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Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff'

Jeffrey Goldberg

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The Atlantic=/p>

Obama to Iran=and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff'<=b>

Jeffrey Goldberg </=pan>

Mar 2 2012 -- At the White House on Monday, President Obama wil= seek to persuade the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to postp=ne whatever plans he may have to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities in the coming months. Obama will argue that unde= his leadership, the United States "has Israel's back," and that=he will order the U.S. military to destroy Iran's nuclear program if econo=ic sanctions fail to compel Tehran to shelve its nuclear ambitions. In the most extensive interview he has given about the looming Iran crisis,=Obama told me earlier this week that both Iran and Israel should take seri=usly the possibility of American action against Iran's nuclear facilities.= "I think that the Israeli government recognizes that, as president of the United States, I don't bluff." H= went on, "I also don't, as a matter of sound policy, go around adver=ising exactly what our intentions are. But I think both the Iranian and the Israeli governments recognize that when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapo=, we mean what we say." The 45-minute Oval Office convers=tion took place less than a week before the president was scheduled to add=ess the annual convention of AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobbying group, and then meet, the next day, with Prime Minister Netanyahu=at the White House. In the interview, Obama stated specifically that "=all options are on the table," and that the final option is the "=military component." But the president also said that sanctions organized by his administration have put Iran in a "wo=ld of hurt," and that economic duress might soon force the regime in =ehran to rethink its efforts to pursue a nuclear-weapons program. &q=ot;Without in any way being under an illusion about Iranian intentions, without in any way being naive about the nature of tha= regime, they are self-interested," Obama said. "It is possible =or them to make a strategic calculation that, at minimum, pushes much furt=er to the right whatever potential breakout capacity they may have, and that may turn out to to be the best decision f=r Israel's security." The president also said that Tehran=s nuclear program would represent a "profound" national-security=threat to the United States even if Israel were not a target of Iran's violent rhetoric, and he dismissed the argument that the United =tates could successfully contain a nuclear Iran. "You're talkin= about the most volatile region in the world," he said. "It will=not be tolerable to a number of states in that region for Iran to have a nuclear weapon and them not to have a nuclear weapon. I=an is known to sponsor terrorist organizations, so the threat of prolifera=ion becomes that much more severe." He went on to say, "The dang=rs of an Iran getting nuclear weapons that then leads to a free-for-all in the Middle East is something that I think =ould be very dangerous for the world." The president was =ost animated when talking about the chaotic arms race he fears would break=out if Iran acquired a nuclear weapon, and he seemed most frustrated when talking about what he sees as a deliberate cam=aign by Republicans to convince American Jews that he is anti-Israel. &quo=;Every single commitment I have made to the state of Israel and its securi=y, I have kept," he told me. "Why is it that despite me never failing to support Israel on every single problem=that they've had over the last three years, that there are still questions=about that?" Though he struck a consistently pro-Israel p=ture during the interview, Obama went to great lengths to caution Israel that a premature strike might inadvertently help=Iran: "At a time when there is not a lot of sympathy for Iran and its=only real ally, [Syria,] is on the ropes, do we

want a distraction in which suddenly Iran can portray itself as a victim?" He also said he would try to convince Netanyahu that the only way to bring about a permanent end to a country's nuclear program is to convince the country in question that nuclear weapons are not in its best interest. "Our argument is going to be that it is important for us to see if we can solve this thing permanently, as opposed to temporarily," he said, "and the only way historically that a country has ultimately decided not to get nuclear weapons without constant military intervention has been when they themselves take [nuclear weapons] off the table. That's what happened in Libya, that's what happened in South Africa." And though broadly sympathetic to Netanyahu's often-stated fear that Iran's nuclear program represents a Holocaust-scale threat to the Jewish state, and the Jewish people, Obama suggested strongly that historical fears cannot be the sole basis for precipitous action: "The prime minister is head of a modern state that is mindful of the profound costs of any military action, and in our consultations with the Israeli government, I think they take those costs, and potential unintended consequences, very seriously." But when I asked the president if he thought Israel could damage its reputation among Americans with an attack on Iran -- an attack that could provoke Iranian retaliation against American targets, and could cause massive economic disruption -- he said, "I think we in the United States instinctively sympathize with Israel." President Obama also shared fascinating insights about his sometimes tension-filled relationship with Netanyahu -- and spoke at length about Syria -- but for that, you'll have to read the entire interview. Here is a transcript of our conversation:

JEFFREY GOLDBERG: From what we understand, Prime Minister Netanyahu is going to ask you for some specific enunciations of red lines, for specific promises related to the Iranian nuclear program. What is your message to the prime minister going to be? What do you want to get across to him?

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: First of all, it's important to say that I don't know exactly what the prime minister is going to be coming with. We haven't gotten any indication that there is some sharp "ask" that is going to be presented. Both the United States and Israel have been in constant consultation about a very difficult issue and that is the prospect of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon. This is something that has been one of my top five foreign-policy concerns since I came into office. We, immediately upon taking over, mapped out a strategy that said we are going to mobilize the international community around this issue and isolate Iran to send a clear message to them that there is a path they can follow that allows them to rejoin the community of nations, but if they refused to follow that path, that there would be an escalating series of consequences. Three years later, we can look back and say we have been successful beyond most people's expectations. When we came in, Iran was united and on the move, and the world was divided about how to address this issue. Today, the world is as united as we've ever seen it around the need for Iran to take a different path on its nuclear program, and Iran is isolated and feeling the severe effects of the multiple sanctions that have been placed on it. At the same time, we understand that the bottom line is: Does the problem get solved? And I think that Israel, understandably, has a profound interest not just in good intentions but in actual results. And in the conversations I've had over the course of three years, and over the course of the last three months and three weeks, what I've emphasized is that preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon isn't just in the interest of Israel, it is profoundly in the security interests of the United States, and that when I say we're not taking any option off the table, we mean it. We are going to continue to apply pressure until Iran takes a different course.

