



INSS Insight No. 369, September 9, 2012

Can a Red Line be Drawn on Iran?

Ephraim Asculai

We can define “red lines” as acts, activities, or situations that if carried out or reached, mandate actions to redress the situation. The purpose of drawing these lines is twofold: to deter these said acts or activities, and to judge that the situation is serious enough to warrant reactions. Red lines, virtual or real, have been drawn in the past as part of strategies to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. These lines were defined and later crossed without any action taken – other than verbal.

The issue is now resurfacing as part of a proposed understanding between the US administration and Israel, with the intention of lowering the tension between them. The main point of contention is that Israel assesses that Iran has already gone far enough with its nuclear weapons development program to produce them at will, while the US administration thinks that there is time enough for a “diplomatic solution” to this issue.

The US also assesses that it will know well in advance if the Iranians are “breaking out” and starting the relatively short route towards the production of nuclear weapons. The *Times of Israel* reported that on August 10, 2012, Jay Carney, spokesman for the White House, said that the United States “can see what’s going on with Iran’s nuclear program” and that it would know “if Tehran is close to obtaining a nuclear weapon. I would also say that we have eyes – we have visibility into the program, and we would know if and when Iran made what’s called a breakout move towards acquiring a weapon.” He later said he was referring to the International Atomic Energy Agency officials who are mandated to inspect Iran’s nuclear sites. This, in a way, set a red line for Iran.

There are two implicit assumptions here: the first is that the US intelligence system is infallible, and the second is that the IAEA inspectors would discover an Iranian “breakout” in time to sound a reliable warning. The problem is that Israel does not share these assumptions, and indeed, both are difficult to embrace. Intelligence is not infallible, as history has shown, and the IAEA is very limited in its observational powers, especially in Iran. Reliance on intelligence can lead to overconfidence and misread facts, and the stakes, at least for Israel, are too high for that.

In order to be effective, red lines must fulfill several conditions. They must be well-defined and realistic, referring to determinable parameters; they must be timely, in that there would be enough time left for preventive actions; the consequences of crossing the lines must be serious enough to be considered a deterrent; and they must be made known to the other side, or even be made public.

Setting the red line at the breakout point could be effective only if the consequences of crossing it would be serious enough for Iran. In a larger view, consider a breakout scenario against the conditions listed above. In order to be well-defined, the term “breakout” must be well-defined. Does crossing the 20 percent enrichment level fulfill this condition? The Iranians have already started to delegitimize this criterion by announcing that they are planning to use nuclear energy for submarine propulsion, which will need highly enriched uranium (which is not necessarily technically true). Does working on the nuclear weapons explosive mechanism constitute a red line? According to IAEA indications, they have been already doing this for some time.

Is the breakout red line timely? Probably not. As time goes on, Iran is perfecting its breakout technology and accumulating more and more low enriched uranium. Because of uncertain intelligence (especially if this depends on the IAEA inspection teams), information concerning Iran’s breakout activities would be considerably delayed. What would be the consequences of crossing the red line? Is the US prepared to take military action to stop Iran’s progress in producing nuclear weapons? Although the US made several statements referring to this possibility, it has never stated it as such in clear language. Is it ready and prepared to resort to military action if the signal comes from the intelligence community tomorrow? This is highly uncertain. The fact that the US has maintained that there is still time for a diplomatic solution may also imply that the US has not issued any warning or even an ultimatum to Iran, so that the third and fourth conditions are not fulfilled. Is there an alternate red line to be applied?

There certainly is. It is simply the setting of a deadline. One deadline could be a date for acquiescing to the Security Council resolutions concerning Iran. Another could involve the unending talks with Iran, with the P5+1 setting the requirements for an interim arrangement: the suspension of work at the Fordow enrichment site; the stopping of uranium enrichment at 20 percent, and the transfer of all 20 percent enriched uranium out of Iran. If a deadline for this is set, with the threat of military action if the conditions are not met, this could be considered a reasonable red line. The deadline should not be too far in the future, so as not to enable an Iranian breakout and the production of a first nuclear weapon; it is verifiable; the threat is serious enough; especially if issued by the US; and it will be well known to all Iranians. This red line has another advantage: it could be the first stage in a longer process, without demanding at first a total surrender of Iran to the

demands of the Security Council and the IAEA (and even these are not the final stage in a possible settlement).

Is this doable? Probably not, at least at the present time, before the upcoming US elections. On the apparent down side, setting a time limit forces the hands of both sides, forcing Iran to make a decision, if it believes the red line, and driving those who set it to action. At present, Iran is comfortable not having to deal with an ultimatum, and the US is not in a position to be forced to take action.

Thus, the talk of setting red lines seems to be little more than a method of dousing the public disagreements between the governments of Israel and the US, at least until after the elections. The Iran issue, however, will only grow more and more serious – and less reversible – as time goes on.

