

How to Deal with the Iranian Nuclear Programme?

A dinner discussion with Yossi Beilin

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Occasion and participants

The Böll Foundation organised a dinner discussion with Yossef ('Yossi') Beilin, member of the Israeli Knesset, on the occasion of his visit to Berlin in February 2008. Beilin was traveling as part of an initiative by the Israeli government, which had tasked members of the defense committee of the Knesset to visit Europe in order to explain Israeli policy towards Iran. The dinner discussion furthermore followed in the footsteps of a series of round tables on the Iranian nuclear program, organised by the Böll Foundation in late 2007 and 2008 in New York, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, and Moscow.

Beilin's talk in the Brasserie in Berlin Mitte was attended by a distinguished circle of politicians, journalists, diplomats, academics, and other public figures with an interest in the Middle East.

The dinner discussion was initiated with a talk by Yossi Beilin, focusing on two main topics - the Iranian nuclear programme, as well as Beilin's views on the prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace. The talk was succeeded by an open discussion and question-and-answer round.

Iran's Nuclear Capabilities

A changed balance of power in the Middle East

Beilin began his presentation by recalling Yitzhak Rabin's two main motivations in the Middle East: One being the demographic process (in Rabin's eyes the negative vision of a minority of Jews eventually coming to be dominated by a majority of non-Jews); the other being Rabin's aims to establish peace with the Palestinians before a potential nuclearisation of Iran. Rabin's second motivation was led by the belief that Palestinian politics serve as a justification for Iran's nuclear ambitions. Contrary to the opinion of some politicians, such as Netanyahu, Beilin however does not believe that Israel would be a target if Iran had nuclear capacities; instead, Beilin thinks that the real danger is posed by the shifting balance of power that would occur in the Middle East in the case of Iranian nuclear armament.

Prospects for sanctions

In the context of sanctions, Beilin mentioned the recently released US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report on Iran's nuclear capabilities, which stated that the Iranian clandestine programme was functioning until 2003 and has now ceased. Beilin voiced concern that the NIE report underplays certain threats, such as the remaining potential for utilising uranium for non-civilian purposes. As a result, he advocates increased sanctions towards Iran in order to stop centrifugal uranium programs. These sanctions and other issues regarding Iran's nuclear program should remain before the Security Council, and a potential moving of the issue from the agenda of the Security Council to the IAEA should be prevented.

Beilin concluded his points on Iran by expressing his understanding, based on various voices coming from Iran that well-targeted and sophisticated sanctions could be effective in inducing Iran to move away from its nuclear ambitions. This expectation is based on the assumption that a rationally motivated Iran would respond to sanctions, since the country is very dependent on oil exports to the West and for the development of Western technology to harvest that oil.

The Current Situation Vis-à-vis Syria and the Palestinians

Syrian-Israeli peace at a well-known price

Addressing the topic of Syria, Beilin currently sees a fair chance to forge sustainable peace with Syria as a stable partner, at a well-known price: that of the Golan Heights. Whether the Golan Heights are handed over on the borders of 1923 or 1967 is marginal, in his opinion.

The main spoiler is not the current Israeli leadership, which is ready for an Israeli-Syrian peace, but the US - in inverse to the situation in the past, when the US considered peace with Syria as a strategic measure (whereas peace with the Palestinians was seen as merely tactical).

Today, the US would not oppose but also not support peace with Syria. This lack of explicit support is tantamount to blocking peace, as without US support the Syrians will not be willing to engage in peace, since Israel (just as in the past with Egypt) serves as a gate to the West and to the US.

The window of opportunity for Israeli-Palestinian peace

With regard to Israeli-Palestinian peace, Beilin described the status quo as “good things that are happening in a very bad situation, and the right people currently existing in the wrong situation”.

The willingness of the troika of the US, Israel and the official Palestinian leadership has opened a window of opportunity, and an unprecedented situation that is unlikely to return anytime soon: not only is the current „music very leftist”, but also about 70% of the Knesset would support peace with the Palestinians and Syrians. This setting is compounded by a “dream team” on the Palestinian side: Abbas (Abu Mazen), who was very sincere about stopping the violence of the Intifada; Salam Fayyad, a US-educated economist engaged in the fight against corruption, committed to peace and who refrains from sloganeering; Saeb Erekat, who is also committed to peace; plus others.

The caveat of Hamas

The main current obstacle to peace is that the Gaza strip plus parts of the West Bank are not controlled by the official Palestinian leadership, but by the Hamas. Beilin believes that Hamas was only allowed to run in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006 as a result of the US pushing to demonstrate that democratisation is possible in the Middle East. Beilin is highly critical of the fact that Hamas was permitted to stand for elections (even though it was believed that Hamas would at best become voted in as opposition) since this constitutes a violation of the Oslo agreements, disallowing any party inciting terrorism to stand for parliament.

The subsequent Hamas rebellion and takeover of Gaza that came as a result of the non-acceptance of Hamas by Israel, the US and Europe now has become a major hindrance for peace, as there is no Palestinian counterpart capable of implementing a potential peace agreement.

