

US/Israel Challenged on Iran

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The times may be a-changin' – at least a bit – with the United States and Israel no longer able to dictate to the rest of the world how crises in the Middle East must be handled, though the new reality has been slow to dawn on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her neocon friends in Congress and the U.S. media.

They may think they are still in control, still the smart ones looking down at upstarts like the leaders of Turkey and Brazil who had the audacity to ignore U.S. warnings and press ahead with diplomacy to head off a possible new war, this one over Iran.

On Monday, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva announced success in persuading Iran to send roughly 50 percent of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for higher-enriched uranium that would be put to peaceful medical uses.

The tripartite agreement parallels one broached to Iran by Western countries on Oct. 1, 2009, which gained Iranian approval in principle but then fell apart.

That Monday's joint announcement took U.S. officials by surprise betokens a genteel, ivory-tower-type attitude toward a world that is rapidly changing around them, like old British imperialists befuddled by a surge of anti-colonialism in the Raj or some other domain of the Empire.

Tellingly, U.S. officials and their acolytes in the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) could not bring themselves to believe that Brazil and Turkey would dare pursue an agreement with Iran after Clinton and President Barack Obama said not to.

However, the signs were there that these rising regional powers were no longer willing to behave like obedient children while the United States and Israel sought to take the world for another ride into a Middle East confrontation.

Standing Up To Israel

In March, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was so upset with President da Silva's advocacy of dialogue with Iran that he gave the upstart from South America a stern lecture. But the Brazilian president did not flinch.

Da Silva had grown increasingly concerned that, without some quick and smart diplomacy, Israel was likely to follow up a series of escalating sanctions by attacking Iran. Mincing no words, da Silva said:

“We can’t allow to happen in Iran what happened in Iraq. Before any sanctions, we must undertake all possible efforts to try and build peace in the Middle East.”

Turkey’s Erdogan had his own face-off with an Israeli leader – shortly after Israel’s three-week assault on Gaza from Dec. 17, 2008, to Jan. 18, 2009, in which some 1,400 Gazans and 14 Israelis were killed.

On Jan. 29, 2009, the Turkish president took part with Israeli President Shimon Peres on a small panel moderated by the Washington Post’s David Ignatius at the World Economic Summit at Davos, Switzerland.

Erdogan could not abide Peres’s loud, passionate defense of Israel’s Gaza offensive. Erdogan described Gaza as “an open-air prison,” and accused Peres of speaking loudly so as to hide his “guilt.”

After Ignatius allotted Peres twice as much time as he gave Erdogan, the latter was livid, and insisted on responding to Peres’s speech.

The final one-and-a-half minutes, captured [on camera by the BBC](#), shows Erdogan physically pushing Ignatius’s outstretched arm down and out of the way, as Ignatius tries to cut him off with entreaties like, “We really do have to get people to dinner.”

Erdogan keeps at it, refers to “the sixth commandment — Thou Shalt Not Kill,” and adds, “We are talking about killing” in Gaza. He then alludes to barbarity “way beyond what it should be,” and strides off the stage saying, “I don’t think I’ll come back to Davos.”

The Brazilian government also condemned Israel’s bombing of Gaza as “disproportionate response.” It expressed concern that violence in the region had affected mainly the civilian population.

Brazil’s statement came on Jan. 24, 2009, just five days before Erdogan’s strong criticism of the Israeli president’s attempt to defend the attack. Perhaps it was then that a seed was planted to germinate and later grow into a determined effort to move forcefully to prevent another bloody outbreak of hostilities.

And that is what Erdogan did, with the collaboration of da Silva. The two regional leaders insisted on a new multilateral approach to head off a potential Middle East crisis, rather than simply acquiescing to the decision-making from Washington, as guided by the interests of Israel.

So, get over it, boys and girls in the White House and Foggy Bottom. The world has changed; you are no longer able to call all the shots.

Eventually you might even be thankful that some prescient grownups came by, rose to the occasion, and defused a very volatile situation from which no one — repeat, no one — would have profited.

Giving Hypocrisy a Bad Name

One might have even thought that the idea of Iran surrendering about half its low-enriched uranium would be seen as a good thing for Israel, possibly lessening Israel’s fears that Iran

might get the bomb sometime soon.

By all rights, the surrender of half Iran's uranium should lessen those concerns, but the bomb does NOT appear to be Israel's primary preoccupation. You see, despite the rhetoric, Israel and its supporters in Washington do not view the current dispute over Iran's nuclear program as an "existential threat."

