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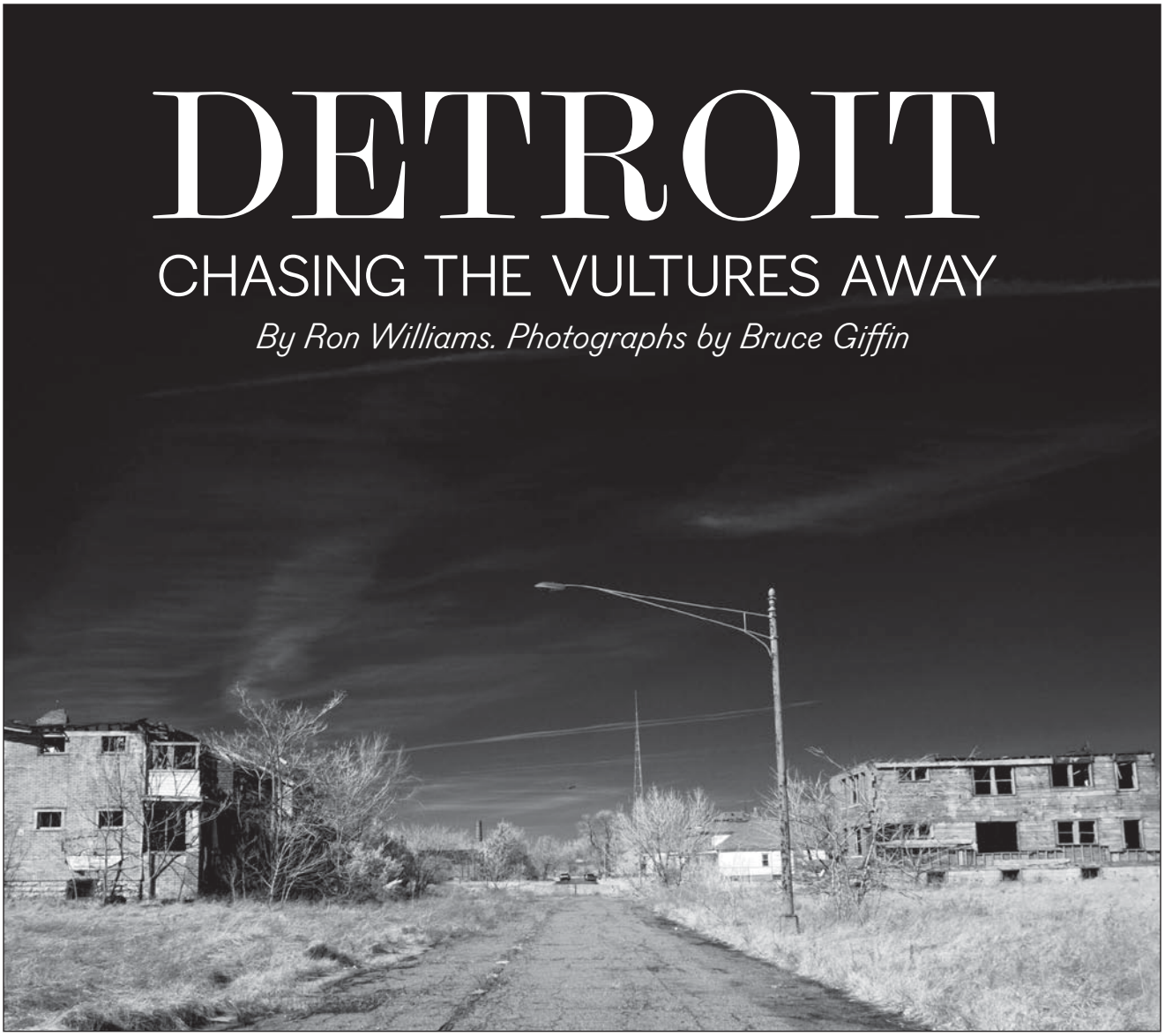

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Cover Photo by Bruce Giffin: Houses slated for demolition in Detroit

LOST IN THE USA

Collateral damage of smart sanctions

The prospects for democracy, socio-economic development, and conflict resolution will suffer if the West continues to rely on punitive measures, writes **Ali Fathollah-Nejad**

As the history of the West–Iran conflict proves, sanctions have rather kept the state of crisis alive than contributed to its resolution

This time, the warmongers' silly season found its apogée in U.S. neoconservative Daniel Pipes' advice to Obama to "bomb Iran," shortly after Tony Blair, having outlined why he helped invade Iraq, remarked ominously, "We face the same problem about Iran today." The UK's Chilcot Inquiry into the launching of the Iraq War ironically coincided with a considerable military build-up in the Persian Gulf region. All this occurred amidst the continued struggle of Iran's civil rights movement and proclamations of Western leaders to be in support of the latter's efforts. But is there any evidence for this?

