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Cutting Through the Media's Bogus Bomb-Iran Debate

America's march to a disastrous war in Iraq began in the media, where an unprovoked U.S. invasion of an Arab country was introduced as a legitimate policy option, then debated as a prudent and necessary one. Now, a similarly flawed media conversation on Iran is gaining momentum.

Last month, *TIME*'s Joe Klein [warned](#) that Obama administration sources had told him bombing Iran's nuclear facilities was "back on the table." In an interview with CNN, former CIA director Admiral Mike Hayden next [spoke](#) of an "inexorable" dynamic toward confrontation, claiming that bombing was a more viable option for the Obama administration than it had been for George W. Bush. The

*pièce de
résistance*

in the most recent drum roll of bomb-Iran alerts, however, came from Jeffrey Goldberg in the [Atlantic Monthly](#)

. A journalist influential in U.S. pro-Israeli circles, he also has access to Israel's corridors of power. Because sanctions were unlikely to force Iran to back down on its uranium enrichment project, Goldberg invited readers to believe that there was a more than even chance Israel would launch a military strike on the country by next summer.

His piece, however, conveniently skipped over the obvious inconsistencies in what his Israeli sources were telling him. In addition, he [excluded perspectives](#) from Israeli leaders that might have challenged his narrative in which an embattled Jewish state feels it has no alternative but to launch a quixotic military strike. Such an attack, as he presented it, would have limited hope

of doing more than briefly setting back the Iranian nuclear program, perhaps at catastrophic cost, and so Israeli leaders would act only because they believe the "goyim" won't stop another Auschwitz. Or as my friend Paul Woodward, editor of the

[War in Context](#)

website, so brilliantly summed up the Israeli message to America: "You must do what we can't, because if you don't, we will."

Goldberg insists that he is merely initiating a debate about how to tackle Iran and that debate is already underway [on his terms](#) -- that is, like its Iraq War predecessor, based on a fabricated sense of crisis and arbitrary deadlines.

Last Friday, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the Obama administration had convinced Israel that there was no need to rush on the issue. Should Iran decide to build a nuclear weapon (which it has not done), it would, administration officials pointed out, quickly make its intentions clear by expelling the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors who routinely monitor its nuclear work, and breaking out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). After that, it would still need another year or more to assemble its first weapon.

In other words, despite Goldberg's breathless two-minutes-to-midnight schedule, there's no urgency whatsoever about debating military action against Iran. And then, of course, there's the question of the very premises of the to-bomb-or-not-to-bomb "debate." Perhaps, after all these years of obsessive Iran nuclear mania, it's too much to request a moment of sanity on the issue of Iran and the bomb. If, however, we really have a couple of years to think this over, what about starting by asking three crucial questions, each of which our debaters would prefer to avoid or ignore?

1. *Does the U.S. have a right to launch wars of aggression without provocation, in defiance of international law and an international consensus, simply on the basis of its own suspicions about another country's future intentions?*

Or to put it bluntly, as former National Security Council staffers Flint Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett [have](#) : Does the U.S. have the right to attack Iran because it is enriching uranium?

The idea that the U.S. has the right to take such a catastrophic step based on the fevered

imaginings of Biblically inspired Israeli extremists -- Goldberg has previously suggested that Prime Minister Netanyahu believes Iran to be the [reincarnation](#) of the Biblical Amalekites, mortal enemies the ancient Hebrews were to smite -- or simply to preserve an Israeli monopoly on nuclear force in the Middle East is as bizarre as it is reckless. Even debating the possibility of launching a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities as a matter of rational policy, absent any Iranian aggression or even solid evidence that the Iranian leadership intends to wage its own version of aggressive war, gives an [undeserved respectability](#) to what would otherwise be considered steps beyond the bounds of rational foreign policy discussion.

Perhaps someone in our media hothouse could take just a moment to ask why, outside of the United States and Israel, there is no support -- nada, zero, zip -- for military action against Iran. In Goldberg's world, this may be nothing more than the eternal beast of anti-Semitism rearing its ugly head in the form of disdain for the rise of yet another Amalek/Haman/Torquemada/Hitler. A more sober reading of the international situation would, however, suggest that most of the international community simply doesn't share an alarmist view of what Iran's nuclear program represents.

Indeed, it is notable that, in Goldberg's world, Arabs and Iranians never get to speak. The Arabs, we are told, secretly want Israel or the U.S. to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities out of fear that the acquisition of nuclear weapons would embolden their Persian rivals. They are, so the story goes, just not able to say so in public. Of course, when Arab leaders do [publicly express](#) their opposition to the idea of another war being launched in the Middle East, they are ignored in the Goldberg-led debate.