GOLDBERG: Go back to this language, 'All options on the table.' You've probably said it 50 or 100 times. And a lot of people believe it, but the two main intended audiences, the supreme leader of Iran and the prime minister of Israel, you could argue, don't entirely trust this. The impression we get is that the Israeli government thinks this is a vague expression that's been used for so many years. Is there some ramping-up of the rhetoric you're going to give them?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think the Israeli people understand it, I think the American people understand it, and I think the Iranians understand it. It means a political component that involves isolating Iran; it means an economic component that involves unprecedented and crippling sanctions; it means a diplomatic component in which we have been able to strengthen the coalition that presents Iran with various options through the P-5 plus 1 and ensures that the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] is robust in evaluating Iran's military program; and it includes a military component. And I think people understand that. I think that the Israeli government recognizes that, as president of the United States, I don't bluff. I also don't, as a matter of sound policy, go around advertising exactly what our intentions are. But I think both the Iranian and the Israeli governments recognize that when the United States says it is

unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say. Let =escribe very specifically why this is important to us.

In addition to the profound threat that it poses to Israel, one of our stro=gest allies in the world; in addition to the outrageous language that has =een directed toward Israel by the leaders of the Iranian government -- if =iran gets a nuclear weapon, this would run completely contrary to my policies of nonproliferation. The risk= of an Iranian nuclear weapon falling into the hands of terrorist organiza=ions are profound. It is almost certain that other players in the region w=uld feel it necessary to get their own nuclear weapons. So now you have the prospect of a nuclear arms race i= the most volatile region in the world, one that is rife with unstable gov=rnments and sectarian tensions. And it would also provide Iran the additio=al capability to sponsor and protect its proxies in carrying out terrorist attacks, because they are less fearf=l of retaliation.

GOLDBERG: What would your position be if Israel weren't in this pict=re?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: It would still be a profound national-security inte=est of the United States to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

GOLDBERG: Why, then, is this issue so often seen as binary, always d=fined as Israel versus Iran?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think it has to do with a legitimate concern on t=e part of Israel that they are a small country in a tough neighborhood, an= as a consequence, even though the U.S. and Israel very much share assessm=nts of how quickly Iran could obtain breakout capacity, and even though there is constant consultation and inte=ligence coordination around that question, Israel feels more vulnerable. A=Id I think the prime minister and the defense minister, [Ehud Barak,] feel = profound, historic obligation not to put Israel in a position where it cannot act decisively and unilate=ally to protect the state of Israel. I understand those concerns, and as a=consequence, I think it's not surprising that the way it gets framed, at l=ast in this country, where the vast majority of people are profoundly sympathetic to Israel's plight and =potential vulnerabilities -- that articles and stories get framed in terms =f Israel's potential vulnerability. But I want to make clear t=at when we travel around the world and make presentations about this issue, that's not how we frame it. We frame it as= this is something in the national-security interests of the United States=and in the interests of the world community. And I assure you that Europe =ould not have gone forward with sanctions on Iranian oil imports -- which are very difficult for them to c=rry out, because they get a lot of oil from Iran -- had it not been for th=ir understanding that it is in the world's interest, to prevent Iran from =etting a nuclear weapon. China would not have abided by the existing sanctions coming out of the National=Security Council, and other countries around the world would not have unif=ed around those sanctions, had it not been for us making the presentation =bout why this was important for everyone, not just one country.

GOLDBERG: Is it possible that the prime minister of Israel has over=earned the lessons of the Holocaust?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think the prime minister has a profound responsib=lity to protect the Israeli people in a hostile neighborhood, and I am cer=ain that the history of the Holocaust and of anti-Semitism and brutality d=rected against the Jewish people for more than a millennium weighs on him when he thinks about these questi=ns. I think it's important to recognize, though, that the prime mini=ter is also head of a modern state that is mindful of the profound costs o= any military action, and in our consultations with the Israeli government, I think they take those costs, and potential =nintended consequences, very seriously.

GOLDBERG: Do you think Israel could cause damage to itself in Americ= by preempting the Iranian nuclear program militarily?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I don't know how it plays in America. I think we in=the United States instinctively sympathize with Israel, and I think politi=al support for Israel is bipartisan and powerful. In my discussions with l=rael, the key question that I ask is: How does this impact their own security environment? I've said it publ=cly and I say it privately: ultimately, the Israeli prime minister and the=defense minister and others in the government have to make their decisions=about what they think is best for Israel's security, and I don't presume to tell them what is best for them.=But as Israel's closest

friend and ally, and as one that has devoted the last three years to making sure that Israel has additional security capabilities, and has worked to manage a series of difficult problems and questions over the past three years, I do point out to them that we have a sanctions architecture that is far more effective than anybody anticipated; that we have a world that is about as united as you get behind the sanctions; that our assessment, which is shared by the Israelis, is that Iran does not yet have a nuclear weapon and is not yet in a position to obtain a nuclear weapon without us having a pretty long lead time in which we will know that they are making that attempt. In that context, our argument is going to be that it is important for us to see if we can solve this thing permanently, as opposed to temporarily. Another way, historically, that a country has ultimately decided not to get nuclear weapons without constant military intervention has been when they themselves take [nuclear weapons] off the table. That's what happened in Libya, that's what happened in South Africa. And we think that, without in any way being under an illusion about Iranian intentions, without in any way being naive about the nature of that regime, they are self-interested. They recognize that they are in a bad, bad place right now. It is possible for them to make a strategic calculation that, at minimum, pushes much further to the right whatever potential breakout capacity they may have, and that may turn out to be the best decision for Israel's security. These are difficult questions, and again, if I were the prime minister of Israel, I'd be wrestling with them. As president of the United States, I wrestle with them as well.

GOLDBERG: Could you shed some light on your relationship with the prime minister? You've met with him more than with any other world leader. It's assumed that you have a dysfunctional relationship. What is it like?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I actually think the relationship is very functional, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The fact of the matter is we've gotten a lot of business done with Israel over the last three years. I think the prime minister -- and certainly the defense minister -- would acknowledge that we've never had closer military and intelligence cooperation. When you look at what I've done with respect to security for Israel, from joint training and joint exercises that outstrip anything that's been done in the past, to helping finance and construct the Iron Dome program to make sure that Israeli families are less vulnerable to missile strikes, to ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge, to fighting back against delegitimization of Israel, whether at the [UN] Human Rights Council, or in front of the UN-General Assembly, or during the Goldstone Report, or after the flare-up involving the flotilla -- the truth of the matter is that the relationship has functioned very well.