Sanctions are widely portrayed as necessary, almost healthy medicine to bring about change in the opponent's policies. However, as the history of the West–Iran conflict proves, sanctions have rather kept the state of crisis alive than contributed to its resolution. Nonetheless, Western governments do not seem to have lost their dubious fascination for them.

"Smart sanctions", it is claimed, are a magic wand with which to decapitate evil. In the Iranian case, evil is identified with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Originally a defense organization to counter Iraqi aggression in the 1980s, the Guardians have developed into an expansive socio-politico-economic conglomerate believed to possess great economic and political power in today's Islamic Republic.

As we are told, "smart sanctions" shall target the Guardians' grip on the Iranian power structure. The much neglected difficulty here – though it is widely acknowledged that the bulk of Iranian economy is now in the hands of the Guardians – is that millions of civilians connected to these wide-ranging sectors thought to be controlled by the Guardians will be affected. Seen in this light, the gigantic dimension of these alleged "smart sanctions" comes to the fore.

Moreover, so-called "crippling sanctions" that target the petrol supply to Iran are still en route. In anticipation of those U.S. unilateral sanctions, the world's largest insurance companies have announced their retreat from Iran. This concerns both the financial and shipping sectors, and affects petrol supplies to Iran which imports 40 percent of its needs. Also three giant oil traders ended supplies to Iran, which amounted to half of Tehran's imports. Needless to say, such sanctions ultimately harm the population. To add, a complete implementation thereof – i.e. preventing Asian competitors to step in – would require a naval blockade which amounts to an act of war.

As stressed by civil society figures and economists, the price of sanctions is being paid by the Iranian population. The Iranian economy – manufacturing, agriculture, bank and financial sectors etc. – has been hurt from almost three decades of sanctions. Even today, businesses cannot easily obtain much needed goods on the international market to continue production and must often pay above-standard

prices. Moreover, the scientific community has faced discrimination in areas of research and Iran's technological advances been slowed down. Reflecting the dangers sanctions pose to the Green Movement, last fall Mir-Hossein Mousavi said, "We are opposed to any types of sanctions against our nation." The same was recently uttered by his fellow opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi in an interview with *Corriere della Serra.*

Meanwhile a more fundamental problem remains, one that is hardly acknowledged by many proponents who succumb to the adventurous illusion of having a say in the design and implementation of sanctions: They are mainly designed by the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), introduced to the U.S. Congress and finally implemented by the Treasury Department's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey – an AIPAC confidant. Along this process, the potential suffering by Iran's civil society hardly plays a role.

Sanctions – either "crippling" or "smart" – ultimately harm ordinary citizens. "Smart sanctions" is as much of an oxymoron as "smart weapons" which supposedly through "surgical strikes" only take out evil components. Indeed, much as in the case of their militaristic brothers-in-sprit, in the end the "collateral damages" of "smart sanctions" remain dominant.

More generally, in an increasingly multipolar globalized world, sanctions imposed upon energy-rich countries are basically futile as an effective policy tool. Too numerous are business-driven actors that are only too happy to jump in. Thus, Chinese, Russian, and even U.S. companies (acting via Dubai) have hugely benefitted from the European, U.S.-pressured withdrawal from the Iranian market.

Thus, sanctions – a medicine with which Western policy-circles are so obsessed with – are not a cure but a slow poison applied to the civil society. Sanctions as prototype of economic warfare in concert with the seasonal flaring-up of war-mongering are a dangerous mix. The deafening "drums of war" continue to bang upon the beating heart of Iran's civil society.

All this suggests that sanctions are perhaps a fig leaf for other agendas. For, in contrast to Western proclamations, sanctions do harm civil society while cementing the position of hardliners. Iran's middle class, as a result, will be affected by this further isolation of the country as sanctions punish honest traders and reward corrupt ones. The Guardians with their assumed 60 harbors in the Persian Gulf control the bulk of imports and sanctions will only bolster the trend of flourishing "black channels".