Rather, it is viewed as another golden opportunity to bring "regime change" to a country considered one of Israel's adversaries, as Iraq was under Saddam Hussein. As with Iraq, the selling point for intervention is the accusation that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon, a weapon of mass destruction that might be shared with terrorists.

The fact that Iran, like Iraq, has denied that it is building a nuclear bomb — or that there is no credible intelligence proving that Iran is lying (a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate in 2007 expressed confidence that Iran had halted such efforts four years earlier) — is normally brushed aside in the United States and its FCM.

Instead, the fearsome notion of Iran with nuclear weapons somehow sharing one with al-Qaeda or some other terrorist group is used to scare the American public once more. (That Iran has no ties to al-Qaeda, which is Sunni while Iran is Shiite, just as the secular Saddam Hussein despised al-Qaeda, is sloughed off.)

Yet, earlier this year, answering a question after a speech in Doha, Qatar, Secretary Clinton let slip a piece of that reality, that Iran "doesn't directly threaten the United States, but it directly threatens a lot of our friends, allies, and partners" — read Israel, first and foremost among friends.

Clinton also would have us master the mental gymnastics required to buy into the Israeli argument that, were Iran to somehow build a single bomb from its remaining uranium (presumably after refining it to the 90 percent level required for a nuclear weapon when Iran has stumbled technologically over much lower levels), this would pose an unacceptable threat to Israel, which has 200-300 nuclear weapons along with missiles and bombers to deliver them.

But if it's not really about the remote possibility of Iran building a nuclear bomb and wanting to commit national suicide by using it, what's actually at stake? The obvious conclusion is that the scare tactics over Iranian nukes are the latest justification for imposing "regime change" in Iran.

That goal dates back at least to President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech in 2002, but it has an earlier precedent. In 1996, leading American neocons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, prepared a radical strategy paper for Israel's Netanyahu calling for a new approach to guaranteeing Israel's security, through the removal or neutralizing of hostile Muslim regimes in the region.

Called "[A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm](#)," the plan envisioned abandoning "land for peace" negotiations and instead "reestablishing the principle of preemption," beginning with the ouster of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and then tackling other regional enemies in Syria, Lebanon and Iran.

However, to achieve such an ambitious goal — with the necessary help of American money

and military might — required making traditional peace negotiations appear foolish or impossible and then ratcheting up tensions.

Obviously, with President Bush in the White House and with the U.S. public outraged over the 9/11 attacks, new possibilities opened - and Saddam Hussein, the first target of “securing the realm,” was taken out by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

But the Iraq War didn't go as easily as expected, and President Obama's intentions to reinvigorate the Middle East peace process and to engage Iran in negotiations emerged as new obstacles to the plan. It became important to show how naïve the young President was regarding the impossibility of dealing with Iran.

Derailing a Deal

Many Washington insiders were shocked last Oct. 1 when Tehran agreed to send 2,640 pounds (then as much as 75 percent of Iran's total) of low-enriched uranium abroad to be turned into fuel for a small reactor that does medical research.

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, gave Tehran's agreement “in principle,” at a meeting in Geneva of representatives of members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany, chaired by Javier Solana of the European Union.

Even the New York Times acknowledged that this, “if it happens, would represent a major accomplishment for the West, reducing Iran's ability to make a nuclear weapon quickly, and buying more time for negotiations to bear fruit.”

The conventional wisdom presented in the FCM today has it that Tehran backed off the deal. True; but that is only half the story, a tale that highlights how, in Israel's set of priorities, regime change in Iran comes first.

The uranium swap had the initial support of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And a follow-up meeting was scheduled for Oct. 19 at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna.

However, the accord soon came under criticism from Iran's opposition groups, including the “Green Movement” led by defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, who [has had ties to the American neocons and to Israel](#) since the Iran-Contra days of the 1980s when he was the prime minister who collaborated on secret arms deals.

Strangely, it was Mousavi's U.S.-favored political opposition that led the assault on the nuclear agreement, calling it an affront to Iran's sovereignty and suggesting that Ahmadinejad wasn't being tough enough.

Then, on Oct. 18, a terrorist group called Jundullah, acting on amazingly accurate intelligence, detonated a car bomb at a meeting of top Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders and tribal leaders in the province of Sistan-Baluchistan in southeastern Iran. A car full of Guards was also attacked.

