

Israel's Netanyahu rails against US-Iran talks, but others see opportunities

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's response to Thursday's discussions involving US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif at the United Nations continues to be hostile and belligerent in the extreme.

Last week Netanyahu's office dismissed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's avowal that "We have time and again said that under no circumstances would we seek any weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, nor will we ever".

This was "mere media spin", a statement declared. "One should not be taken in by Rouhani's deceptive words".

Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition allies are publicly furious at the Obama administration's turn to diplomacy with Iran following Washington's inability to proceed with plans for an immediate war against Syria in face of massive public opposition. Israeli officials have been widely quoted warning against any weakening of American "resolve".

Netanyahu plans to make Iran's nuclear development programme the focus of his meeting with Barack Obama in Washington on September 30 and his speech to the UN General Assembly the next day, warning against the US being deluded by Rouhani's "rhetoric".

The White House has repeatedly sought to reassure the Israelis. Benjamin Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser for strategic communication, for example, commented, "We certainly recognize and appreciate Israel's significant concerns about Iran, given the threats that have been made against Israel and the outrageous comments that have come out of Iran for many years about Israel".

"There's not an open-ended window for diplomacy, but we do believe there is time and space for diplomacy", he added.

US spokesmen have also repeatedly made clear that any negotiations with Tehran will take place under a continued regime of economic sanctions and the ever-present threat of military force.

America's sponsorship of the Syrian opposition and its threats of a military strike against Assad's forces have nothing to do with humanitarian concerns. Syria has long been seen as an ante-chamber to a broader campaign to change the balance of forces in the Middle East—eliminating first the Assad regime and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and then installing a pliant regime in Tehran. This would in turn undermine the pro-Iranian Maliki government in Iraq.

The elimination of what is referred to as the Shi'ite Crescent also provides the shaky petro-monarchs of Bahrain, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia with a convenient rallying cry against their own oppressed workers, many of whom are Shi'a and face discrimination and hardship.

Washington's recent change of tack on Syria has been forced upon it, but has been given some traction by the readiness of first Assad and now Iran's Rouhani to offer concessions in the face of US military and economic might.

The US clearly wants to test out how far the two regimes are prepared to go in bowing to its dictates. But the central pillar of American and Israeli foreign policy remains in force: that any and all opposition to US imperialist domination of the resource-rich Middle East and threats to the Israeli state must be eliminated—chiefly Iran, which is backed by Russia and China.

Diplomacy is nothing more than another means of enforcing these policies. Moreover, any failure of either Syria or Iran to toe the line—that is, to accept complete subjugation—will provide the occasion to declare the

need for war.

In a revealing interview with the *Jerusalem Post* Friday, Michael Oren, Israel's outgoing ambassador to the US, has confirmed what is at stake in the Syrian civil war and the latest round of negotiations.

Both the US and Israel shared “the goal of stopping Iran from getting nuclear weapons”, he said.

The US and Israel have long maintained—without providing any evidence—that Iran's programme for developing nuclear energy is a smokescreen for developing nuclear weapons and have used this as the pretext for sanctions on Iranian oil exports that have devastated that country's economy.

Oren added that Assad's overthrow would weaken Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah and that “The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut”.

“We saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc”, he continued. “That is a position we had well before the outbreak of hostilities in Syria”.

“We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran”, he said. When pressed upon whether Israel supported the “bad guys” when they were Al Qaeda or Al Nusra, Oren said, “We understand that they are pretty bad guys”.

For all the talk about the global war on terror, Israel and the US are both perfectly willing to support, arm and work with Al Qaeda and its affiliates to accomplish their objectives. In Syria, Islamist militias supported by the Gulf sheikdoms and the imperialist powers have carried out numerous atrocities against defenceless civilians, including the use of chemical weapons. Only in the last few days, Al Qaeda-linked groups in Yemen, Kenya and Pakistan have claimed responsibility for attacks killing scores of people.

However, the US-born Oren, with his extensive involvement in Republican circles and lecturing at major universities, has political allegiances that are more closely aligned with Washington's. He sees as one of his tasks countering Netanyahu's need to placate the far right in Israel. To this end, Oren fairly unambiguously lent his support to the US diplomatic push—backed of course by the threat of military force.

“Now, since the US-Russian negotiations on removing the WMDs [weapons of mass destruction], we see this as a development that could be an important

precedent not just for Syria, but for Iran”, he said, “especially if all the WMDs are removed. And we continue to believe that in order for diplomacy to be effective, it has to be backed up by a credible threat—which is also our position on Iran”.

Such comments are indicative of the gangster mentality that dominates the political establishment of all the major and regional powers.

Throughout the Syrian civil war Israeli authorities have acted as they always do, as Washington's paid subcontractor in the region. “We make the case, and I do so unreservedly, that American aid to Israel is vital for American security, not just for Israeli security, and that it is money that is well and economically spent”, Oren said.

“You are spending \$3.1 billion a year, and this is what you are getting: an exceedingly robust military loyal to a democratically elected government, an unabashedly pro-American country at the center of the most strategically crucial crossroads in the world, intelligence sharing, ports, airports and storage of close to \$1 billion of US military equipment”.

Other Israeli politicians and diplomats are also concerned that Netanyahu's hard-line is damaging to Israel's interests. “Netanyahu's message on Iran is unrefined, arouses opposition and most importantly, is not especially convincing”, a senior Israeli official told *Haaretz*, “Netanyahu's approach could harm Israel's ability to influence the position of the world powers as they negotiate with Iran”.



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