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TEAR DOWN THESE RED LINES: A COMPARISON OF ISRAEL'S AND THE UNITED STATES' APPROACH TOWARDS IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

by MARGARET JONES

As worldwide spending on nuclear weapons passes 1 trillion per decade,¹ Global Zero is leading the international movement to reduce nuclear arsenals. To remind countries that “their citizens care about this issue and expect them to take action,”² Global Zero’s campaigns are found anywhere from music festivals to the Oval Office.³ Additionally, in 2010, Global Zero developed the Global Zero Action Plan that requires all nuclear weapons countries to

“commit to participate in multilateral negotiations for proportionate reductions of stockpiles” by 2014.⁴

While international tensions over Iran’s nuclear program intensify, Israel and the U.S. are taking different approaches, begging the question of whether Global Zero’s plan for peaceful disarmament is realistic.

Beginning in 2002, Iran began construction of the country’s first nuclear reactor in Bushehr.⁵ In the subsequent years, Iran’s relationship with the International Atomic Energy Agency (“IAEA”), an international organization charged with promoting nuclear peace and safety, deteriorated significantly.⁶ Iran’s refusal to suspend its uranium conversion, insisting the program is for peaceful purposes, is partially the reason for this deterioration, which caused resolutions and sanctions to be passed by the United Nations (“UN”) and the United States.⁷

The UN’s first resolution demanded Iran “suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research development.”⁸ When Iran failed to comply, the UN passed four subsequent resolutions, each implementing economic and diplomatic sanctions. These sanctions included import and export blocks of all “sensitive nuclear material and equipment,” tougher rules on financial transaction with Iranian banks, and frozen financial assets of those involved in Iran’s nuclear activities.⁹

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS ISSUED BY THE UNITED STATES

In October 2007, the U.S. passed “sweeping new sanctions against Iran,”¹⁰ over growing concerns that Iran seeks to build a nuclear warhead. The U.S. Congress and President stated , Iran’s nuclear program “represent[s] a serious threat to the security of the US and its allies around the world.”¹¹ Recently, municipal sanctions prohibit businesses that invest in Iran from bidding or submitting proposals to any political subdivision of the state or any public department or agency.¹²

However, sanctions often have little impact, and the conventional wisdom in the international community is “sanctions don’t work.”¹³ To support this opinion, many experts cite examples such as “the failure of the American trade

embargo to topple Fidel Castro for half a century, or the failure of sanctions to remove Saddam Hussein from power.”¹⁴

Similarly, economic sanctions by the U.S. have had little impact on Iran’s nuclear program.¹⁵ Professor Alexandru Balas from Loyola University Chicago commented that although these sanctions have dealt a blow to the regime’s income from oil exportation, it has not changed the desire of the current administration to obtain nuclear energy or a nuclear weapon.¹⁶

Currently, as a result of the sanctions, Iran’s “oil production and currency have both plummeted 40%.”¹⁷ However, officials in Israel admit the sanctions have “fallen short of their intended effect.”¹⁸ According to Professor Balas, who noted the failure of U.S. sanctions on North Korea’s nuclear program, it is likely Iran will simply find other customers to purchase their oil.¹⁹ Iran’s problems may be exacerbated by the sanctions, but they “will not stop [Iran’s] nuclear pursuit.”²⁰

ISRAEL’S RED LINE

Believing these sanctions are not working, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is using a different approach by establishing a “clear red line” between peace and war with Iran.²¹

Netanyahu told delegates at a UN summit that Iran was “already 70 percent of the way through the process of enriching enough uranium to fuel a bomb.”²² Hoping Iran will back down if faced with an ultimatum, Netanyahu’s clear red line is a specified level of uranium enrichment that, if exceeded, would cause Israel to take military action against Iran.²³ Israel has set this nuclear threshold at 90 percent uranium enrichment.²⁴ Netanyahu believes this is the only “way to peacefully prevent Iran from getting atomic bombs.”²⁵

In response to Israel’s ultimatum, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says this “continued threat by the uncivilised [sic] Zionists [Israel] to resort to military action is a clear example” of nuclear intimidation.²⁶

In the event Israel attacks, Iran vowed it is “strong enough to defend itself and reserves its full right to retaliate with full force against any attack.”²⁷ Believing Israel would not attack Iran without help from the U.S., Iran told news media,

“U.S. military bases in Qatar, Bahrain, and Afghanistan are legitimate targets.”²⁸

Additionally, although Iran is not looking to start a war, it would not hesitate to “launch a pre-emptive attack if it was sure that the enemies [were] putting the final touches to attack.”²⁹

MOVING FORWARD: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Iran continues to maintain that their nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, such as energy and medical use.³⁰ Even if Iran is pursuing a nuclear warhead, according to Professor Balas, it is highly unlikely that Iran will use it.³¹ If anything, Iran having a nuclear warhead may bring a greater “balance of power to the Middle East”.³² Moreover, because Iran invested millions of dollars into their nuclear program, it is unlikely Iran would give it to terrorists or the Hezbollah,³³ a political organization in Lebanon comprised mainly of Shia Muslims.³⁴

As for Israel, “its credibility and deterrent capacity is undermined”³⁵ the more it talks about red lines and very few countries are willing to follow Israel’s approach, including the United States.³⁶

Although the “Obama administration has not ruled out a military option,” the U.S. believes the “sanctions and multilateral negotiations with Iran must still be given time to work.”³⁷ Moreover, now that elections are over, Israel has announced “they will continue to follow the lead of the U.S.”³⁸

In the end, according to Professor Balas, the U.S. could most likely live with a nuclear Iran.³⁹ For right now, it is important to “just keep talking”⁴⁰ so that we can eventually “tear down those red lines.”

NOTES

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- 7 *Id.*
- 8 *UN Sanctions Against Iran*, BBC NEWS (July 26, 2010), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-10768146>; *see generally* S.C. RES. 1737; S.C. RES. 1747; S.C. 1803; S.C. RES. 1929.
- 9 *Id.*
- 10 *Iran's Nuclear Timeline*, *supra* note 5.
- 11 N.J. STAT. ANN. § 52:32-55 (West).
- 12 *See, e.g.*, N.Y. GEN. MUN. LAW § 103-g (McKinney).
- 13 JOSEPH S. NYE, JR., *THE FUTURE OF POWER* 72 (PublicAffairs ed., 1st ed. 2011).
- 14 *Id.* at 72–73.
- 15 Interview with Alexandru Balas, Professor, Comparative Politics and International Relations at Loyola Univ. Chi. (Oct. 18, 2012).
- 16 *Id.*
- 17 *Netanyahu Urges U.S. to Set 'Red Line' for Iran*, CNN NEWS (Sept. 16, 2012), <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/16/politics/israel-netanyahu-interview/index.html>.
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- 23 *Id.*
- 24 *Id.*
- 25 *Id.*
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- 30 *Netanyahu Urges U.S.*, *supra* note 17.
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- 32 *Id.*
- 33 *Id.*
- 34 *Who are Hezbollah?* BBC NEWS (July 4, 2010), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4314423.stm.
- 35 Aaron David Miller, *Netanyahu's Red Line Isn't Getting Him Anywhere*, CNN NEWS (September 28, 2012), <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/28/opinion/miller-netanyahu-red-line/index.html?iref=allsearch>.
- 36 *Id.*
- 37 *Iran Claims Right to Retaliate*, *supra* note 26.

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39 Balas, *supra* note 15.

40 *Id.*