GOLDBERG: Are you friends? Do you talk about things other than business?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: You know, the truth of the matter is, both of us have so much on our plates that there's not always a lot of time to have discussions beyond business. Having said that, what I think is absolutely true is that the prime minister and I come out of different political traditions. This is one of the few times in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations where you have a government from the right in Israel at the same time you have a center-left government in the United States, and so I think what happens then is that a lot of political interpretations of our relationship get projected onto this. But one thing that I have found in working with Prime Minister Netanyahu is that we can be very frank with each other, very blunt with each other, very honest with each other. For the most part, when we have differences, they are tactical and not strategic. Our objectives are a secure United States, a secure Israel, peace, the capacity for our kids to grow up in safety and security and not have to worry about bombs going off, and being able to promote business and economic growth and commerce. We have a common vision about where we want to go. At any given moment -- as is true, frankly, with my relationship with every other foreign leader -- there's not going to be perfect alignment of how we achieve these objectives.

GOLDBERG: In an interview three years ago, right before he became prime minister, Netanyahu told me <<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/03/netanyahu-to-obama-stop-iran-or-i-will/7390/>> that he believes Iran is being run by a "messianic apocalyptic cult." Last week, General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, referred to the Iranian leadership as "irrational." Where do you fall on this continuum? Do you feel that the leaders of Iran might be so irrational that they will not act in what we would understand to be their self-interest?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think you're right to describe it as a continuum.=There is no doubt they are isolated. They have a very ingrown political sy=tem. They are founded and fueled on hostility towards the United States, I=rael, and to some degree the West. And they have shown themselves willing to go outside international norms a=nd international rules to achieve their objectives. All of this makes them =dangerous. They've also been willing to crush opposition in their own count=y in brutal and bloody ways.

GOLDBERG: Do you think they are messianic?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think it's entirely legitimate to say that this i= a regime that does not share our worldview or our values. I do think, and=this is what General Dempsey was probably referring to, that as we look at=how they operate and the decisions they've made over the past three decades, that they care about the regime'= survival. They're sensitive to the opinions of the people and they are tr=ubled by the isolation that they're experiencing. They know, for example, =hat when these kinds of sanctions are applied, it puts a world of hurt on them. They are able to make decisi=ns based on trying to avoid bad outcomes from their perspective. So if the=re presented with options that lead to either a lot of pain from their pe=spective, or potentially a better path, then there's no guarantee that they can't make a better decision.

GOLDBERG: It seems unlikely that a regime built on anti-Americanism =ould want to appear to succumb to an American-led sanctions effort.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think the question here is going to be: What exac=ly are their genuine interests? Now, what we've seen, what we've heard dir=ctly from them over the last couple of weeks is that nuclear weapons are s=nful and un-Islamic. And those are formal speeches from the supreme leader and their foreign minister.

GOLDBERG: Do you believe their sincerity?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: My point here is not that I believe the sincerity o= the statements coming out of the regime. The point is that for them to pr=ve to the international community that their intentions are peaceful and t=at they are, in fact, not pursuing weapons, is not inconsistent with what they've said. So it doesn't require=them to knuckle under to us. What it does require is for them to actually =how to the world that there is consistency between their actions and their=statements. And that's something they should be able to do without losing face.

GOLDBERG: Let me flip this entirely around and ask: Why is containme=t not your policy? In the sense that we contained the Soviet Union, North =orea --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: It's for the reason I described -- because you're t=king about the most volatile region in the world. It will not be tolerabl= to a number of states in that region for Iran to have a nuclear weapon an= them not to have a nuclear weapon. Iran is known to sponsor terrorist organizations, so the threat of prolife=ation becomes that much more severe. The only analogous situation is North=Korea. We have applied a lot of pressure on North Korea as well and, in fa=t, today found them willing to suspend some of their nuclear activities and missile testing and come back=to the table. But North Korea is even more isolated, and certainly less ca=able of shaping the environment [around it] than Iran is. And so the dange=s of an Iran getting nuclear weapons that then leads to a free-for-all in the Middle East is something that I t=ink would be very dangerous for the world.

GOLDBERG: Do you see accidental nuclear escalation as an issue?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Absolutely. Look, the fact is, I don't think any of=it would be accidental. I think it would be very intentional. If Iran gets=a nuclear weapon, I won't name the countries, but there are probably four =r five countries in the Middle East who say, "We are going to start a program, and we will have nucl=ar weapons." And at that point, the prospect for miscalculation in a =region that has that many tensions and fissures is profound. You essentia= then duplicate the challenges of India and Pakistan fivefold or tenfold.

GOLDBERG: With everybody pointing at everybody else.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: With everybody pointing at everybody else.

GOLDBERG: What I'm getting at specifically is, let's assume there's = Hezbollah attack on Israel. Israel responds into Lebanon. Iran goes on so=e kind of a nuclear alert, and then one-two-three --

PRESIDENT OBAMA: The potential for escalation in those circumstances=is profoundly dangerous, and in addition to just the potential human costs=of a nuclear escalation like that in the Middle East, just imagine what wo=ld happen in terms of the world economy. The possibilities of the sort of energy disruptions that we've ne=er seen before occurring, and the world economy basically coming to a halt= would be pretty profound. So when I say this is in the U.S. interest, I'm=not saying this is something we'd like to solve. I'm saying this is something we have to solve.