One might indeed argue that the not-so-unconscious "collateral damage" of never-ending sanctions is any meaningful transition to more democracy in Iran – a prospect which would set an uncomfortable precedent for the West's authoritarian friends in the region.

At the very least, the unending story of sanctions bears testimony to Western leaders' commitment to uphold "credibility" in the face of adverse conditions as much as to imposing their will on Iran. A futile exercise – even a dangerous one – if one begins to contemplate the aftermath of "smart sanctions" being imposed: Will the next desperate move entail "surgical strikes"?

Instead of going on believing that sanctions will one day develop their desired effects, it is high time to put the brakes. Hence, the only way forward would be to adopt a set of policies that would disarm hardliners of all sides whose business flourishes in the vicious cycle of enmity. It is only by détente that grist to the mills of radicalism can be removed – and a sustainable de-securitization of Iranian politics attained. Revoking existing sanctions on goods for civilian use could work wonders that would shake the very fundaments of confrontational postures.

Despite all frivolous claims, the diplomatic route has not been exhausted. Indeed, we are far from it. Since the core problem remains the "security dilemma" in the region, it would be wise for the West to call upon Israel to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The transatlantic "coercive strategy" vis-à-vis Iran – as it is accurately described in Diplomatic Studies – must be suspended for it undermines prospects for peace and development towards democracy. **CT**

The only way forward would be to adopt a set of policies that would disarm hardliners of all sides whose business flourishes in the vicious cycle of enmity

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Is Iran really a threat to world peace?

The Obama administration ratchets up the rhetoric about Iran, but **Ray McGovern** wonders if this is just more dangerous hype

In a rambling comment, Clinton had lamented that, despite President Barack Obama's reaching out to the Iranian leaders, he had elicited no sign they were willing to engage

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said publicly that Iran "doesn't directly threaten the United States." Her momentary lapse came while answering a question at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, on Feb. 14.

Fortunately for her, most of her Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) fellow travelers must have been either jet-lagged or sunning themselves poolside when she made her unusual admission.

And those who were present did Clinton the favor of disappearing her gaffe and ignoring its significance. (All one happy traveling family, you know.)

But she said it: it's on the State Department Web site. Those who had been poolside could even have read the text after showering. They might have recognized a real story there – but, granted, it was one so off-message that it would probably not we welcomed by editors back home.

In a rambling comment, Clinton had lamented that, despite President Barack Obama's reaching out to the Iranian leaders, he had elicited no sign they were willing to engage:

"Part of the goal – not the only goal, but part of the goal – that we were pursuing was to try to influence the Iranian decision regarding whether or not to pursue a nuclear weapon. And, as I said in my speech, you know, the evidence is accumulating that that [pursuing a nuclear weapon] is exactly what they are trying to do, which is deeply concerning, because it doesn't directly threaten the United States, but it directly threatens a lot of our friends, allies, and partners here in this region and beyond."

Qatar afraid? Not so much

The moderator turned to Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Al-Thani and invited him to give his perspective on "the danger that the Secretary just alluded to…if Iran gets the bomb."

Al-Thani pointed to Iran's "official answer" that it is not seeking to have a nuclear bomb; instead, the Iranians "explain to us that their intention is to use these facilities for their peaceful reactors for electricity and medical use…

"We have good relations with Iran," he added. "And we have continuous dialogue with the Iranians."

The prime minister added, "the best thing for this problem is a direct dialogue between the United States and Iran," and "dialogue through messenger is not good."

Al-Thani stressed that, "For a small country, stability and peace are very important," and intimated – diplomatically but clearly – that he was at least as afraid of what Israel and the U.S. might do, as what Iran might do.

All right. Secretary Clinton concedes that

Iran does not directly threaten the United States; so who are these "friends" to whom she refers? First and foremost, Israel, of course.

How often have we heard the Israelis say they would consider nuclear weapons in Iran's hands an "existential" threat? But let's try a reality check.

Former French President Jacques Chirac is perhaps the best-known statesman to hold up to ridicule the notion that Israel, with between 200 and 300 nuclear weapons in its arsenal, would consider Iran's possession of a nuclear bomb an existential threat.