A brigadier general who was deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards ground forces, the Revolutionary Guards brigadier commanding the border area of Sistan-Baluchistan, and three other brigade commanders were killed in the attack; dozens of other military officers and civilians were left dead or wounded.

Jundullah took credit for the bombings, which followed years of lethal attacks on Revolutionary Guards and Iranian policemen, including an attempted ambush of President Ahmadinejad's motorcade in 2005.

Tehran claims Jundullah is supported by the U.S., Great Britain and Israel, and retired CIA Middle East operations officer Robert Baer has fingered Jundullah as one of the "good terrorist" groups benefiting from American help.

I believe it to be no coincidence that the Oct. 18 attack - the bloodiest in Iran since the 1980-88 war with Iraq - came one day before nuclear talks were to resume at the IAEA in Vienna to follow up on the Oct. 1 breakthrough. The killings were sure to raise Iran's suspicions about U.S. sincerity.

It's a safe bet that the Revolutionary Guards went directly to their patron, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, arguing that the bombing and roadside attack proved that the West cannot be trusted.

Khamenei issued a statement on Oct. 19 condemning the terrorists, whom he charged "are supported by certain arrogant powers' spy agencies."

The commander of the Guards' ground forces, who lost his deputy in the attack, charged that the terrorists were "trained by America and Britain in some of the neighboring countries," and the commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards threatened retaliation.

The attack was big news in Iran, but not big news in the United States, where the FCM quickly consigned the incident to the great American memory hole. The FCM also began treating Iran's resulting anger over what it considered acts of terrorism and its heightened sensitivity to outsiders crossing its borders as efforts to intimidate "pro-democracy" groups supported by the West.

Still, Iran Sends a Delegation

Despite the Jundallah attack and the criticism from the opposition groups, a lower-level Iranian technical delegation did go to Vienna for the meeting on Oct. 19, but Iran's leading nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili stayed away.

The Iranians questioned the trustworthiness of the Western powers and raised objections to some details, such as where the transfer should occur. The Iranians broached alternative proposals that seemed worth exploring, such as making the transfer of the uranium on Iranian territory or some other neutral location.

But the Obama administration, under mounting domestic pressure on the need to be tougher with Iran, dismissed Iran's counter-proposals out of hand, reportedly at the instigation of White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and neocon regional emissary Dennis Ross.

Both officials appeared averse to taking any steps that might lessen the impression among Americans that Ahmadinejad is anything other than a rabid dog needing to be put down, the new most despised *bête noire* (having replaced the now deceased Saddam Hussein, who was hanged by the U.S.-installed government in Iraq).

Watching all this, da Silva and Erdogan saw the parallels between Washington's eagerness

for an escalating confrontation with Iran and the way the United States had marched the world, step by step, into the invasion of Iraq (complete with [the same deeply biased coverage](#) by the leading American news outlets.)

This spring, hoping to head off a similar result, the two leaders dusted off the Oct. 1 uranium transfer initiative and got Tehran to agree to similar terms last Monday. Both called for sending 2,640 pounds of Iran's low-enriched uranium abroad in exchange for nuclear rods that would have no applicability for a weapon.

Yet, rather than embrace this Iranian concession as at least a step in the right direction, U.S. officials sought to scuttle it, by pressing instead for more sanctions. The FCM did its part by insisting that the deal was just another Iranian trick that would leave Iran with enough uranium to theoretically create one nuclear bomb.

An editorial in Tuesday's Washington Post, entitled "[Bad Bargain](#)," concluded wistfully/wisfully:

"It's possible that Tehran will retreat even from the terms it offered Brazil and Turkey — in which case those countries should be obliged to support U.N. sanctions."

On Wednesday, a New York Times' [editorial](#) rhetorically patted the leaders of Brazil and Turkey on the head as if they were rubes lost in the big-city world of hard-headed diplomacy. The Times wrote:

"Brazil and Turkey ... are eager to play larger international roles. And they are eager to avoid a conflict with Iran. We respect those desires. But like pretty much everyone else, they got played by Tehran."

Rather than go forward with the uranium transfer agreement, Brazil and Turkey should "join the other major players and vote for the Security Council resolution," the Times said. "Even before that, they should go back to Tehran and press the mullahs to make a credible compromise and begin serious negotiations."

Focus on Sanctions

Both the Times and the Post have applauded the Obama administration's current pursuit of tougher economic sanctions against Iran - and on Tuesday, they got something to cheer about.