GOLDBERG: One of the aspects of this is the question of whether it's=plausible that Barack Obama would ever use military power to stop Iran. Th= Republicans are trying to make this an issue -- and not only the Republic=ns -- saying that this man, by his disposition, by his character, by his party, by his center-left outloo=, is not going to do that.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Look, if people want to say about me that I have a =rofound preference for peace over war, that every time I order young men a=d women into a combat theater and then see the consequences on some of the=, if they're lucky enough to come back, that this weighs on me -- I make no apologies for that. Because anyb=dy who is sitting in my chair who isn't mindful of the costs of war should=t be here, because it's serious business. These aren't video games that w=re playing here. Now, having said that, I think it's fair to say that the last three years, I've shown =yself pretty clearly willing, when I believe it is in the core national in=erest of the United States, to direct military actions, even when they ent=il enormous risks. And obviously, the bin Laden operation is the most dramatic, but al-Qaeda was on its [kne=s] well before we took out bin Laden because of our activities and my dire=tion. In Afghanistan, we've made very tough decisions because we felt it w=s very important, in order for an effective transition out of Afghanistan to take place, for us to be pus=ing back against the Taliban's momentum. So aside from the usual pol=tics, I don't think this is an argument that has a lot of legs. And by the=way, it's not an argument that the American people buy. They may have complaints about high unemployment still, and th=t the recovery needs to move faster, but you don't hear a lot of them argu=ng somehow that I hesitate to make decisions as commander in chief when ne=essary.

GOLDBERG: Can you just talk about Syria as a strategic issue? Talk a=out it as a humanitarian issue, as well. But it would seem to me that one =ay to weaken and further isolate Iran is to remove or help remove Iran's o=ly Arab ally.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Absolutely.

GOLDBERG: And so the question is: What else can this administration =e doing?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, look, there's no doubt that Iran is much weak=r now than it was a year ago, two years ago, three years ago. The Arab Spr=ng, as bumpy as it has been, represents a strategic defeat for Iran, becau=e what people in the region have seen is that all the impulses towards freedom and self-determination and f=ee speech and freedom of assembly have been constantly violated by Iran. [=he Iranian leadership is] no friend of that movement toward human rights a=d political freedom. But more directly, it is now engulfing Syria, and Syria is basically their only true ally in =he region. And it is our estimation that [President Bashar al-Assad's] day= are numbered. It's a matter not of if, but when. Now, can we accelerate t=at? We're working with the world community to try to do that. It is complicated by the fact that Syria is a=much bigger, more sophisticated, and more complicated country than Libya, =or example -- the opposition is hugely splintered -- that although there's=unanimity within the Arab world at this point, internationally, countries like Russia are still blocking p=tential UN mandates or action. And so what we're trying to do -- and the s=cretary of state just came back from helping to lead the Friends of Syria =roup in Tunisia -- is to try to come up with a series of strategies that can provide humanitarian relief. =ut they can also accelerate a transition to a peaceful and stable and repr=sentative Syrian government. If that happens, that will be a profound loss=for Iran.

GOLDBERG: Is there anything you could do to move it faster?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, nothing that I can tell you, because your cla=sified clearance isn't good enough. (Laughter.)

This is part of, by the way, the context in which we have to examine our ap=roach toward Iran, because at a time when there is not a lot of sympathy f=r Iran and its only real ally is on the ropes, do we want a distraction in=which suddenly Iran can portray itself as a victim, and deflect attention from what has to be the core iss=e, which is their potential pursuit of nuclear weapons? That's an ex=ample of factors that -- when we are in consultation with all our allies, i=cluding the Israelis, we raise these factors, because this is an issue of many dimensions here, and we've got t= factor all of them in to achieve the outcome that hopefully we all want.<=r>

GOLDBERG: Do the Israelis understand that? There have been disagreem=nts between Israel and the U.S. before, but this is coming to a head about=what the Israelis see as an existential issue. The question is: In your mi=d, have you brought arguments to Netanyahu that have so far worked out well?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think that in the end, Israel's leaders will make=determinations based on what they believe is best for the security of Isra=l, and that is entirely appropriate.

When we present our views and our strategy approach, we try to put all our =ards on the table, to describe how we are thinking about these issues. We =try to back those up with facts and evidence. We compare their assessments =ith ours, and where there are gaps, we try to narrow those gaps. And what I also try to do is to underscore th= seriousness with which the United States takes this issue. And I think th=t Ehud Barak understands it. I think that Prime Minister Netanyahu, hopefu=ly when he sees me next week, will understand it.

And one of the things that I like to remind them of is that every single co=mitment I have made to the state of Israel and its security, I have kept. = mean, part of your -- not to put words in your mouth -- but part of the u=derlying question is: Why is it that despite me never failing to support Israel on every single problem th=t they've had over the last three years, that there are still questions ab=ut that?

GOLDBERG: That's a good way to phrase it.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: And my answer is: there is no good reason to doubt =e on these issues.

Some of it has to do with the fact that in this country and in our media, t=is gets wrapped up with politics. And I don't think that's any secret. And-if you have a set of political actors who want to see if they can drive a =edge not between the United States and Israel, but between Barack Obama and a Jewish American vote that has h=istorically been very supportive of his candidacy, then it's good to try to=fan doubts and raise questions. But when you look at the record, the=e's no "there" there. And my job is to try to make sure that those political factors are washed away on an iss=e that is of such great strategic and security importance to our two count=ies. And so when I'm talking to the prime minister, or my team is talking =o the Israeli government, what I want is a hardheaded, clear-eyed assessment of how do we achieve our goa=s. And our goals are in sync. And historically, one of the reasons t=at the U.S.-Israeli relationship has survived so well and thrived is share= values, shared history, the links between our peoples. But it's also been because it has been a profoundly bipartisa= commitment to the state of Israel. And the flip side of it is that, in te=ms of Israeli politics, there's been a view that regardless of whether it'= a Democratic or Republican administration, the working assumption is: we've got Israel's back. And that's something t=at I constantly try to reinforce and remind people of.

GOLDBERG: Wait, in four words, is that your message to the prime min=ster -- we've got Israel's back?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: That is not just my message to the prime minister, =hat's been my message to the Israeli people, and to the pro-Israel communi=y in this country, since I came into office. It's hard for me to be cleare= than I was in front of the UN General Assembly, when I made a more full-throated defense of Israel and i=s legitimate security concerns than any president in history -- not, by th= way, in front of an audience that was particularly warm to the message. S= that actually won't be my message. My message will be much more specific, about how do we solve this problem.=/span>

Article 2.

