

# Steinberg: Alarm Subsiding in Israel on Intelligence Estimate on Iran

**Interviewee:** Gerald M. Steinberg

**Interviewer:** Bernard Gwertzman

Gerald M. Steinberg, an Israeli-American national security expert, says the initial Israeli alarm has eased over whether the latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) would soften U.S. posture toward Iran. The estimate said Iran dropped its nuclear weapons program in 2003, but Steinberg notes experts have increasingly focused on Iran's continuing enrichment of uranium, which can lead to nuclear weapons. "The initial reaction was that this was designed to lead to a situation in which the Bush administration would be unable to threaten or to take military action against Iran," says Steinberg. But now, he says, there's a sense "the report may not change the direction of American policy.

**Last week, the United States intelligence agencies issued a National Intelligence Estimate on Iran which surprised most people because it contradicted one from two years ago that said Iran was working on a nuclear weapon. The new NIE said that since 2003 Iran had stopped work on that military program for nuclear weapons, but was still continuing its enrichment program on uranium, from which of course you can make nuclear weapons eventually. What is the reaction in Israel?**

The initial reaction was that this was designed to lead to a situation in which the Bush administration would be unable to threaten or to take military action against Iran. The concern was that by the time a new administration was in place Iran would have enough enriched uranium to make nuclear weapons.

You saw this across the Israeli media, and this was to a large degree reflected in public statements by politicians and others—that this would leave Israel alone to have to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat.

**Since the report came out, I think there has been re-thinking, with a number of people, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates, saying Iran was still a nuclear threat. Has this eased concerns in Israel?**

Israelis are also realizing in the second wave that this is going to take time to play out. President Bush will be here in less than a month, and he'll certainly be questioned about the implications. But there's a sense that perhaps there was too much attention paid to the headlines about this intelligence report, and the report may not change the direction of American policy.

**I had noticed that since the report came out, there doesn't seem to be any less interest by the Europeans in joining the United States in additional sanctions. I don't know where the Russians and Chinese stand right now.**

There was a sense that the NIE reduced the chances of sanctions because this now may give countries the opportunity to say, "It's not clear. We can wait a couple years and see what happens." There's some concern that this will be the outcome, and China did just announce a major deal with Iran for oil exploration and production that will clearly provide Iran with a big accretion of foreign currency, but that obviously had been a long time in negotiations. It may not be a response at all to this report. We should wait and see how this is going to go.

**Now, in the political debate in the United States, I think one line that you hear that still is fairly prevalent is to have more direct unconditional talks with Iran. Does that argument carry much weight in Israel?**

Iran is the focus of a major part of Israeli security and foreign-policy discussion, including the possibility that the United States will change its policy and open up a direct channel to Iran. And there are many Israelis who argue that's a good thing, that perhaps by talking to Iran, Iranians will realize the dangers of getting into a nuclear confrontation with Israel, a country that they have no diplomatic relations with. They don't understand anything about how Israel works, and they need to consider very carefully their policies. Opening talks with the United States might provide Iranian leadership with a justification for freezing its nuclear program, for saying, "we've accomplished what we've set out to do," and that would be good as well.

So there's certainly a lot of interest in Israel in that discussion. There is some concern that bilateral discussions between Iran and the United States would leave Israel out in the cold. Iran would continue to support Hezbollah, to arm various terrorist groups such as Hamas, and continue to produce weapons of mass destruction while these negotiations with the United States go on.

**I think the more sophisticated discussion, even in Congress, is over whether the uranium-enrichment program is more important than the scratched nuclear-weapons program. And somebody was making the point today that the Iranians have an enrichment program without any nuclear reactors now, so it's hardly a very big nuclear-power program that they have underway.**

That's true, and one of the reasons is that all this enrichment is likely for weapons and not for power. But you're right that in the second wave of looking at the NIE report, there's less of that sense that the United States has downgraded the significance of these activities.

**What's still, I think, of more importance in the United States, is how the intelligence community now operates, since it had all of these reforms. There are a lot of folks saying that this NIE was issued as a sort of a political statement by the intelligence community to try to deter action against Iran—to make up for its failure to deter action against Iraq.**

Certainly the security relationship with the United States is extremely important. There are of course a lot of areas of cooperation, but there are also different assessments and in some cases different policy decisions. But if the differences on core issues such as Iran are the result of American political agendas, this would be very disturbing, and weaken Israel's willingness to rely on U.S. security pledges on this and other issues.

Beyond Iran, we've got the question of what's going to happen in Iraq in the next couple of years. Assuming the United States begins to reduce the number of troops that are there, will Iraq again become a dangerous source of regional violence? How will that impact on stability in Jordan, which is always very important for Israeli security? What will happen in Egypt with the transition to a new president? And the Russians are back. In the Mediterranean for the first time in over two decades, apparently returning or rebuilding their naval bases in Syria. And the U.S. fleet is resuming its port visits to Haifa, which had been suspended for quite a while.

So I think it's important to interpret some of what is going on in terms of responding to this renewed Russian activism. It's not the Cold War, but there might be a greater American-Israeli cooperation in response to the renewed presence of Russia and their involvement with Syria.

There are a lot of those issues that are on the table. Missile defense is always an important issue. Israeli technology and development is often done in cooperation with the United States. There are discussions about arms sales and technology sales to India and to China. It's important for Israel to get reassured periodically that the United States continues to view such issues also in terms of Israeli security and regional stability.

**We didn't talk much about Syria. Is there now a feeling in Israel that it would be good to have negotiations with Syria on the peace agreement?**

A significant part of the Israeli defense establishment wants to have negotiations with Syria. They say: "This is an opportunity. You've got a weak Syrian government, it's a possibility of pulling them away from Hezbollah and from their connections with Iran." The Syrian-Iranian link is, I think, quite dangerous for Israel, also the presence there of Khaled Meshal, the head of Hamas, in Damascus. If the Israelis could pull Syria out of that orbit, they argue, that would have a major positive impact on Israeli security.

The political establishment is less enthusiastic. They really can't handle two major peace processes and Israeli risk-taking and concessions at the same time. There is a lot of uncertainty about whether Syrian President Bashar Assad is capable of making any significant decisions.

**So just summing up on this again, after the initial unhappiness of the NIE, Israeli political analysts and military analysts see that there's second-thinking going on in the United States about it as well.**

Well, I think you're right, but I'd say it a little bit more strongly: Israelis follow the American debate, and as there's more analysis of the report, and a more careful reading of what it actually says and doesn't say, it doesn't look like the damage, in terms of international pressure on Iran, is going to be that great. The initial news reports seemed [to suggest] there was going to be a 180-degree change in American policy, the headlines said that "Iran doesn't have a military program," but upon more careful reading that's not the case.

So Israelis will follow the American debate carefully. But there's a concern in Israel that the next president, whoever he or she is, will take a year at least to be able to make a policy on Iran, and in the meantime Iran will go ahead and run with its enrichment program. But even that's being rethought. Listening to the Democratic candidates and a number of the advisors who are likely to play a critical role if the Democrats win the White House, Israelis see more continuity on the Iran issue.