

# The veiled threats against Iran

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The stand-off on Iran's nuclear program has reached a new crescendo this week after President Obama's speech to the powerful Jewish lobbying group the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) at its policy conference on 4 March 2012. This speech was followed by a meeting between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 5 March in which Netanyahu applauded Obama's remarks and said that his government had managed to put Iran on the list of immediate global concerns.<sup>2</sup> Over the last few months, Israeli and US officials have been escalating the rhetoric on Iran's nuclear program and the options for ending the stand-off. But it seems that the Obama administration is only prepared to give Iran one option: cease all nuclear activity without conditions or negotiations. In his speech, Obama commented that 'Iran's leaders still have the opportunity to make the right decision'.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, fall in line with US wishes and thus avoid greater sanctions, or risk even harsher measures, possibly a bombing campaign against its nuclear facilities or even an invasion.

Obama's speech to AIPAC is nothing special or new. Speeches by politicians at the conference – an annual event attended enthusiastically by both Republicans and Democrats – usually

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2 'After meeting Obama, Netanyahu says world united over Iran', *Haaretz*, 5 March 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/after-meeting-obama-netanyahu-says-world-united-over-iran-1.416704>

3 Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the president at AIPAC policy conference', *The White House*, 4 March 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference>

include an affirmation of the Israel–US alliance, a resolve to ensure Israel’s security in a dangerous neighbourhood, and support for a democratic political system, the only one of its kind in the Middle East. Obama’s address was no different. Carefully worded to win applause and mentioning his unwavering support of the Jewish state, the speech was filled with absolutist statements which, if applied from a position of Iranian supremacy, would seem abhorrent to most US and Israeli politicians and policy makers. Statements such as a ‘nuclear armed Iran is completely counter to Israel’s security interests’ is one example. Of course, a nuclear armed Israel is completely counter to Iran’s security interests, but this does not warrant consideration or comment from the Obama administration. Perhaps the most important sentence in Obama’s address was his belief that ‘Israel must always have the ability to defend itself, by itself, against any threat’. This could be understood as giving Israel free reign in deciding whether or not to launch a bombing campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Ultimately, the US exposes its one-sided approach to the entire situation with remarks such as those in Obama’s speech to AIPAC. If it were not for Israeli security considerations, the Obama administration might have been able to approach Iran’s leaders in a more amicable fashion, highlighting the potential benefits to Ahmadinejad’s government if it abandoned its nuclear program as well as any future nuclear ambitions. However, pressure from Israel and lobbyist groups in Washington is undoubtedly helping to form a more aggressive US stance towards Iran. The reason for the Israeli preference for a denuclearised Iran is obvious: to maintain Israel’s nuclear hegemony in the Middle East. For all the rhetoric emanating from the US and Israel over Iran, there is one concern above all else that scares the Israeli government: that Iranian nuclear weapons would balance Israel’s own stockpile and limit its hitherto unrestricted freedom of action in the region. Of course this is never stated openly by either Israeli or American politicians, but it is clearly the guiding logic behind halting Iran’s nuclear program.

Proliferation is another concern often invoked in regards to Iran’s nuclear program. The argument goes that if Iran were eventually to build a nuclear weapon, other regional powers

would feel compelled to initiate their own nuclear programs with a view to building a bomb themselves. The two states commonly noted to fit the bill are Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both looking to extend their influence. Saudi Arabia would seek to contain Iranian influence in Iraq – essentially now a proxy battleground for influence between its two neighbours – while extending its own influence, as well as limiting Egypt’s influence, which it sees as a competitor as the leader of the Sunni world. Likewise, Egypt would like to see the Saudis’ influence curbed, whilst also possibly enticing the likes of Syria and Jordan into an alliance against the Saudis. In regards to Syria, an alliance with Egypt would cause a break with its current Iranian ally. All these possible moves would be detrimental to Israel, plunging its regional strategy into even deeper chaos than the shake-up cause by the Arab Spring. Proliferation could cause a scramble among both small and large powers to enter into alliances with one another to build strategic blocs, such as Egypt–Syria–Jordan, Iran–Iraq–Syria, Saudi Arabia–Iraq–Bahrain, and the possibilities go on.

In the event of a scramble to build alliances, it is highly likely that the Middle East’s main pariah – Israel – would end up with no friends in a geopolitical situation where two or three regional blocs emerge, exacerbating its already isolated existence. At the moment there are only two obvious blocs – the Iran–Syria–Lebanon alliance and the US–Saudi–Israeli alliance. Proliferation could cause the rearrangement or disintegration of these blocs and facilitate newly emergent blocs that are less predictable and with a higher chance of military conflict. Although the possibility of conflict between states might be heightened by the formation of alliances – the situation in Europe during 1914 springs to mind – Israel would be at a distinct disadvantage with no regional ally, instead relying on America’s ability to project power if any conflict between itself and others were to erupt. It is in Israel’s interests, therefore, to maintain the status quo, namely, a complex regional mesh of relationships with only the two existing blocs. The proliferation of nuclear weapons could threaten not only its relationship with the Saudi royal family but bring in to play distinct strategic blocs that could threaten Israel’s dominant position in the region. From Israel’s perspective, a nuclear-armed Iran, Egypt or Saudi Arabia could spell the end of its current triumvirate with the US and Saudi Arabia.