In a recorded interview with the *New York Times,* the *International Herald Tribune,* and *Le Nouvel Observateur,* on Jan. 29, 2007, Chirac put it this way:

"Where will it drop it, this bomb? On Israel?" Chirac asked. "It would not have gone 200 meters into the atmosphere before Tehran would be razed." Thus, Iran's possession of a nuclear bomb would not be "very dangerous."

Chirac and a hard place

Soon, the former French president found himself caught between Chirac and a hard place. He was immediately forced to retract, but did so in what seemed to be so clumsy a way as to deliberately demonstrate that his initial candor was spot on.

On Jan. 30, Chirac told the *New York Times*: "I should rather have paid attention to what I was saying and understood that perhaps I was on record. … I don't think I spoke about Israel yesterday. Maybe I did so, but I don't think so. I have no recollection of that."

The Israeli leaders must have been laughing up their sleeve at that. Their continued ability to intimidate presidents of other countries – including President Barack Obama – is truly remarkable, particularly when it comes to helping to keep Israel's precious "secret," that it possesses one of the world's most sophisticated nuclear arsenals.

Shortly after Obama became U.S. President, veteran reporter Helen Thomas asked him if he knew of any country in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons, and Obama awkwardly responded that he didn't want to "speculate."

On April 13, 2010, Obama looked like a deer caught in the headlights when the *Washington Post*'s Scott Wilson, taking a leaf out of Helen Thomas' book, asked him if he would "call on Israel to declare its nuclear program and sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty."

Our normally articulate President stuttered his way through with a mini-filibuster answer, the highlight of which was, "And, as far as Israel goes, I'm not going to comment on their program …"

The following day the *Jerusalem Post* smirked, "President Dodges Question About Israel's Nuclear Program." The article continued: "Obama took a few seconds to formulate his response, but quickly took the weight off Israel and called on all countries to abide by the NPT."

The Jerusalem Post added that Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak chose that same day to send a clear message "also to those who are our friends and allies," that Israel will not be pressured into signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

(Also the following day, the *Washington Post* made no reference to the question from its own reporter or Obama's stumbling non-answer.)

In his response to Scott Wilson, Obama felt it necessary to tack on the observation that his words regarding the NPT represented the "consistent policy" of prior U.S. administrations, presumably to avert any adverse reaction from the Likud Lobby to even the slightest suggestion that Obama might be ratcheting up, even a notch or two, any pressure on Israel to acknowledge its nuclear arsenal and sign the NPT.

The greatest consistency to the policy, however, has been the U.S. obsequiousness to this double standard. Clearly, Washington and the FCM find it easier to draw black-

Our normally articulate President stuttered his way through with a mini-filibuster answer, the highlight of which was, "And, as far as Israel goes, I'm not going to comment on their program …"

I am reminded of an early Sunday morning talk show over five years ago at which Sen. Richard Lugar, then chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was asked why Iran would think it has to acquire nuclear weapons

and-white distinctions between noble Israel and evil Iran if there's no acknowledgement that Israel already has nukes and Iran has disavowed any intention of getting them.

This never-ending hypocrisy shows itself in various telling ways. I am reminded of an early Sunday morning talk show over five years ago at which Sen. Richard Lugar, then chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was asked why Iran would think it has to acquire nuclear weapons. Perhaps Lugar had not yet had his morning coffee, because he almost blew it with his answer:

"Well, you know, Israel has…" Oops. At that point he caught himself and abruptly stopped. The pause was embarrassing, but he then recovered and tried to limit the damage.

Aware that he could not simply leave the words "Israel has" twisting in the wind, Lugar began again: "Well, Israel is alleged to have a nuclear capability."

Is "alleged" to have? Lugar was chair of the Foreign Relations Committee from 1985 to 1987; and then again from 2003 to 2007. No one told him that Israel has nuclear weapons? But, of course, he did know, but he also knew that U.S. policy on disclosure of this "secret" – over four decades – has been to protect Israel's nuclear "ambiguity."

Small wonder that our most senior officials and lawmakers – and Lugar, remember, is one of the more honest among them – are widely seen as hypocritical, the word Scott Wilson used to frame his question.

The Fawning Corporate Media, of course, ignores this hypocrisy, which is their standard operating procedure when the word "Israel" is spoken in unflattering contexts. But the Iranians, Syrians and others in the Middle East pay closer attention.

