Israel's Netanyahu weakened by US shift on Iran/Syria

Jean Shaoul
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Israel's Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has come under sustained attack for opposing President Barack Obama's deal with Iran. He and his officials had called it "appeasement," an "historic mistake," a "sell-out," "tantamount to the plague and cholera" and "a danger to Israel's very existence."

Former senior Israeli national security officials have called Netanyahu's attitude potentially damaging to Israel's strategic ties to Washington, as have neoconservatives and other supporters of Israel in the United States.

Isaac Herzog, the newly elected leader of the opposition Labour Party, said, "The deal that was struck between the world powers and Iran is a fact, and Israel must adjust itself to the new situation." He called on Netanyahu to "fix the damage that was caused from the public clash with the US and return to an intimate relationship with President Obama and other world leaders."

An Israeli state official said of Washington, "They are starting to get offended. The personal things said by anonymous sources in Israel about [US Secretary of State John] Kerry were exaggerated and should not have been said."

British Foreign Secretary William Hague commented, "We would discourage anybody in the world, including Israel, from taking any steps that would undermine this agreement and we will make that very clear to all concerned."

His was a clear warning to Israel to refrain from any provocations against Iran or its allies that might derail the rapprochement with Tehran.

Kerry, visiting Israel, made it clear that Netanyahu had got the message, saying that in three meetings the prime minister had "been extremely constructive… He understands that we are now in the real negotiations… Israel and the United States are absolutely in synch."

The agreement with Tehran—the first in more than 30 years—is a major blow for Netanyahu and his co-thinkers in the US, who for years had sought to push the White House into mounting military strikes, or supporting Israel's attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

No sooner had the ink dried on the Geneva agreement than international diplomats from the Gulf, Turkey and Britain were booking their flights to Tehran. The energy corporations were dusting off their plans for investment and the US was said to be in talks with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia closely allied with Iran. Israel's business leaders clearly felt that the deal opened up opportunities, with the Tel Aviv stock exchange hitting a new high.

Washington's abandonment of its long anticipated air strike against Syria, Iran's chief Arab ally in the region, and the Geneva agreement with Iran do not represent a turn away from militarism. Rather, they express US imperialism's drive to utilise its military strength to more effectively dominate the world's most important oil and gas-exporting region.

While Obama tried to signal a more conciliatory approach to US foreign policy in the Middle East in his Cairo speech in 2009, he continued the military policies of the previous Bush administration, most recently using NATO to back Islamist forces to topple the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011. He gave every indication of doing the same in Syria.

But the widespread public opposition at home and in allied states such as the UK finally convinced the White House of the necessity of changing tack. The Obama administration calculated that it could pressure Tehran into granting its energy corporations privileged access to Iran's oil and natural gas, aiding in suppressing opposition to US foreign policy throughout the region from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

This would underpin the broader strategy of its "pivot to Asia," since by shoring up the region against its rivals

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Russia and above all China, the US would better able to encircle and confront China and ensure its hegemony across the Eurasian landmass.

In making this turn, the US could rely on the urgent desire of the Iranian bourgeoisie to reach an accommodation. Tehran faces crippling US sanctions and, no less than its Arab counterparts, growing hostility from its youthful population. More than half of Iran's 75 million people are under 30, including many either unemployed or underemployed and an impoverished working class.

Iran's theocratic–led nationalist regime, despite its rhetoric about leading a "Resistance Front", never wanted conflict with the US. It had made several efforts to reach an accommodation with the US. To this end, it worked with the US in ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan and reining in Muqtada al-Sadr's Shi'ite forces in Iraq to stabilise the US-puppet Maliki government.

It is the fear that Tehran could become a crucial US ally whose usefulness would outweigh its own that lies behind Netanyahu's rage over the Geneva deal. The US had long used Israel to control the region through its suppression of Palestinians and military assaults on its neighbours. Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon was conceived by the Bush administration as the means of destroying Hezbollah militarily and politically and installing a more pliant pro-US government, and it had even called on Israel to attack Syria as part of a broader plan of taking on Iran.

To the extent that the 8-million-strong Israel is today a strong regional player, this is a product both of US aid and the economic, technical, political and military weakness of the other Middle East states.

Tel Aviv, the region's sole nuclear power, has since the early 1990s used unsubstantiated claims that Iran's nuclear energy programme serves as a front for the development of nuclear weapons, as a means of furthering its opposition to Tehran.

The Shi'ite regime had sponsored Hezbollah in Lebanon that since the early 1980s had been Israel's chief opponent in Lebanon, forcing it out of Lebanon in May 2000. But this was no barrier to Israel's providing support to Iran during the eight-year-long Iraq-Iran war to help defeat Baghdad, which had long sponsored Palestinian groups opposed to Israel.

It was only after the US-led Gulf War in 1991 decisively defeated Iraq and shifted the regional balance of power in Iran's favour that Israel began its sustained propaganda campaign against Tehran in earnest. It asserted that Iran was just months away from developing a nuclear bomb and was the centre of world terrorism.

Israel's threats grew in the aftermath of the defeat of the second Palestinian intifada and the virtual imprisonment of former Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat in his Ramallah compound. Indeed, Iran and the "Shi'a arc of extremism" came to replace the Palestinians as the most cited "existential threat" to Israel.

In 2004, as Washington became increasingly preoccupied with Iraq and unwilling to engage in another theatre of war, Israel began to issue ultimatums and threats of unilateral strikes against Iran's nuclear sites.

Like Saudi Arabia, Israel had lobbied intensively for a US assault on Syria in a bid to support the Islamist forces being sponsored by the CIA, Riyadh, Doha and Ankara, to overthrow the Assad regime and bring about regime change in Iran. It was furious at Washington's turn to diplomacy, having worked closely with the Syrian opposition forces, providing vital intelligence information and training and launching air strikes targeting weapons shipments to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.

But there has always been a significant layer within the top ranks of the Israeli military, intelligence, political and financial establishment opposed to a military strike against Iran. Former Mossad Director Meir Dagan and former Shin Bet Director Yuval Diskin blocked an Israeli offensive, fearing that war with Iran would leave Tel Aviv imperilled in the Middle East and politically isolated on the international arena. In 2011, Dagan said that a military strike was "the stupidest thing I have ever heard" and "patently illegal under international law."

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