Iran's military expenditure is one quarter of Saudi spending on defence, and most likely miniscule in comparison to Egypt. So in regards to the previous point, how and why would Iran benefit from the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the posturing of Egypt and Saudi Arabia against it in the form of regional blocs? The short answer is that it would not benefit. In fact such a scenario is likely to add to the list of possible belligerents towards Iran. So why would Iran want to increase the amount of countries postured against it? Once again, it would not. This tells us something about the policy pursued by Iran. Iran's leaders are so concerned about the threat Israel poses to its own security – including its nuclear stockpile – that it is willing to risk regional nuclear proliferation, as well as the possibility of more hostile governments in the region, in order to attain a nuclear deterrent against Israel. Even in the knowledge that its military budget pales in comparison to the other regional powers, Iran is willing to attain a nuclear capability out of fear of an Israeli attack despite the possibility that this could spark horizontal proliferation throughout the region, ultimately to their own detriment. This is a sign that Iran's leaders are desperate to avoid such a conflict.

As I wrote in my previous commentary, the proposal for a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Middle East has received little to no attention in the international media in the past few months as the Iranian stand-off steadily escalates. In his speech to AIPAC, President Obama stated: 'I firmly believe that an opportunity still remains for diplomacy – backed by pressure – to succeed.' Up to this point there has been very little diplomacy and a great deal of pressure. Based on US efforts, 'diplomacy' means an Iranian acceptance of US demands – an end to nuclear activity – and only then will negotiations for a final settlement commence. 'Pressure' through the imposition of sanctions is the means to a pre-determined US end.

The sanctions imposed on Iraq during the 1990s all the way through to the US-led invasion in 2003 can serve as a lesson as to why Iran is unlikely to budge under the extreme measures proposed by the US and the European Union. Sanctions were imposed on Iraq by the United Nations and extended by the UN Security Council as a result of Saddam Hussein's decision to invade Kuwait in 1990. After a brief US-led campaign against the Iraqi army which pushed

Iraqi troops out of Kuwait and all the way back to Baghdad, sanctions remained in place. Under UN Security Council Resolution 687, the lifting of sanctions was tied to Iraq's compliance with destroying all chemical and biological weapons and abiding by its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations not to pursue nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup> Of course, subsequent evidence suggests that Saddam destroyed all of his nuclear materials once sanctions were imposed. Ironically it was Saddam's use of chemical weapons during the Iran–Iraq war in 1980–88 that led Ayatollah Khomeini to restart Iran's nuclear program, which had been stopped in 1979 when Khomeini came to power.<sup>5</sup> Iraq at that time was supported by the United States, which supplied Saddam with many of the chemical weapons it used against Iran. American short-term policy helped establish Iran's current nuclear program. Once sanctions were imposed on Iraq after the Gulf War, despite Iraq complying with most of the demands of the UN resolution, they were not lifted or softened, but instead remained in place for over a decade.

From Iran's perspective, the historical experience of its neighbour does not bode well for itself. Iran has every right to believe that were it to abandon and dismantle its nuclear program, sanctions would remain in place for an indefinite amount of time. Worried that Iran's influence in the region is growing, particularly in Iraq, the US might have no interest in softening or ending sanctions. In fact, the Obama administration could conceivably have it both ways: no nuclear program in Iran and the continuation of sanctions. In Iraq, sanctions crippled the country and hundreds of thousands of people starved, only for the country to be subsequently invaded in 2003 despite all evidence pointing to the fact that Saddam had disposed of all nuclear materials and the nuclear program. Iran's greatest fear would be to dismantle its nuclear program, have the current sanctions maintained or expanded in order to crush its economy, and when it is too weak to fight back – like Iraq in 2003 – be invaded and the government overthrown and replaced by a pro-western regime. With every intention of staving off such a scenario, giving up its nuclear program could ultimately be suicidal. It is for this reason that, if a peaceful solution to the stand-off is to be reached, sanctions need to be

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 687, 3 April 1991, <http://www.fas.org/news/un/iraq/sres/sres0687.htm>

<sup>5</sup> JM Lewis and L Olson, 'Iran policy on the way to zero' in CM Kelleher and J Reppy (eds) *Getting to zero: the path to nuclear disarmament*, Stanford University Press, California, 2011, p 207.

lifted so that meaningful diplomacy can begin with a view to creating a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Middle East. If diplomacy is not initiated without some basic guarantees, it will only heighten Iranian fears that Israel and the US are conspiring to launch an attack on its nuclear facilities in the short-term, and possibly even launch an invasion in the long-term.