

“Red Lines” and “Green Lights”: Israel still Angling for Attack on Syria and Iran

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President Barack Obama may have drawn his seemingly regretted “red line” around Syria’s chemical weapons, but it was neither he nor the international community that turned the spotlight on their use. That task fell to Israel.

It was an Israeli general who claimed in April that Damascus had used chemical weapons, forcing Obama into an embarrassing demurrer on his stated commitment to intervene should that happen.

According to the Israeli media, it was also Israel that provided the intelligence that blamed the Syrian president, Bashar Al Assad, for the latest chemical weapons attack, near Damascus on August 21, triggering the clamour for a US military response.

It is worth remembering that Obama’s supposed “dithering” on the question of military action has only been accentuated by Israel’s “daring” strikes on Syria – at least three since the start of the year.

It looks as though Israel, while remaining largely mute about its interests in the civil war raging there, has been doing a great deal to pressure the White House into direct involvement in Syria.

That momentum appears to have been halted, for the time being at least, by the deal agreed at the weekend by the US and Russia to dismantle Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal.

To understand the respective views of the White House and Israel on attacking Syria, one needs to revisit the US-led invasion of Iraq a decade ago.

Israel and its ideological twin in Washington, the neoconservatives, rallied to the cause of toppling Saddam Hussein, believing that it should be the prelude to an equally devastating blow against Iran.

Israel was keen to see its two chief regional enemies weakened simultaneously. Saddam’s Iraq had been the chief sponsor of Palestinian resistance against Israel. Iran, meanwhile, had begun developing a civilian nuclear programme that Israel feared could pave the way to an Iranian bomb, ending Israel’s regional monopoly on nuclear weapons.

The neocons carried out the first phase of the plan, destroying Iraq, but then ran up against domestic opposition that blocked implementation of the second stage: the break-up of Iran.

The consequences are well known. As Iraq imploded into sectarian violence, Iran's fortunes rose. Tehran strengthened its role as regional sponsor of resistance against Israel – or what became Washington's new "axis of evil" – that included Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Israel and the US both regard Syria as the geographical "keystone" of that axis, as Israel's outgoing ambassador to the US, Michael Oren, told the Jerusalem Post this week, and one that needs to be removed if Iran is to be isolated, weakened or attacked.

But Israel and the US drew different lessons from Iraq. Washington is now wary of its ground forces becoming bogged down again, as well as fearful of reviving a cold war confrontation with Moscow. It prefers instead to rely on proxies to contain and exhaust the Syrian regime.

Israel, on the other hand, understands the danger of manoeuvring its patron into a showdown with Damascus without ensuring this time that Iran is tied into the plan. Toppling Assad alone would simply add emboldened jihadists to the troubles on its doorstep.

Given these assessments, Israel and the US have struggled to envision a realistic endgame that would satisfy them both. Obama fears setting the region, and possibly the world, ablaze with a direct attack on Iran; Israel is worried about stretching its patron's patience by openly pushing it into another catastrophic venture to guarantee its regional hegemony.

In his interview published yesterday by the Jerusalem Post, Michael Oren claimed that Israel had in fact been trying to oust Assad since the civil war erupted more than two years ago. He said Israel "always preferred the bad guys [jihadist groups] who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys [the Assad regime] who were backed by Iran."

That seems improbable. Although the Sunni jihadist groups, some with links to al-Qaeda, are not natural allies for either the Shia leaders of Iran or Hizbollah, they would be strongly hostile to Israel. Oren's comments, however, do indicate the degree to which Israel's strategic priorities are obsessively viewed through the prism of an attack on Iran.

More likely, Israel has focused on using the civil war as a way to box Assad into his heartlands. That way, he becomes a less useful ally to Hizbollah, Iran and Russia, while the civil war keeps both his regime and the opposition weak.

Israel would have preferred a US strike on Syria, a goal its lobbyists in Washington were briefly mobilised to achieve. But the intention was not to remove Assad but to assert what Danny Ayalon, a former deputy Israeli foreign minister, referred to as "American and Israeli deterrence" – code for signalling to Tehran that it was being lined up as the next target.

That threat now looks empty. As Silvan Shalom, a senior government minister, observed: "If it is impossible to do anything against little Syria, then certainly it's not possible against big Iran."

But the new US-Russian deal to dispose of Syria's chemical weapons can probably be turned to Israel's advantage, so long as Israel prevents attention shifting to its own likely stockpiles.

In the short term, Israel has reason to fear Assad's loss of control of his chemical weapons, with the danger that they pass either to the jihadists or to Hizbollah. The timetable for the weapons destruction should help to minimise those risks – in the words of one Israeli

commentator, it is like Israel “winning the lottery”.

But Israel also suspects that Damascus is likely to procrastinate on disarmament. In any case, efforts to locate and destroy its chemical weapons in the midst of a civil war will be lengthy and difficult.

And that may provide Israel with a way back in. Soon, as Israeli analysts are already pointing out, Syria will be hosting international inspectors searching for WMD, not unlike the situation in Iraq shortly before the US-led invasion of 2003. Israel, it can safely be assumed, will quietly meddle, trying to persuade the West that Assad is not cooperating and that Hezbollah and Iran are implicated.

In a vein Israel may mine later, a Syrian opposition leader, Selim Idris, claimed at the weekend that Damascus was seeking to conceal the extent of its stockpiles by passing them to Lebanon and Iraq.

Obama is not the only one to have set a red line. Last year, Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, drew one on a cartoon bomb at the United Nations as he warned that the world faced an imminent existential threat from an Iranian nuclear weapon.

Israel still desperately wants its chief foe, Iran, crushed. And if it can find a way to lever the US into doing its dirty work, it will exploit the opening – regardless of whether such action ramps up the suffering in Syria.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His new website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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