

To bomb or not to bomb — is that the question?

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In the last three years there has been ample discussion whether to bomb (Iranian nuclear sites) or not to bomb. More specifically, the debate is whether Israel should go at it alone. Is it much ado about nothing? To a large extent it is, because very few experts really understand what is at stake and the consumers of the debate can do very little about it. Namely, they can do little about an Israeli attack and even less so about a pending Iranian attack. This is perhaps the wrong debate, at the wrong time, by the wrong people. A far more serious effort — not a debate — is missing, yet needed in the public arena: the focus on the intent and purpose of Iranian nuclear ambitions and objectives, along with the rhetoric that serves as its backdrop; namely their genocidal theme.

Iranian nuclear aims

The Iranian nuclear efforts started in 1957 under the US initiative of Atoms for Peace which had research for peaceful use of atomic energy as its official goal. In the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution, international nuclear cooperation and support was cut off. In 1981 Iran officially decided to continue its nuclear efforts and the vacuum was filled by Argentina providing assistance and uranium. Then the IAEA and China added their support which was later stopped apparently due to US pressure. German intelligence reported, as early as 1984, that Iran was two years away from developing nuclear weapons with uranium supplied by Pakistan. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) the two Iranian reactors in Bushehr were bombed and damaged by Iraqi airborne attacks. In the 1990s Iran renewed its agreement with France (no uranium was supplied) and Russia became the key partner for Iran's nuclear ambitions. IAEA inspections in 1992 found Iran "in compliance" with peaceful use of atomic energy.

The existence of two nuclear sites which apparently were known to intelligence agencies, but until then remained classified information, were reported twenty years ago by an Iranian dissident group. Open and backdoor negotiations between European governments (the EU-3: U.K., France and Germany) and Iran were not successful. International inspections in 2005 "cleared" Iran. However, it did not stop enrichment and in 2006 its president, Ahmadinejad, announced that Iran had "successfully enriched Uranium," that it will not back away from its plans, and for those who are "angry" about it he offered to "be angry with us and die of this anger." In December 2006 the UN Security Council imposed sanctions (Resolution 1737) on Iran for its non-compliance. Since then the UN Security Council has passed seven resolutions reaffirming these sanctions. In a series of at least 21 IAEA reports between 2007 and 2012 the

agency has essentially given Iran a reprieve from the intention to develop nuclear weapons even though it is clear from the May 2012 report that a 27% enrichment level enables Iran to develop bomb-grade material. Finally in August, the IAEA declared that Iran continued its refusal to comply with international agreements and warned there was no evidence to show that Iran has stopped its work on nuclear weapons. While trying to verify Iran's compliance, the IAEA "was unable to conclude that all nuclear material in Iran was in peaceful activities." The report repeated the damning conclusion that "analysis indicates that Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a 'nuclear explosive device'" and that "some activities may still be ongoing."

The debate in Israel and beyond

For twenty years Israel has warned of Iranian hostile intentions of developing and using nuclear weapons (including their delivery systems) of mass destruction. The threat is not only to Israel but also to Iran's Arab neighbors, Europe, the US and the rest of the world. For Israel the threat is existential. Even a survival of a first strike still means a devastating blow to life and property. In the last few months an air parade of senior US official that included the Secretary of State (Clinton), The Secretary of Defense (Panetta), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Dempsey) and the National Security Advisor (Donilon) visited Israel in an attempt to prove to Israel that the US stands by its ally but much more so to dissuade Israel from attacking Iran. Lately representatives of the European Union (Germany's Merkel and France's Fabius) have added their statements opposing an Israeli attack. In August terse exchanges between Israel and the administration became very public when Secretary of State Clinton refused to draw "red lines" and the President "did not find time in his schedule" to meet with the Israeli Prime Minister.

In Israel "to bomb or not to bomb" has become a fierce public debate with the Prime Minister (Netanyahu) and Defense Minister (Barak) being portrayed as pro-attack while prominent current and former security officials as well as the current and a former president being in favor of "do not attack now." The situation is further entangled with the US pending elections with most opinions suggesting the US will not attack prior to the elections (or not even after it irrespective of who will be elected as president). Some in the US are even in favor of Iran having a nuclear weapon as a "stabilizing deterrent" (Kenneth Walt, Foreign Affairs, July / August).

These debates actually featured diplomats and appointed officials publically discussing their – sometime blunt and sometime nuanced – differences in key media outlets that show that the Israeli clock and the American clock indicate different time tables and hence a different sense of urgency and course of action. One of the best illustrations is the American position on preventing Iran from having a nuclear bomb and the Israeli position desiring to prevent Iran from having the capability of developing one (or more). Both positions assume Iran is intent on developing this weapon but the US wants to prevent the actual bomb from being manufactured while Israel wants to prevent the capability to manufacture it. The difference between the two positions is that within a few months a development capability can manufacture a bomb and the

time and intelligence to stop it may not be there. The US (and many Israelis) continues to publically argue that the diplomatic avenue and the economic sanctions have not been exhausted and that there is still a window of time to let them work. The Israeli decision makers and diplomats believe that window is fast closing and the discussion on a pending attack is now within weeks or very few months. Short of the actual attack plans and flight pattern everything else has been discussed publically (with some claiming to know the attack plans as well).