Obama Overachieving

As for Obama, the die was cast during the presidential campaign when, on June 3, 2008, in the obligatory appearance before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), he threw raw red meat to the Likud Lobby.

Someone wrote into his speech: "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel and it must remain undivided." This obsequious gesture went well beyond the policy of prior U.S. administrations on this highly sensitive issue, and Obama had to backtrack two days later.

"Well, obviously, it's going to be up to the parties to negotiate a range of these issues. And Jerusalem will be part of those negotiations," Obama said when asked if he was saying the Palestinians had no future claim to the city.

The person who inserted the offending sentence into his speech was not identified nor fired, as he or she should have been. My guess is that the sentence inserter has only risen in power within the Obama administration.

So, why am I reprising this sorry history? Because this is what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sees as the context of the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

Even when Israel acts in a manner that flies in the face of stated U.S. policy – calling on all nations to sign the NPT and to submit to transparency in their nuclear programs – Netanyahu has every reason to believe that Washington's power-players will back down and the U.S. FCM will intuitively understand its role in the cover-up.

L'Affaire Biden – when the Vice President was humiliated by having Israel announce new Jewish construction in East Jerusalem as he arrived to reaffirm U.S. solidarity with Israel – was dismissed as a mere "spat" by the neoconservative editorial page of the *Washington Post.*

Rather than Israel making amends to the United States, it has been vice versa.

Obama's national security adviser, James Jones, trudged over to an affair organized by the AIPAC offshoot think tank, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), to make a major address.

I got to wondering, after reading his text, which planet Jones lives on. He devoted his first nine paragraphs to fulsome praise for

WINEP's "objective analysis" and scholarship, adding that "our nation – and indeed the world – needs institutions like yours now more than ever."

Most importantly, Jones gave pride of place to "preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them," and only then tacking on the need to forge "lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians." He was particularly effusive in stating:

"There is no space – no space – between the United States and Israel when it comes to Israel's security."

Those were the exact words used by Vice President Joe Biden in Israel on March 9, before he was mouse-trapped by the announcement of Israel's plans for East Jerusalem.

The message is inescapably clear: Netanyahu has every reason to believe that the Siamese-twin relationship with the United States is back to normal, despite the suggestion from CENTCOM Commander, Gen. David Petraeus, earlier this year that total identification with Israel costs the lives of American troops.

Petraeus's main message was that this identification fosters the widespread impression that the U.S. is incapable of standing up to Israel. The briefing that he sponsored reportedly noted, "America was not only viewed as weak, but there was a growing perception that its military posture in the region was eroding."

However, in the address to WINEP, National Security Adviser Jones evidenced no concern on that score. Worse still, in hyping the threat from Iran, he seemed to be channeling Dick Cheney's rhetoric before the attack on Iraq, simply substituting an "n" for the "q." Thus:

"Iran's continued defiance of its international obligations on its nuclear program and its support of terrorism represents (sic) a significant regional and global threat. A nuclear-armed Iran could transform the landscape of the Middle East…fatally wounding the global non-proliferation regime, and emboldening terrorists and extremists who threaten the United States and our allies."

A Bigger Mousetrap?

Jacques Chirac may have gone a bit too far in belittling Israel's concern over the possibility of Iran acquiring a small nuclear capability, but it is truly hard to imagine that Israel would feel incapable of deterring what would be a suicidal Iranian attack.

The real threat to Israel's "security interests" would be something quite different. If Iran acquired one or two nuclear weapons, Israel might be deprived of the full freedom of action it now enjoys in attacking its Arab neighbors.

Even a rudimentary Iranian capability could work as a deterrent the next time the Israelis decide they would like to attack Lebanon, Syria or Gaza. Clearly, the Israelis would prefer not to have to look over their shoulder at what Tehran might contemplate doing in the way of retaliation.

However, there has been a big downside for Israel in hyping the "existential threat" supposedly posed by Iran. This exaggerated danger and the fear it engenders have caused many highly qualified Israelis, who find a ready market for their skills abroad, to emigrate.

That could well become a true "existential threat" to a small country traditionally dependent on immigration to populate it and on its skilled population to make its economy function.

The departure of well-educated secular Jews also could tip the country's political balance more in favor of the ultra-conservative settlers who are already an important part of Netanyahu's Likud coalition.