"We have reached agreement on a strong draft [sanctions resolution] with the cooperation of both Russia and China," Secretary Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, making clear that she viewed the timing of the sanctions as a riposte to the Iran-Brazil-Turkey agreement.

"This announcement is as convincing an answer to the efforts undertaken in Tehran over the last few days as any we could provide," she declared.

Her spokesman, Philip J. Crowley, was left with the job of explaining the obvious implication that Washington was using the new sanctions to scuttle the plan for transferring half of

Iran's enriched uranium out of the country.

Question: "But you say that you're supportive and appreciative [of the Iran-Brazil-Turkey agreement], but don't you think you handicapped it in any way? I mean, now by introducing the resolution the day after the agreement, you almost guarantee that Iran is going to react in a negative way."

Another question: "Why, if, in fact, you think this Brazil-Turkey deal — Iran will prove that it is not serious and you don't have a lot of optimism that it's going to go forward and Iran will continue to show that it's not serious about its nuclear ambitions, why don't you just wait for that to play out and then you could get a tougher resolution and even presumably Brazil and Turkey would vote for it because Iran would have humiliated them and embarrassed them? Why don't you just wait to see how that plays out?"

Yet another question: "The impression left, though, is that the message here — sure there's a message to Iran, but there's also a message to Turkey and Brazil, and that is, basically, get out of our sandbox, that the big boys and girls are playing here and we don't need your meddling. Do you not — you don't accept that?"

I almost found myself feeling sorry for poor P.J. Crowley, who did his level best to square these and other circles. His answers were lacking in candor, but did reflect an uncanny ability to stick to one key talking point; i. e., that the "real key," the "primary issue" is Iran's ongoing enrichment of uranium. He said this, in identical or similar words no fewer than 17 times.

That the State Department at this moment has chosen to cite this single point as a showstopper is curious, at best. The proposed deal offered to Tehran last Oct. 1 did not require it to give up enrichment, either.

And the current emphasis on non-observance of Security Council resolutions — which had been demanded by the United States and its allies — is eerily reminiscent of the strategy for maneuvering the world toward the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Crowley said the administration has "no particular timetable" in mind for putting a resolution to a vote, saying, "it will take as long as it takes." He added that President Obama "laid out a goal of having this done by the end of this spring" — about one month from now.

Counter-Initiative

Despite the efforts by Washington officialdom and neocon opinion-makers to derail the Iran-Brazil-Turkey plan, it still seems on track, at least for the moment.

Iranian officials have said they would send a letter confirming the deal to the IAEA within a week. In a month, Iran could ship 2,640 pounds of its low-enriched uranium to Turkey.

Within a year, Russia and France would produce 120 kg of 20-percent enriched uranium to be used to refuel a research reactor in Tehran that produces isotopes to treat cancer patients.

As for Clinton's claim that China, as well as Russia are part of a consensus on the draft Security Council resolution, time will tell.

There is particular doubt as to how firmly China is on board. On Monday, Chinese officials hailed the Iran-Brazil-Turkey proposal and said it should be fully explored. Russian officials also suggested that the new transfer plan be given a chance.

Also, the proposed new sanctions don't go as far as some U.S. and Israeli hardliners wanted. For instance, it does not embargo gasoline and other refined petroleum products to Iran, a harsh step that some neocons had hoped would throw Iran into economic and political chaos as a prelude for "regime change."

Instead, the proposed new sanctions call for inspections of Iranian ships suspected of entering international ports with nuclear-related technology or weapons. Some analysts doubt that this provision would have much practical effect on Iran.

Israel will be conferring with Washington before issuing an official response, but Israeli officials have told the press that the transfer deal is a "trick" and that Iran had "manipulated" Turkey and Brazil.

There is every reason to believe that Israel will search deep into its toolbox for a way to sabotage the agreement, but it isn't clear that the usual diplomatic tools will work at this stage. There remains, of course, the possibility that Israel will go for broke and launch a preemptive military strike at Iran's nuclear facilities.

In the meantime, it's a sure bet that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu will apply all the pressure he can on Obama.

As a former CIA analyst, I hope that Obama would have the presence of mind to order a fast-track special National Intelligence Estimate on the implications of the Iran-Brazil-Turkey agreement for U.S. national interests and those of the countries of the Middle East.

Obama needs an unvarnished assessment of the agreement's possible benefits (and its potential negatives) as counterweight to the pro-Israel lobbying that will inevitably descend on the White House and State Department.

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