Missing in this debate is the likelihood that Iran actually already has the bomb. Given gross intelligence errors in the past and the difficulty of gleaning information on nuclear development progress, that is not an unlikely possibility. The 2007 US intelligence assessment concluded that Iran has halted or even “abandoned” its nuclear program. An August 2012 intelligence report purports that “Iran has made surprising, significant progress toward military nuclear capability” but US officials refused to confirm it. Thus, for even a reasonably educated person to sift through all the statements, positions, declarations, interviews, publications, reports, visits, speculations and “learned” opinions can only lead to one certain conclusion: there is a tremendous fog of war and good luck to those who really understand what is going on or will be going on.

Most people, including professionals and policy makers alike understand very little about nuclear technology or about military strategies and most in the west are naturally against military intervention and even when it is done the guiding principle is “last resort” and “all options are on the table” provided that there is a “smoking gun” (pun not intended) of complete indisputable proof. Even when governments decide on military intervention, the longer they are the less popular they become and the less support they receive. That is true for the US, the UK, and Israel, among others.

The wrong focus

Yet there is something awfully amiss in the focus on nuclear technology, the search for proof on compliance or non-compliance, the diplomatic negotiations or intelligence assessments. The excessive focus on technology has overshadowed the need to focus discussion on intent. In terrorism and war there are two important components: intent and capability. Being capable of carrying out an attack does not mean one will take place absent the intent. Yet, intending to carry out an attack does not mean it will be operational absent the capability. However, If the intent is there it might well lead to developing the capability. We have seen it with terrorist groups high on intent developing the capability to carry out mass atrocities with fairly little investment. The public debate questions the capability, with some arguing that Iran is far from acquiring it; a few even suggest that the intent is not more than rhetoric.

The dilemma for the west is whether a barking dog will bite. There is a common disconnect between talk and action. In the west one can virtually (if not legally) say anything they want with fairly little punitive measures. Recently (the newly elected) Egyptian president Morsy made the first state visit, since the Iranian revolution, to Iran and the Iraqi government has been assisting Iran to avoid the economic sanctions. Morsy took advantage of the 16th Summit of the

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) gathered in Teheran at the end of August. Iran now begins a three-year period as chair of the NAM which consists of 120 member countries and 21 observer countries yielding key influence on NAM's policies and positions.

The election of Iran to chair the NAM block, the visit by the Egyptian president and by the UN Secretary General as well as the Iraqi support of Iran are only recent examples of the growing influence and support that Iran has in the world. In addition to potential nuclear weaponry capability, and its intent to use it – Iran also enjoys support from key nations such as Russia and China and tacit support and business ties with and from many others (including in the west). This is anything but the picture of isolation and effective sanctions that the US, the UN, and the Europeans are trying to portray. It is against this backdrop that the nexus of talk-deed becomes so important.

The rhetoric and the action

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979 the vitriolic rhetoric against the US and Israel were evident in recurrent well-orchestrated public demonstrations by throngs of hundreds of thousands of people shouting ecstatically “Death to America” (the ‘Big Satan’) and “death to Israel” (the ‘Small Satan’). The Iranian president repeatedly and frequently is expressing his desire to eliminate Israel, Zionism, and Jews off the map and so does the Iranian spiritual leader; irrespective of who that current Ayatollah is. A series of post-NAM Iranian cartoons displayed virulent anti US and anti-Israel themes arrogantly suggesting that the NAM was crushing the “stranglehold” that they perceive both to have (on Iran and on NAM).

Ahmadinejad has questioned the existence of the Holocaust, called to “eliminate the Zionist regime,” and “Israel must be wiped off the map,” took part in a protest called “World Without Zionism” and has derided Israel on numerous occasions. He has urged regional powers to cut ties with Israel and halt oil sales. While some question the translation of the Iranian original and argue that he actually refers only to the elimination of a “regime” this is nothing but hypocritical diplo-speak hair-splitting: After all when hundreds of thousands of people burn Israeli symbols and shout “death to Israel,” people who live in that “regime” do tend to take it a bit personally. Exact rhetoric like that served the Nazis as the ideology that led to and resulted in the holocaust. The US does not fare much better. Marking the 32nd anniversary of the revolution, throngs of Iranians burned flags chanting “Death to America.”

When rhetoric like that is reported in the west it is often accompanied by interpretation that this is for “internal consumption” with the implication that they do not really mean it. Such vile rhetoric coming from Arabs/Muslims has been ignored for years despite the vitriolic nature that has been institutionalized into religious edicts, articles, literature, newspaper reports, films, propaganda, and textbooks, not to say political statements.

So Americans and westerners tend to simply ignore such rhetoric because it does not appear – yet – to pose an existential or even economic threat against the US and therefore is tolerated as nothing more than annoying barking dogs – if at that.