Similarly, their rejection of Washington's long-held premise that Israel's special security must be exempted from any discussion of the creation of a nuclear-free Middle East remains outside the bounds of the Iran-debate story. And don't expect to see any mention of the authoritative University of Maryland annual survey of Arab public opinion either. After all, it recently [reporte](#)
[d](#) that, contrary to claims of an Arab world cowering under the threat of Iranian nukes, 57% of the Arab public actually believe a nuclear-armed Iran would be good for the Middle East!

The idea that Iran's regime might exist for any purpose other than to destroy Israel is largely ignored as well. Bizarrely enough, Iranians don't actually feature much in the American "debate" at all (beyond citations of Mad-Mullah-like pronouncements by some Iranian leaders who wish Israel would disappear). The long, nuanced relationship between Israel and the Islamic

Republic, as [explained](#) by Trita Parsi, author of [Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States](#), is simply ignored. So, too, is every indication Iran's leaders have given that they have no intention of attacking Israel or any other country. In fact, in the Goldberg debate, domestic politics in both the U.S. and Israel is understood as an important factor in future decisions; Iran, with the Green Movement presently [suppressed](#), is considered to have no domestic politics at all, just those Mad Mullahs.

2. Even if Iran were to acquire the means to build a nuclear weapon, would that be a legitimate or prudent reason for launching a war?

If Iran is actually pursuing the capability to build nuclear weapons, its leaders would be doing so in response to a strategic environment in which two of its key adversaries, the U.S. and Israel, and two of its sometime friends/sometime adversaries, Russia and Pakistan, have substantial nuclear arsenals. By all sober accounts, Iran's security posture is primarily focused on the survival of its regime. Some Israeli military and intelligence officials have been quoted in Israel's media as saying that Iran's motivation in seeking a nuclear weapon would be primarily to head off a threat of U.S. intervention aimed at regime change.

Most states do not pursue weapons systems as ends in themselves, and most states are hardwired to prioritize their own survival. It is to that end that they acquire weapons systems -- to protect, enhance, or advance their own strategic position, or up the odds against more powerful rivals. In other words, the conflicts that fuel the drive for nuclear weapons are more dangerous than the weapons themselves, and the problem of those weapons can't be addressed separately from those conflicts.

An Iran that had been bombed to destroy its nuclear power program would likely emerge from the experience far more dangerous to the U.S. and its allies over the decades to come than an Iran that had nuclear weapons within reach. The only way to diminish the danger of an escalating confrontation with Iran is to address the conflict between Tehran and its rivals directly, and seek a *modus vivendi* that would manage their conflicting interests.

Unfortunately, such a dialogue between Washington and Tehran has scarcely begun, even as, amid alarmist warnings, Goldberg and others insist it must be curtailed so as to avoid the Iranians "playing for time."

3. *Is Iran actually developing nuclear weapons?*

No, it is not. That's the conclusion of the [CIA](#), the IAEA, whose inspectors are inside Iran's nuclear facilities, and most of the [world's intelligence agencies](#), including the Israelis. U.S. intelligence believes that Iran is using a civilian nuclear energy program to assemble much of the infrastructure that could, in the future, be used to build a bomb, and that Iran may also be continuing theoretical work on designing such a weapon.

Washington's spooks and its defense establishment do not, however, believe Iran is currently developing nuclear weapons, nor that its leadership has made the ultimate decision to do so. In fact, the consensus appears to be that Iran will not weaponize nuclear material, but will stop short at "breakout capacity" -- the ability, also available, for instance, to Japan, to move relatively quickly to build such a weapon. Currently, as the *New York Times* reported, the time frame for "breakout," if all went well (and it might not), would be about a year, after which Iran would have enough fissile material for one bomb. (The Israelis, by comparison, are believed to have [200 to 400](#) nuclear weapons in their undeclared program, the Pakistanis between 70 and 90, and the United States more than 5,000.) In addition, a credible nuclear deterrent would require the production of not one or two bombs, but a number of them, which would allow for testing.

For ex-CIA Director Hayden, such a breakout capacity would be "as destabilizing as their actually having a weapon." His is a logical leap that's hard to sustain, unless you believe that it's worth launching a war to prevent Iran from, at worst, acquiring a defensive trump card that might prevent it from being attacked.

Iran's enrichment activities are, of course, a violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions backed by sanctions. Those were imposed to demand that Iran suspend its enrichment program until it satisfied concerns raised by IAEA inspectors over its compliance with the disclosure and transparency requirements of the NPT -- especially when it came to aspects of its program which have been developed in secret, raising suspicions over their future use.

Three years before North Korea was in a position to test a nuclear weapon, it had to withdraw from the NPT and kick out IAEA inspectors. Iran remains within the treaty. Even as the standoff

over its nuclear program continues, renewed efforts are underway to broker a confidence-building deal to exchange Iranian enriched uranium for fuel rods produced outside the country to power a Tehran reactor that produces medical isotopes.