The Washington Post>

Mideast peace= with something short of a deal

Robert Malley and A=ron David Miller

March 3 -- Pre=ident Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will devote =ittle time Monday http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-eeting-obama-to-warn-netanyahu-against-military-strikes-on-iran/2012/03/02/gIQA5Wf0mR_story.html to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in part because of Iran and election=ear politics. But the principal cause is this: A negotiated, two-state sol=ution is running harder than ever against intractable political and psychol=gical realities in Israel, Palestine and the Arab world. These are pushing toward a de facto outcome that will =ot be negotiated, comprehensive or conflict-ending. Even assuming Netanyah= is prepared to embrace a two-state solution acceptable to Palestinians, h= would have to take on powerful settler and right-wing constituencies at a time when regional tumult and I=an's nuclear progress exacerbate national feelings of insecurity. Netany=hu's assertion that the Palestinian split and instability in the Arab wo=ld counsel against risky moves might be a convenient excuse to do nothing — but that doesn't necessarily ma=e it wrong. And he is unlikely to jeopardize his political future or his c=untry's security chasing a solution that, to his mind, does both.=/p>

Among Palestinians,=the brewing crisis over President Mahmoud Abbas's potential succession, =opular disenchantment with the peace process and the appeal of internation=alizing the conflict mean there are few political incentives for flexibility toward Israel. Divisions between the =atah and Hamas factions complicate matters: Their recent agreement is pape=th= and highlights that, for now, Palestinians are focused more on immed=ate politics than on their longer-term fate. Then there are regional developments: Abbas can no longer rely on in=luential Arab cover for controversial compromises. The Islamist wave is a =eliable indicator of where popular Arab sentiment resides; it probably wil= not translate into imminent hostility toward Israel but, at a minimum, excludes a forthcoming approach. Co=ditions will not remain static. Over time, the political landscape is like=y to be carved by local actors' concerns. Reports of Israel's isolatio= may be exaggerated, but international ill will is mounting. Israelis recognize that if Palestinians remain under occ=ation for much longer, they may drop their call for independent statehood=and demand equal rights in a single, binational (i.e., no longer Jewish) s=ate. Israel has a potential answer: a withdrawal from the most populated areas of the West Bank, preserving th= bulk of settlements and overall Israeli dominion and sparing the country = wrenching internal conflict. The idea is not new: Mooted in Gaza in 2005,=its planned extension to the West Bank was halted when Palestinians' acquisition of weapons through a poro=s border with Egypt soured Israelis' mood. Sooner or later, the plan cou=d be revived, coupled with an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Vall=y to minimize risks of a Gazan repeat. Fatah and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority have a long-term object=ve that differs markedly from Israel's: a state enjoying full sovereign =ights on virtually all the land occupied in 1967. But many among them are =orking toward goals that are closer at hand: building institutions of a putative state, governing their people=and lessening Israel's footprint. They are unlikely to agree with Jerusa=em over the scope of its withdrawal, which almost certainly makes negotiat=ons futile. For now, a unilateral Israeli decision could suit both sides. A greater chasm separates Ha=as's and Israel's ideas for a permanent solution. Paradoxically, this =eans they could be inclined to settle for a long-term de facto understandi=g — what the Islamist movement calls a truce and Israel calls an interim arrangement. Here, too, their perspectives col=ide, as Hamas's conception of a truce entails a full withdrawal from the=West Bank and the right of return for Palestinian refugees, steps Israel w=ll adamantly reject in a permanent or temporary agreement. Still, an

Israeli pullout from parts of the West Bank, coupled with a mutual cease-fire but without any interaction with or recognition of the Jewish state, is something Hamas would welcome as a victory without endorsing as a deal.

Such an outcome would promote the protagonists' short-term interests. Israel would mollify Western critics and neutralize the Palestinian demographic threat; Fatah could continue building institutions of a future state; Hamas again may claim credit for pushing Israel back without compromising on core principles. But the conflict would endure. Israel would not achieve Arab recognition or an end to Palestinian claims; Fatah would not have produced a sovereign, independent state or resolved the refugee issue; and Hamas would have to acquiesce in the continued presence of a Jewish state on what it considers Palestinian land. The ultimate reckoning would still loom, arguably under conditions more inimical to the comprehensive resolution all claim to seek.

Since the inception of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the status of the land between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea has been determined almost invariably by acts of war or unilateral decisions. Even the Oslo Accords altered the status of Palestinian territory little on the ground. Someday this may change. For now, events outside the negotiating room again deserve far more consideration than what's happening inside — and could shape Israeli-Palestinian relations for some time to come.

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Article 3.

The daily Beast

Shimon Peres' Influence Wanes as Israel Grows More Bellicose Toward Iran

Dan Ephron</=>

March 2, 2012 -- The oddest odd couple in Israeli politics might just be Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres, both of whom are in Washington this week for meetings with President Obama <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/02/26/obama-won-t-back-an-israeli-strike-on-iran.html>. Netanyahu is an unwavering skeptic with a deep devotion to Greater Israel, Peres a relentlessly optimistic peacenik. Yet for much of the past three years, Netanyahu had no bigger booster than Peres, who repeatedly vouched for him with foreign leaders and assured people he genuinely wants peace. Netanyahu, in return, allowed Peres a brief role in contacts with the Palestinians, though as president, his job description restricts him mostly to pomp and circumstance. Now the honeymoon might be ending. People familiar with the relationship say tensions have bubbled to the surface in recent months over how to cope with Iran's nuclear ambitions <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/02/07/u-s-jews-should-heed-top-israeli-soldiers-who-oppose-bombing-iran.html> and what to offer the Palestinians. So much so that while Netanyahu is expected to tell Obama that Israel will take action on its own <http://www.thedailybeast.com/cheats/2012/02/27/israel-won-t-warn-u-s-on-iran-strike.html> if sanctions against Iran don't produce quick results—raising the specter of a regional war—Peres has different ideas. "When you see that the United States and Europe are taking steps [to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons] ... that's the way right now," he told Newsweek in a recent interview in Jerusalem. "We don't have to monopolize it." &nb;p;

That Israel's two most senior political figures don't see eye to eye on the weightiest issues of the day is hardly unprecedented. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, is said to have imbued the presidency with zero executive powers precisely to prevent his political rival, Chaim Weizmann, from having a role in the decision making. But it's a reminder that even as Israel edges toward confrontation with Iran, in defiance of Washington, how to deal with the mullahs is the subject of fierce debate inside Israel—not just within the political establishment but also in the military and the intelligence community. It's also a reflection of Netanyahu's diminished status among a certain group of politicians, public figures, and journalists who believed three years ago that Netanyahu would surprise everyone by striking a deal with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Peres is merely the latest member of the group to face disillusionment. "For a long time, Peres nurtured the hope that with his input and consultation, Netanyahu would be much more forthcoming and active in the peace process," says David Landau, who has coauthored two books with Peres and sees him regularly. "But of late, Peres has given up that hope."