The role of the US presidential term: “Another last effort before the next last effort”

A last main point focused on the role of the US presidential term and its implications for a potential Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Beilin observes a pattern in that President Bush, just like Reagan in 1988 and Clinton in 2000, dedicated concerted efforts towards the Israel-Palestine situation only during the last period of their (second) term in office. This period marks a “moment of grace in which a president does not own anything to anybody, including to his own party and his successor”: at that moment, there is room to manoeuvre.

This assumption leads Beilin to believe that the period of November 2008 to January 2009 will be crucial, as it marks “Bush’s period to maneuver”, as well as Abu Mazen’s end of term.

If however by January 2009 there is no agreement, prospects for peace will be bleak, since there will be no new agreement in that same year, as no new US administration will deal with the Israeli-Palestinian Middle East conflict upon coming into office. This is compounded by the fact that Abu Mazen's successor will not be able to sign a peace treaty with Israel, as a new incumbent will not likely be able to pay the political price of a compromise.

Beilin thus sees his current role, as well as that of the pro-peace camp in Israel, as having to push the involved parties to use this unique window of opportunity for reaching an agreement in 2008, preferably through the framework of the Geneva Initiative: "What ever can be achieved now, cannot be achieved later; because the will may be there, but not the circumstances: and the will in itself is not enough."

Summary of the Discussion and Question-and-Answer Round

Participants posed various questions to Beilin, subsumed under the following topics.

The Iranian nuclear program

Several participants asked about the timing, potential talks, and agreement for sanctions aimed at Iran. Timing is seen as crucial, as delays raise the stakes of Iran being able to continue its nuclear programme; prolonged talks or lengthy arguments about conditions for talks will thus exacerbate the problem. Opinions diverge particularly on whether talks should be conditioned on the suspension of Iran's enrichment programme, as per Security Council decision, or whether talks should be unconditional (Beilin's view). Regarding sanctions, concern was raised as to the potential for the West to agree on a timely sanctions program, suitable in scope and target, and whether in absence of a common agreement, a 'coalition of the willing' for sanctions would be an adequate solution. In the words of one participant, targeted sanctions need to be agreed upon by the most important countries to have an effect, and need to send a clear message to Iran that "business is not as usual" in that individuals have to pay the price for developing an unconventional weapon.

Participants also pointed out the difference in perception of the threat between the EU and Israel, and the problems posed by this differing view. Beilin responded that differing perceptions made military options much less likely, thereby increasing the importance of sanctions capable of inducing a change.

One participant reinforced Beilin's view that the NIE report did not constitute a clear sign of lessened threat, as uranium enrichment is continuing; it was however pointed out that the NIE report indicated that Iran's actions are subject to a cost-benefit calculation (as deduced from the suspension of warhead production in 2003). This fact may open space for some political diplomacy in which the role of the US remains paramount.

US presidential candidates

Several questions centered on Beilin's advice for the next US president and the various candidates in the running for office. Beilin highlighted the importance of the US having a high profile in the region by placing the Middle East on the agenda from the first term onwards. He proposed that the next US administration should form a headquarters on neutral ground in the Middle East to deal with the peace process of Israel, Palestine, and Syria. By means of such a headquarters, the US could be involved on these three fronts through close monitoring and intervention.

The Middle East conflict

Over the course of the dinner, debate kept returning to the wider Middle East conflict.

Participants inquired on Beilin's assessment on the role of Lebanon and recent events in the country. Beilin sees peace with Syrian and Lebanon as an aim, but also described the threat that was posed by a stronger Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, he hopes that Israel can

make peace with Lebanon as a result of making peace with Syria, not the other way around, and that such a move would soften Hezbollah.

The stance of Syria vis-à-vis Iran in the event of Israeli-Syrian peace was also debated. It was pointed out that Syrian-Iranian relations would become less salient in the case of peace, if closer relations with Israel and the US could be forged.

Further questions raised throughout the dinner concerned the inability of Abbas to stop terrorists, and the potential this has to derail any peace process. General agreement was voiced on the threat potential of Hamas. Bein repeated that while there was good potential for Olmert and Abbas to work together, a ceasefire with Hamas could be in the security interest of Israel, even though only the recognised government of the Palestinian people remains the one legitimate partner for peace negotiations.

Debate also centered on the issue of settlements; this clearly being a sensitive issue in Israel. Bein stated that no majority in Israel is in favour of more settlements.

The role of Germany and Europe

A salient point of the debate revolved about the role of Germany and Europe in the Middle East.

Bein pointed out the increased role Europe could and should play through a more assertive Common Foreign and Security Policy, and that Europe should cease to solely follow the initiative of the US concerning the Middle East, particularly regarding the US-led Road Map for Peace.

Bein envisions a situation where Europe or Germany lead international conferences, for example on the financing of a peace agreement with the Palestinians; on the multinational forces needed to implement any peace agreement, posted on the Palestinian side; and on the absorption of Palestinian refugees.

Despite questions from the participants, Bein disagreed that there should be any competition between the EU and US versus their relations with Israel.