Missing the point

And here is exactly the point where all those who raise hell against an attack on Iran have been missing. The possible attack against Iran is not because of belligerent intentions but because of self-defense against an existential threat. Israel has been there before. More precisely the Jews as a people were massacred in WWII and very little help was offered before, during, or even after. The two prime examples were the refusal to allow US entry to the St. Louis and the refusal of the Allied Forces to bomb the railroad to Auschwitz. When help was given it was mostly individual and not institutional; as is illustrated by the example of Raoul Wallenberg.

So suggesting that they were not translated correctly when the Iranians scream in a hysterical chorus to wipe Israel and America off the map may certainly fool some but not all. First, this is how the Iranian official translators provided the original text. But more important: assume magnanimity for the sake of discussion. Namely, that indeed it is not the people they want to wipe out but the “regime.” So what is this regime? It is the country of Israel which is the incarnation of the political aspirations and rights of the Jews not only to peoplehood but to nationhood. In other words: it is the right of the Jews to have a state of their own. Therefore, wiping the Israeli (Zionist) regime means denying the Jews the right for their own state which is the epitome of their political aspirations. This is nothing less than anti-Semitic, insidious and a bullying call for annihilation. In short, this is incitement for genocide. The fact that some ultra-orthodox Jews wish that fate on the modern state of Israel and even collaborate with Iran for that purpose does not make it less so.

What should the focus be on? Incitement to genocide!

So, if someone does not claim to be an expert on military strategy nor on nuclear weapons, what else remains to be said? Plenty. The question at hand should not be to bomb or not to bomb – leave that to those who were elected, appointed and are paid to make that decision. It certainly should not be about Israel doing so alone (and it should not go at it alone). Opinion polls can come to play at a later time, not now. The question we can and should be able to deal with is incitement. In other words, if we deem that incitement to genocide is unacceptable under any circumstances what is it that we should do to stop it? On this issue there need be no debate and nothing less than decisive exemplary action is expected.

Almost 115 years ago, Émile Zola has openly challenged the French establishment and the entire French society when in 1898 he published his famous *J'accuse* (I accuse) where in a letter to the president of the republic (published in *L'Aurore*) he accused the French leadership of obstruction of justice and anti-Semitism following the (framed) conviction for treason of Captain Alfred Dreyfus.

Israel and the world no longer have the luxury of passively waiting for post-trial results in order to accuse anyone. Elevating genocidal inciting speech to levels of the Nazi regime less than 70 years following the greatest atrocity against humanity (targeting the Jewish people and millions of non-Jews) is simply unacceptable. And who will say “I accuse” after Iran rains nuclear bombs

against the US? Certainly not the 120 NAM countries (they might shed crocodile tears while enjoying the news). To date conspicuously absent are the condemnations usually issued by various human rights groups. But not on Iran.

The question of “to bomb or not to bomb” should be replaced with to attack (incitement) or not to attack? Economic and other sanctions should not only be activated (and they are not yet fully implemented and clearly ineffective to date) against a nuclear threat. Any member state/group of the civilized world cannot be considered in good standing if it emits Hitlerian genocidal threats against another member nation of the UN. The personal attendance of the UN Secretary General in Teheran served to legitimize the strength of the Iranian regime and his carefully phrased objections to Iranian rhetoric against Israel not only fell on deaf ears but in his presence the Iranians openly and harshly vilified Israel with genocidal rhetoric. The attack on incitement should be proactive, concerted, public, vocal, decisive, and relentless. No debate on this is necessary. It is the duty of heads of state, diplomats, heads of NGOs, representatives of civic associations, professional associations, universities, corporations, human rights groups, writers, poets, and anyone who could and should make a difference (including the intelligentsia if it can lift its head and see reality). Personalities of the caliber of Zola are rare these days and too many actually take the side of the bully (Günter Grass for example).

When the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs sheds any interest in (“being complicit in”) attacking Iran the Iranians understand very well the lack of willingness of the US to attack. When the US president does not repudiate this political statement it means that he has the back of Dempsey not that of US allies. When the White House sends secret messages to Iran that in exchange of not hurting US interests in the region – should Israel attack Iran – the US will not support such an attack it means the US has abandoned its key ally. The persistent reports make the White House denial less than credible.

Iran needs to be sent a clear message that there is a red line for its nuclear ambitions but even more so that its entitlement to genocidal rhetoric has expired. The message to Iran needs to be loud and clear: Your rhetoric and your intent are unacceptable in a civilized world that cares about human rights. Any duplicity in this effort will not only hurt Israel. The Iranian bark will prove to turn into a lethal bite for the rest of the world.

On September 7 the Canadian government announced that it severed the ties with Iran, recalled its ambassador and staff from Teheran and requested the Iranian legation to leave Ottawa. In July 2010, the first-ever charge was laid for promoting genocide by the OPP. Canada clearly deserves commendations for showing the way and other countries should follow suit and heed its exemplary inspiring move.

Such a concerted effort to isolate Iran culturally, morally, and spiritually might be a far more effective tool in de-legitimizing its perceived entitlement to bully other nations and should therefore significantly weaken its position. Whether there is sufficient time to do this or even more important, whether there is a will, that is an entirely different question. It is not likely to stop Iran’s nuclear ambitions but at the very least it will help draw the lines between good and evil.