The backstory of the bromance between Peres and Netanyahu is a complicated one. In 1996 the two had squared off in one of Israel's most fiercely fought elections for prime minister, just months after a right-wing Jew murdered Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin in a bid to halt the Oslo peace process. Peres succeeded Rabin, but then lost to Netanyahu by less than half a percentage point, leaving the Israeli left with the feeling that the assassin had won—and casting a dark cloud over the fate of the peace process. Yossi Beilin, who served as a member of Peres's cabinet at the time, recalls feeling bereft, "really broken," when results were announced. Yet he found Peres remarkably composed. He remembers overhearing Peres ask his wife on the phone that day what she was cooking. When the answer, chicken, came back, Peres gave her the standard response: I'll be home for lunch. The ability to rebound from defeat was vintage Peres, but he didn't seem to harbor a grudge against Netanyahu, which surprised people around him. Peres is not above bad-mouthing political enemies—his decades-long rivalry with Rabin, a member of his own party, produced some seriously nasty invective. But people who know him say they've never heard him utter a bad word about Netanyahu, either after the election or in the years since. Landau attributes this courtesy to a certain reverence for Yoni Netanyahu, Benjamin's brother, who was killed leading the daring rescue of hostages at Entebbe in 1976. Peres, who served as defense minister at the time, dispatched Yoni on the mission and carries the burden of effectively having signed his death warrant.

One way or another, Peres seems to have welcomed Netanyahu's return to the prime minister's office in 2009, even as members of the peace camp cringed. By then Peres had been serving as president for almost two years and was able to lend a hand by, among other things, smoothing early wrinkles in Netanyahu's relationship with Obama. But the good will appears to have run out last September, when Netanyahu vetoed a meeting Peres was to have held with Abbas in Amman, Jordan. The two had met secretly on four previous occasions in what amounted to the most vigorous surge of diplomacy between Israelis and Palestinians in years. Netanyahu hoped the meetings would divert Abbas from petitioning the United Nations for membership, according to a source in Netanyahu's inner circle, a move Israel feared would lead to its isolation. When Abbas pressed ahead with the U.N. initiative, Netanyahu terminated the Peres backchannel. About the prospects of an agreement with the Palestinians, Peres said the gaps were small, a characterization that is at odds with even the most upbeat assessments in the region.

In the interview with Newsweek, Peres sidestepped questions about tensions with Netanyahu. At 88, Peres has more than a quarter century on the Israeli prime minister, a gap that seems to infuse even his frustrations with an avuncular spirit. But he did say repeatedly that giving time for sanctions against Iran to work was the right thing to do (Netanyahu has said the sanctions aren't enough and has made clear to the Americans that Israel might launch airstrikes). He also said Obama appeared to have a "deep conviction" that Iran must not get the bomb, in contrast to the skepticism some people around Netanyahu express about the American president. "Let's give the necessary time to see the effect of the economic sanctions," he said in his Jerusalem office. "There is quite an important alliance to prevent it from happening [Iran developing nuclear weapons]. Give them a chance."

About the prospects of an agreement with the Palestinians, Peres said the gaps were small, a characterization that is at odds with even the most upbeat assessments in the region. Israelis and Palestinians have not engaged in sustained talks in more than three years, the longest diplomatic drought since the start of the Oslo peace process in 1993. Most observers believe that both sides are moving away from an agreement that would resolve their conflict, not toward one.

But Peres is irrepressible as always. He says the setbacks are blip= on a graph line that has mostly ascended since the '70s and '80s, whe= Israel and the PLO refused to even recognize each other. And he believes there's no real alternative to the two-state=solution if Israel wants to maintain its democratic character. Peres recen=ly co-wrote a book with Landau about his mentor, Ben-Gurion. It concludes =hat Ben-Gurion's greatest decision was accepting the United Nations partition plan, which gave Israel a state=but much less territory than it sought. The book is a historical accountin= from a man who worked under him for decades. But Landau says Peres also t=inks of it as a contemporary tract. "He's trying to deliver a message to people here and now that nothing =as changed since Ben-Gurion's decision," Landau said. "In order to m=aintain a democratic country, Israel needs to forgo part of the territory.=94

Articl= 4.

Bulletin of the Ato=ic Scientists

Fearful of a =uclear Iran? The real WMD nightmare is Syria

Charles P. Blair

1 March 2012 -- As =ossible military action against Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program l=oms large in the public arena, far more international concern should be di=ected toward Syria and its weapons of mass destruction. When the Syrian uprising began more than a year ago, =ew predicted the regime of President Bashar al-Assad would ever teeter tow=rd collapse. Now, though, the demise of Damascus's current leadership appe=rs inevitable, and Syria's revolution will likely be an unpredictable, protracted, and grim affair. Some see sim=ilarities with Libya's civil war, during which persistent fears revolved ar=und terrorist seizure of Libyan chemical weapons, or the Qaddafi regime's =se of them against insurgents. Those fears turned out to be unfounded.

But the Libyan chem=cal stockpile consisted of several tons of aging mustard gas leaking from = half-dozen canisters that would have been impossible to utilize as weapon=. Syria likely has one of the largest and most sophisticated chemical weapon programs in the world. Moreover, Sy=ia may also possess an offensive biological weapons capability that Libya =id not.

While it is uncerta=n whether the Syrian regime would consider using WMD against its domestic =pponents, Syrian insurgents, unlike many of their Libyan counterparts, are=increasingly sectarian and radicalized; indeed, many observers fear the uprising is being "hijacked" by =ihadists. Terrorist groups active in the Syrian uprising have already demo=strated little compunction about the acquisition and use of WMD. In short,=should Syria devolve into full-blown civil-war, the security of its WMD should be of profound concern, as sectarian insurg=nts and Islamist terrorist groups may stand poised to seize chemical and p=rhaps even biological weapons.

