

ISRAEL'S IRANIAN NUCLEAR THREAT: WAS IT OR WASN'T IT?

July 14, 2016

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A year ago, as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was just signed, Israel stood alone as the only country that openly registered strong disapproval, even alarm. While the world celebrated the deal, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the world about “a mistake with historical proportion,” adding that the JCPOA “paves Iran’s path to the bomb.” Netanyahu appeared so adamant that he even raised the specter of “another Holocaust.”

In his desperate effort to kill the JCPOA, Netanyahu ignored all diplomatic protocol as he conspired to turn Congress against the president. It was clearly an unheard-of intervention in American domestic politics, but Netanyahu did not care. In doing so he sacrificed, and surely compromised, his working relations with President Barack Obama for a feeble chance that Congress might overturn the deal. Ultimately, and as most predicted, Netanyahu failed pathetically.

This reckless conduct highlights Netanyahu’s overall obsession over the Iranian nuclear issue. Even before he took office in 2009, as the opposition leader and throughout the campaign, Netanyahu made the Iranian nuclear issue the centerpiece of his claim for national leadership, comparing Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Hitler and Iran to Germany of 1938. Once in office, Prime Minister Netanyahu did not miss an opportunity to invoke the Iranian nuclear issue as Israel’s most dangerous and existential threat. During those six years

Netanyahu manufactured and introduced a new politics of nuclear scare. In fact, Israel was a nation living under a double scare: the scare from the advent of the Iranian bomb itself and the scare of a full-scale Israeli-Iranian war over that bomb.

We know today that Prime Minister Netanyahu threw extraordinary additional funds on his “strike Iran” project. Some estimate that Israel spent \$5–10 billion above and beyond the regular defense budget to enhance the capabilities of the air force, intelligence collection, and command and control, while also building new cyber warfare capabilities. Evidently, Netanyahu authorized large-scale preparations to make Israel ready for a full-scale military confrontation with Iran. Indeed, since the signing of the JCPOA we learned that on three separate occasions (at least) Netanyahu initiated preparatory steps aimed to bring Israel to the verge of a military strike on Iran. While it is still unclear how much of all that was bluffing (for the sake of pressing for stronger sanctions), it is clear that Israel’s top security chiefs took those steps seriously enough to get scared themselves by Netanyahu’s conduct.

Given those six years of Iran scare, infused from the top, it is not surprising at all that the signing of JCPOA was initially viewed by most of the Israeli media as a major setback to Israel’s national interests. After all, the nation’s leadership bombarded that message constantly. And even those who were critical about Netanyahu’s politics had

to appear cautious in their assessment of the JCPOA. There were a lot of uncertainties early on about how the JCPOA would be implemented. Hence, virtually no one in the Israeli public limelight was ready to openly endorse the deal, and those who were ready to note its few advantages, also had to note its significant disadvantages.

Indeed, it took some months until a few former senior Israeli military and intelligence officials, let alone nuclear experts, became comfortable to quietly suggest that, on balance, the JCPOA is maybe a good thing for Israel, at least in terms of buying time, something that maybe would make Israel safer. Brigadier General (Res) Uzi Eilam, a former director general of the Israeli Atomic Nuclear Commission, was among the few Israeli security and nuclear experts that voiced opinions in that direction. But even now, a year later, praise for the JCPOA is uttered with great caution. Open and unequivocal praise for the deal is not considered politically correct.

But perhaps the most profound and dramatic impact of the JCPOA on the Israeli national psyche is the fast disappearance of the Iranian bomb scare from the public discourse. A topic that from 2009 to 2015 was almost constantly bombarding the Israeli mind, both by national leaders and by the media, vanished almost overnight from the public discourse. What was viewed for a long time as the most menacing danger to Israel's survival, a topic that clearly dominated all other national security issues, is now barely discussed in public. Except for a few experts, both the leadership and the public have lost interest in this issue, with nothing left to say about it.

One cannot but ask with wonder: was the Iranian threat a real issue or just a bad dream that is all gone as we become awake? Perhaps the most worrying lesson of the fast

disappearance of the “Iranian nuclear threat” in the Israeli consciousness is the realization of how easy it is in a liberal democracy for leadership to manipulate and spin a fairly complicated issue, technically and politically, while so few understand what is going on.

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