None of this will be easy, of course. The two main parties are trying to impose their own, mutually exclusive terms on any deal: Washington wants Iran to forego its treaty-guaranteed right to enrich its own uranium because that also gives it the potential means to produce bomb materiel; Iran has no intention of foregoing that right. Such longstanding pillars of foreign policy sobriety as [Senator John Kerry](#) and [Colin Powell](#), former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State, have publicly deemed the U.S. position untenable.

To suggest that Iran's present nuclear program represents the security equivalent of a clock ticking down to midnight is calculated hysteria that bears no relation to reality. Ah, says Goldberg, but the point is that the Israelis believe it to be so. Yes, [replies](#) former National Security Council Iran analyst Gary Sick, now at Columbia University, but the Israelis and some Americans have been claiming Iran is just a few years away from a nuclear weapon since 1992.

The premises of the debate just initiated by Goldberg's piece are palpably false. More important, they are remarkably dangerous, since they leap-frog over the three basic questions laid out above and move straight on to arguing the case for war amid visions of annihilation. This campaign of panic is not Goldberg's invention. It's been with us for a long time now. Goldberg is just the present vehicle for an American conversation initiated by others, among them those known in the Bush years as neocons, who have long been dreaming of war with Iran and are already, as Juan Cole recently indicated, [planning](#) for such a war under a future Republican administration, if not sooner.

Similarly, among Israelis, Prime Minister Netanyahu, in particular, believes that Americans are politically feeble-minded; he [said as much](#) to a group of Israeli settlers in a video that surfaced recently: "I know what America is. America is a thing you can move very easily, move it in the right direction. They won't get in [our] way."

Through Goldberg, the Israeli leader and his aides are seeking to "move America in the right direction" with dark tales of Auschwitz and Amalekites, and of Netanyahu himself as a hostage, in the Freudian sense, to a fierce and unforgiving father who won't tolerate any show of weakness in the face of perceived threats to the Jews. Goldberg's sources, including

Netanyahu, make it perfectly clear that they don't believe Iran would attack Israel. Instead, they warn that an Iranian nuclear weapon would embolden Hamas and Hizballah, although the logic there is flimsy indeed. After all, if Iran would not attack Israel on its own with a nuclear weapon, why would it do so to defend its insurgent allies?

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak has suggested that a nuclear-armed Iran would prompt the best and brightest Israelis to emigrate, because they are clever people who can make a good life for themselves anywhere in the world. Indeed, and they have been doing exactly that for many years now. Some 750,000 Israeli Jews now live abroad -- one in every six Israelis -- precisely because anti-Semitism is no longer a threat to Jewish life in most of the industrialized world. None of this has anything to do with an Iranian bomb. It has to do with the frustration of Israel's leadership that 63% of the world's Jews have chosen to live elsewhere.

Despite Goldberg's panic-inducing prediction, there are plenty of reasons to believe that, for all its bluster and threat, Israel won't, in fact, bomb Iran next year -- or any time soon. But would the Israelis like to see the United States take on their prime regional enemy? You bet they would. Indeed, Netanyahu continually insists that the U.S. has an obligation to take the lead in confronting Iran.

It's patently clear in Goldberg's piece that the Israelis are trying to create a climate in which the U.S. is pressed onto the path of escalation, adding more and more sanctions, and keeping "all options on the table" in case those don't work.

In an [excellent commentary](#) that dismantles the logic of Goldberg's argument, David Kay -- the American who served as an UNSCOM arms inspector in search of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the U.S. invasion -- suggests that:

"Israel is engaged in psychological warfare with the Obama administration -- and it only partly concerns Iran... [B]eyond Iran, of probably greater importance to the current Israeli government is avoiding the Obama administration pushing it into a choice between settlements and territorial arrangements with the Palestinians that it is unwilling to make and permanent damage to its relationship with the U.S. Hyping the Iranian nuclear program and the need for early military action is a nice bargaining counter... if the U.S. wants to avoid an imminent Israeli strike, it must make concessions to Israel on the Palestinian issues."

Creating a sense of crisis on the Iran front, narrowing U.S. options in the public mind, and precluding a real discussion of U.S. policy towards Iran may serve multiple purposes for various interested groups. Taken together, however, they reduce all discussion to one issue: when to exercise that military option kept "on the table," given the unlikeliness of an Iranian surrender. The debate's ultimate purpose is to plant in the public mind the idea that a march to war with Iran, as Admiral Hayden put it on CNN, "seems inexorable, doesn't it?"

Inexorable -- only if the media allows itself to be fooled twice.

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