

Netanyahu and Israel's Threat to Attack Iran. Former CIA Official

Interview with former CIA executive Paul R. Pillar

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When the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu first bragged about a red line regarding Iran's nuclear program, the international observers assumed that the flames of an imminent war between Israel and Iran will be ignited soon and Israel will act unilaterally to launch a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities in contravention of the UN Charter. We already know that it's far from reality to expect Israel to play the role of a committed and righteous member of the international community. Since its inception in 1948, Israel has been at odds with all of its neighbors and the countries that have challenged its legitimacy. Now, Israel feels that Iran is threatening its shaky foundations and that is why it's using Iran's nuclear program as an excuse to form an international union against Tehran. It has put immense pressure on Washington to convince the White House and Pentagon leaders that attacking Iran is necessary. However, it has failed to realize this inauspicious goal so far.

*Former CIA executive and Georgetown University professor Paul R. Pillar believes that Israel is not in the position to question the legality of Iran's nuclear program or resort to false excuses to attack Iran on its own or with the sponsorship of the United States. Paul Pillar is a 28-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency who had served as a U.S. Army officer in Vietnam prior to joining the CIA. He is currently a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies and a member of the Center for Peace and Security Studies. After graduating from the Oxford University in 1971, Pillar received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the Princeton University in 1975 and 1978 respectively. In the second chapter of our interviews with prominent political scientists about the West and Israel's red line for Iran, we have interviewed Prof. Pillar and asked him a number of questions about the future of standoff over Iran's nuclear program. What follows is the text of the interview.***Q: It was last year when the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu displayed a controversial cartoon before the UN General Assembly during his speech and talked of a red line which Iran will imminently cross if it continues to pursue its nuclear program with the same pace. We know that throughout the past decade, Israel has constantly threatened Iran over its nuclear program and continually issued war threats against Iran in contravention of the spirit of the UN Charter. Is this new red line a repetition of the old war rhetoric or a serious warning?**

A: Netanyahu has agitated for a long time, and will keep agitating, about the dire threat he claims is presented by Iran and especially its nuclear program. It is basically the same message we have been hearing from him for years. It would be a mistake to focus on any one place he draws a line, either verbally or with his red marker. His cartoon bomb was a silly prop, but it succeeded in getting our attention; that made his speech at the UN a

success.

Q: So you believe that Netanyahu's complaints are outworn and unimportant. It seems that Obama's conflict with Netanyahu over Iran's nuclear program has come to surface and the fact that the U.S. President has refused to bow down to the demands made by the Israeli politicians that he should consider using the military option against Iran shows the deep differences between the two staunch allies. Although it should be noted that Obama has repeatedly said that Washington will not take any option off the table with regards to Iran's nuclear program, he doesn't seem to be determined in mulling over the military option. What's your viewpoint on that?

A: President Obama does not want a war with Iran. Most Americans also do not want one, although there are elements within the United States that would welcome such a war. For Mr. Obama, talking about keeping the military option on the table is principally a way of assuaging the Israelis and reducing the chance that they will stage their own attack. The tough talk also builds for the president some capital with members of Congress whose cooperation he will need to implement the sanctions relief that would be part of any deal reached with Iran.

Q: There's one question which Iran experts have been thinking about for a long time. Are the United States and Israel really afraid of a nuclear Iran? Don't they know that Iran is ideologically and practically opposed to nuclear weapons? Is the nuclear program simply a pretext for confrontation with Iran?

A: For some people in Israel and the United States, hyping the Iranian nuclear issue serves purposes beyond the ostensible one. For Netanyahu's government, for example, it serves the purpose of deflecting attention away from the continued occupation and colonization of Palestinian territory and the absence of a Palestinian state. But many, especially in Israel but also in the United States, have a genuine concern about a possible Iranian nuclear weapon.

Q: Let's move on to the next question. What's the general approach of the Western politicians toward the reports published by the influential intelligence agencies including the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate report which underlined that Iran does not pursue a nuclear weapons program? Do the U.S. officials intentionally overlook these reports to ramp up pressure on Iran and force it into making new concessions?

A: The U.S. intelligence community's publicly stated judgment is that Iran has not to date decided to build a nuclear weapon, that it is keeping its options open, and that any future decision about building a bomb will depend on Iran's reading of international circumstances and conditions. Current policy of the Obama administration, in seeking a negotiated agreement, does not contradict that judgment, however much one might quarrel with the particular mix of tactics used. There certainly are others, outside the administration, who tend to believe that Iran has already decided to acquire a nuclear weapon. And there are Western politicians who, even if they do not question directly the intelligence judgment, would say that we have to be mindful of the possibility that Iran will indeed decide to build a bomb.

Q: The U.S. administration and the Congress are unconditionally supporting the

Israel and blindly following in its footsteps. They have increased their pressure on Iran simply in order to appease Israel and demonstrate their commitment to Tel Aviv. Why do the U.S. political institutions, high-ranking politicians and government support Israel in such a subservient way?

A: The lobby in the United States that supports the policies of the Israeli government has long been seen as the most powerful political lobby in the United States, certainly as far as foreign policy is concerned. The perception of power is itself an important basis for power. The power of the lobby could be broken if a critical mass of politicians all acted at the same time in defiance of the lobby's wishes. But politicians don't want to take that chance.

Q: What do you think about the future of nuclear talks between Iran and the six world powers? So far, the two sides have held several rounds of talks but little progress has been made and many observers have noted that no remarkable achievement has been reached during the talks. What do you think about the prospect of the negotiations? Will the West move toward winning the trust of the Iranians and easing the tensions?

A: A negotiated agreement between Iran and the P5+1 is certainly achievable, and the outlines of such agreement have been apparent for some time. The main ingredients that would have to fall in place would be a willingness by the P5+1 to provide substantial relief from sanctions in return for the desired restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, along with at least implicit acceptance of low-level enrichment of uranium by Iran. Iran will have to accept that it is not going to get everything it wants regarding sanctions all at once. An agreement will have to be implemented in phases, with each side giving something and getting something in each phase.

Q: It's very promising that you're hopeful about the future of nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1. But Iranian politicians and people have always complained that the United States and its European allies exercise double standards while dealing with the country's nuclear program. They say that Israel, a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, unrestrictedly develops nuclear weapons in violation of the UNSC resolution that call on it to bring its nuclear facilities under the IAEA safeguards. While not a single inspector has come to Israel to investigate its nuclear arsenal, several IAEA representatives travel to Iran frequently to monitor Iran's nuclear program. Isn't this behavior somewhat hypocritical and duplicitous?

A: The demands being placed on Iran do indeed constitute a double standard, especially when the country that has been most insistent and threatening in making those demands—that is, Israel—has long had an arsenal of nuclear weapons that are completely outside any international control or inspection regime.

Q: Will drawing a red line for Iran's nuclear program prevent it from mastering the nuclear fuel cycle really commit the United States and Israel to attack Iran?

A: So-called red lines do not commit anyone to anything, and especially not to starting a war.

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