An enormous unconve=ntional arsenal. Syria's chemical weapons stockpile is thought to be massive <http://www.dni.gov/reports/2011_report_to_congress_wmd.pdf> . One of only eight nations that is not a mem=er of the Chemical W=apons Convention <<http://www.opcw.org/news-publications/publications/facts-nd-figures/>> -- an arms co=trol agreement that outlaws the production, possession, and use of chemical weapons -- Syria has a chemical arsenal</=pan> that includes several hundred tons of blistering agents along with likely =arge stockpiles of deadly nerve agents, including VX, the most toxic of al= chemical weapons. At least four large chemical weapon production facilities <<http://www.nti.org/facilities/708/>> exist. Additionally, Syria likely stores <<http://www.nti.rsvp1.com/gsn/article/us-calculates-big-military-footprint-may-be-needed-guard-syrian-chemical-arms/?mgh=http%3A%2Fwww.nti.org&mgf=1>> its deadly chemical weapons at dozens of facilities throughout

the fractured country. In contrast to Libya's unusable chemical stockpile, analysts emphasize that Syrian chemical agents are weaponized and deliverable. Insurgents and terrorists with past or present connections to the military might feasibly be able to effectively disseminate chemical agents over large populations. (The Global Security Newswire <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/us-watching-syrian-chemical-arms-amid-fear-attack-diversion/> recently asserted that "[t]he Assad regime is thought to possess between 100 and 200 Scud missiles carrying warheads loaded with sarin nerve agent. The government is also believed to have several hundred tons of sarin agent and mustard gas stockpiled that could be used in air-dropped bombs and artillery shells, according to information compiled by the James Martin Center.")

Given its robust chemical weapons arsenal and its perceived need to deter Israel, Syria has long been suspected of having an active biological weapons program. Despite signing the Biological Weapons and Toxins Convention in 1972 (the treaty prohibits the development, production, and stockpiling of biological and toxin weapons), Syria never ratified the treaty. Some experts contend that any Syrian biological weapons program has not moved beyond the research and development phase. Still, Syria's biotechnical infrastructure undoubtedly has the capability http://www.dni.gov/reports/2011_report_to_congress_wmd.pdf to develop numerous biological weapon agents. After Israel destroyed a clandestine Syrian nuclear reactor in September 2007, Damascus may have accelerated its chemical and biological weapons programs.

It's hard to guard WMD when a government collapses. Although the United States and its allies are reportedly monitoring Syria's chemical weapons, recent history warns that securing them from theft or transfer is an extraordinary challenge. For example, during Operation Iraqi Freedom more than 330 metric tons of military-grade high explosives vanished from Iraq's Al-Qaqa military installation. Almost 200 tons of the most powerful of Iraq's high-explosives, HMX -- used by some states to detonate nuclear weapons -- was under International Atomic Energy Agency seal. Many tons of Al-Qaqa's sealed HMX reportedly went missing in the early days of the war in Iraq. Forensic tests later revealed that some of these military-grade explosives <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/fate-of-high-explosives-at-al-qaqa-still-unknown-increasing-indications-th/#notes> were subsequently employed against US and coalition forces.

Even with a nationwide presence of 200,000 coalition troops, several other sensitive military sites were also looted, including Iraq's main nuclear complex, Tuwaitha. Should centralized authority crumble in Syria, it seems highly unlikely that the country's 50 chemical storage and manufacturing facilities -- and, possibly, biological weapon repositories -- can be secured. The US Defense Department recently estimated <http://www.nti.rsvp1.com/gsn/article/us-calculates-big-military-footprint-may-be-needed-guard-syrian-chemical-arms/?mgh=http%3A%2Fwww.nti.org&mgf=1> that it would take more than 75,000 US military personnel to guard Syria's chemical weapons. This is, of course, if they could arrive before any WMD were transferred or looted -- a highly unlikely prospect.

Complicating any efforts to secure Syria's WMD, post-Assad, are its porous borders <http://tarpley.net/docs/CTCForeignFighter.19.Dec07.pdf>. With Syria's government distracted by internal revolt and US forces now fully out of Iraq, it is plausible that stolen chemical or biological weapons could find their way across the Syrian border into Iraq. Similarly, Syrian WMD could be smuggled into southern Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank, Israel, and, potentially, the United States and Europe.

At least six formal terrorist organizations have long maintained personnel within Syria. Three of these groups <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/170479.pdf> -- Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad -- have already attempted to acquire or use chemical or biological agents, or both. Perhaps more troubling, Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters from Iraq have streamed into Syria <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0221/As-Al-Qaeda-moves-fight-to-Syria-violence-in-Iraq-drops-sharply>, acting, in part, on orders from Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. In the past, Al Qaeda-in-Iraq fighters attempted to use chemical weapons, most notably attacks that sought to release large clouds of chlorine gas. The entry of Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2012/01/30/jabhat-al-nusra-and-jihad-in-syria/> into the Syrian crisis underscores its increasingly sectarian manifestation. Nearly 40 percent of Syria's population consists of members of minority communities. Syria's ruling Alawite regime, a branch of Shia Islam, is considered heretical by many of Syria's majority

Sunni Muslims -- even those who are not jihadists. Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and Christians could all become targets=for WMD-armed Sunni jihadists. Similarly, Shiite radicals could conceivabl= employ WMD agents against Syria's Sunnis.

Religious fanaticis= and WMD. Evidence of growing religious fanaticism is also reflected in re=ent Syrian suicide attacks. Since last December, at least five suicide att=cks occurred in Syria. In the 40 years preceding, only two suicide attacks were recorded. Al Qaeda-linked mujahid=n are believed to be responsible for all of these recent attacks. Civil wa=s are often the most violent and unpredictable manifestations of war. With=expanding sectarian divisions, the use of seized WMD in Syria's uprising is plausible. To the extent that=religious extremists believe that they are doing God's bidding, fundamenta=ly any action they undertake is justified, no matter how abhorrent, since =he "divine" ends are believed to legitimize

<http://www.cs.washington.edu/education/courses/csep590/05=u/readings/Bale_Ackerman_FinalReport.pdf> t=e means.