Still, at this point, Netanyahu has the initiative regarding what will happen next with Iran, assuming Tehran doesn't fully capitulate to the U.S.-led pressure campaign. Netanyahu could decide if and when to launch a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, thus forcing Washington's hand in deciding whether to back Israel if Iran retaliates.

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If Iran sought to retaliate, would Obama feel compelled to come to Israel's defense and "finish the job" by devastating what was left of Iran's nuclear and military capacity?

Netanyahu may not be impressed – or deterred – by anything short of a public pronouncement from Obama that the U.S. will not support Israel if it provokes war with Iran. The more Obama avoids such blunt language, the more Netanyahu is likely to view Obama as a weakling who can be played politically.

If Netanyahu feels himself in the catbird seat, then an Israeli attack on Iran seems to me more likely than not. For instance, would Netanyahu judge that Obama lacked the political spine to have U.S. forces in control of Iraqi airspace shoot down Israeli aircraft on their way to Iran? Many analysts feel that Obama would back down and let the warplanes proceed to their targets.

Then, if Iran sought to retaliate, would Obama feel compelled to come to Israel's defense and "finish the job" by devastating what was left of Iran's nuclear and military capacity?

Again, many analysts believe that Obama would see little choice, politically.

Yet, whatever we think the answers are, the only calculation that matters is Israel's. My guess is Netanyahu would not anticipate a strong reaction from President Obama, who has, time and again, showed himself to be more politician than statesman.

James Jones is, after all, Obama's national security adviser, and is throwing off signals that can only encourage Netanyahu to believe that Jones's boss would scurry to find some way to avoid the domestic political opprobrium that would accrue, were he to seem less than fully supportive of Israel.

Backing Off the NIE?

Netanyahu has other reasons to take heart with the political directions of Washington.

According to the *Washington Post,* the U.S. intelligence community is preparing what is called "a memorandum to holders of Iran Estimate," in other words an update to the full-scale National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) completed in November 2007, which downplayed Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions.

The NIE's update is now projected for completion this August, delayed from last fall reportedly because of new incoming information.

The *Post* article recalls that the 2007 NIE presented the "startling conclusion" that Iran had halted work on developing a nuclear warhead. Why "startling?" Because this contradicted what President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney had been saying during the previous months.

It is a hopeful thing that senior intelligence officials from both CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency have, the way the *Post* puts it, "avoided contradicting the language used in the 2007 NIE," although some are said to privately assert that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon.

The *Post* says there is an expectation that the previous NIE "will be corrected" to indicate a darker interpretation of Iranian nuclear intentions.

It seems a safe, if sad, bet that the same Likud-friendly forces that attacked experienced diplomat Chas Freeman as a "realist" and got him "un-appointed," after National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair had named him Director of the National Intelligence Council, will try to Netanyahu-ize the upcoming Memorandum to Holders.

The National Intelligence Council has purview over such memoranda, as well as over NIEs. Without Freeman, or anyone similarly substantive and strong, it seems likely that the intelligence community will not be able to resist the political pressures to conform.

Nevertheless, the intelligence admirals, generals and other high officials seem to be avoiding the temptation to play games, so far.

The Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Gen. Ronald Burgess, and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. James Cartwright, hewed to the intelligence analysts' judgments in their testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee last month.

Indeed, their answer to the question as

to how soon Iran could have a deliverable nuclear weapon, if fact, sounded familiar:

"Experience says it is going to take you three to five years" to move from having enough highly enriched uranium to having a "deliverable weapon that is usable… something that can actually create a detonation, an explosion that would be considered a nuclear weapon," Cartwright told the panel.

What makes Cartwright's assessment familiar – and relatively reassuring – is that five years ago, the director of DIA told Congress that Iran is not likely to have a nuclear weapon until "early in the next decade" – this decade. Now, we're early in that decade and Iran's nuclear timetable, assuming it does intend to build a bomb, has been pushed back to the middle of this decade at the earliest.

Indeed, the Iranians have been about five years away from a nuclear weapon for several decades now, according to periodic intelligence estimates. They just never seem to get much closer. But there's not a trace of embarrassment among U.S. policymakers or any notice of this slipping timetable by the FCM.

Not that NIEs – or U.S. officials – matter much in terms of a potential military showdown with Iran. The "decider" here is Netanyahu, unless Obama stands up and tells him, publicly, "If you attack Iran, you're on your own."

But don't hold your breath. **CT**

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