply of oil, to the overwhelming part of the world's oil supply. Fourth, they may threaten to use these weapons or to give them to terrorist proxies of their own, or fabricate terror proxies. Finally, you'd create a great sea change in the balance of power in our area—nearly all the Arab regimes are dead-set opposed to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. They fervently hope, even if they don't say it, that the U.S. will act to prevent this, that it will use its political, economic, and, if necessary, military power to prevent this from happening."

If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Netanyahu asserted, Washington's Arab allies would drift into Iran's orbit. "The only way I can explain what will happen to such regimes is to give you an example from the past of what happened to one staunch ally of the United States, and a great champion of peace, when another aggressive power loomed large. I'm referring to the late King Hussein [of Jordan] ... who was an unequalled champion of peace. The same King Hussein in many ways subordinated his country to Saddam Hussein when Saddam invaded

Kuwait in 1990. Saddam seemed all-powerful, unchallenged by the United States, and until the U.S. extracted Kuwait from Saddam's gullet, King Hussein was very much in Iraq's orbit. The minute that changed, the minute Saddam was defeated, King Hussein came back to the Western camp."

One of Iran's goals, Netanyahu said, is to convince the moderate Arab countries not to enter peace treaties with Israel. Finally, he said, several countries in Iran's neighborhood might try to develop nuclear weapons of their own. "Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. The Middle East is incendiary enough, but with a nuclear arms race it will become a tinderbox," he said.

Few in Netanyahu's inner circle believe that Iran has any short-term plans to drop a nuclear weapon on Tel Aviv, should it find a means to deliver it. The first-stage Iranian goal, in the understanding of Netanyahu and his advisers, is to frighten Israel's most talented citizens into leaving their country. "The idea is to keep attacking the Israelis on a daily basis, to weaken the willingness of the Jewish people to hold on to their homeland," Moshe Ya'alon said. "The idea is to make a place that is supposed to be a safe haven for Jews unattractive for them. They are waging a war of attrition."

The Israeli threat to strike Iran militarily if the West fails to stop the nuclear program may, of course, be a tremendous bluff. After all, such threats may just be aimed at motivating President Obama and others to grapple urgently with the problem. But Netanyahu and his advisers seem to believe sincerely that Israel would have difficulty surviving in a Middle East dominated by a nuclear Iran. And they are men predisposed to action; many, like Netanyahu, are former commandos.

As I waited in the Knesset cafeteria to see Netanyahu, I opened a book he edited of his late brother's letters. Yoni Netanyahu, a commando leader, was killed in 1976 during the Israeli raid on Entebbe, and his family organized his letters in a book they titled *Self-Portrait of a Hero*. In one letter, Yoni wrote to his teenage brother, then living in America, who had apparently been in a fight after someone directed an anti-Semitic remark at him. "I see ... that you had to release the surplus energy you stored up during the summer," Yoni wrote. "There's nothing wrong with that. But it's too bad you sprained a finger in the process. In my opinion, there's nothing wrong with a good fist fight; on the contrary, if you're young and you're not seriously hurt, it won't do you real harm. Remember what I told you? He who delivers the first blow, wins."