The situation in Sy=ia is unprecedented. Never before has a WMD-armed country fallen into civi= war. All states in the region stand poised to lose if these weapons find =heir way outside of Syria. The best possible outcome, in terms of controlling Syria's enormous WMD arsenal, wo=ld be for Assad to maintain power, but such an outcome seems increasingly =mplausible. And there is painfully little evidence that democratic forces =re likely to take over in Syria. Even if they do eventually triumph, it will take months or years to consol=date control over the entire country.

If chaos ensues in =yria, the United States cannot go it alone in securing hundreds of tons of=Syrian WMD. Regional leaders -- including some, such as Sunni Saudi Arabia=and Shiite Iran, that are now backing the insurgency and the regime, respectively -- must come together and begi= planning to avert a dispersion of Syrian chemical or biological weapons t=at would threaten everyone, of any political or religious persuasion, in t=e Middle East and around the world.

Articl= 5.

The Daily Star

Hamas rattles=the Resistance Axis

Rami G. Khouri

March 03, 2012 -- The decision last week by the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas to abando= its external headquarters in Damascus and support Syrians demonstrating f=r the removal of Bashar Assad's regime is noteworthy on several levels. =ll of them affirm the vulnerable and changing nature of strategic conditions across the Middle East.=/p>

The decision by Ham=s to abandon Syria emphasizes at the most basic level the pragmatic and po=itical nature of the movement, as opposed to its rigid ideological or theo=logical foundations. When the kitchen gets too hot, rational people get out, and so do Arab Islamist resistance =ovements, it seems.

This is in line with Hamas' gradual slide into a more pragmatic political posture over the past decade. During this time the movement has declared its willingness to accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza and coexistence with Israel, if the principles of the 2002 Arab Peace Plan are adopted and the Palestine refugee issue is resolved equitably. Hamas has also signaled a willingness to abandon the armed struggle in favor of nonviolent resistance against Israel, and to agree to a long-term truce with Israel under certain conditions.

At another level, Hamas' decision to leave Syria reflects ongoing internal divisions within the movement. Islamist organizations, in the final analysis, experience the same dynamics as any grouping of diverse people united by a common cause, but also divided over the many options they have to achieve their goals.

We can see this in the different tactical strands among Hamas officials vis-à-vis the reconciliation with Fatah. The implications of these various views over issues such as negotiations with or recognition of Israel, power-sharing with Fatah, relations with Iran, or support for Arab uprisings across the region – which range from hard-line absolutism to a more accommodating pragmatism – are that groups like Hamas operate according to a domestic political calculus of survival that ultimately overrides other forces.

This is also seen in the quiet debate within Hamas about whether to consolidate its power base in Gaza and make do with a diminutive Palestinian statelet that makes little sense to anyone other than Hamas operatives; or to rejoin and reconfigure Palestinian national institutions such as the Palestine Liberation Organization, to continue the struggle nationally and regionally.

This raises the third level of analysis of Hamas' decision, which relates to the condition of that grouping of states and movements called the Resistance and Deterrence Front – namely Syria, Hezbollah, Iran and Hamas. These four partners have always been fascinating for several reasons, including their ability to transcend traditional divides in the Middle East, such as Sunni-Shiite, Arab-Iranian, and religious-secular divides.

Hamas' decision to turn against Damascus is a blow to the Front, but probably a minor one for now, in a volatile region. The Syrian government is under intense pressure at home and abroad, and may not survive in its present form. The Iranian government faces its own vulnerabilities at home and globally, and continues to be the major regional loser from the Arab uprisings.

Hezbollah in Lebanon – probably the strongest member of the front in the short term – must be working overtime to calculate how it should respond to possible scenarios on the horizon (the fall of the Assad regime, an attack on Iran, a revival of the Green Movement in Iran, an Iranian-Western nuclear agreement, and so on).

Hamas and Syria are the most vulnerable members of the Resistance and Deterrence Front these days. How Hamas plays its cards in the months ahead probably will not have a major impact on the region as a whole, because the movement has become a relatively minor and constrained actor in its Gaza fiefdom. Syria's impact on the region would be much greater, should the regime change, or only alter its policies. For now, we can only conclude two things: The Resistance and Deterrence Front, like any political construct, is vulnerable to change; and, Islamist movements such as Hamas will make political decisions based on pragmatism and realism as much as on ideological purity and absolutism.

The changes under way in the region are a logical step in the ongoing reconfiguration of power-relationships in the Middle East, following the first year of the Arab uprisings. Hamas' reversal on Syria is an important example of how Islamist groups continue to make the transition from their previous world of abstract political opposition and often bloody and costly resistance, to the new environment in which they must grapple more convincingly with real-world conditions and options, especially the spreading advent of populist legitimacy and accountability in Arab countries.

Two of the four members of the Resistance and Deterrence Front have been hit by the Arab uprisings. Others will follow in due course.

Article 6.

Pew Research Center

Millennials will benefit and suffer due to their hyperconnected lives

(Overview)

February 29, 2012 -- In a survey about the future of the internet, technology experts and stakeholders were fairly evenly split as to whether the younger generation's always-on connection to people and information will turn out to be a net positive or a net negative by 2020. They said many of the young people growing up hyperconnected to each other and the mobile Web and counting on the internet as their external brain will be nimble, quick-acting multitaskers who will do well in key respects.

At the same time, these experts predicted that the impact of networked living on today's young will drive them to thirst for instant gratification, settle for quick choices, and lack patience. A number of the survey respondents argued that it is vital to reform education and emphasize digital literacy. A notable number expressed concerns that trends are leading to a future in which most people are shallow consumers of information, and some mentioned George Orwell's 1984 or expressed their fears of control by powerful interests in an age of entertaining distractions.

These findings come from an opt-in, online survey of a diverse but non-random sample of 1,021 technology stakeholders and critics. The study was fielded by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project and Elon University's Imagining the Internet Center between August 28 and October 31, 2011.

The survey question about younger users was inspired by speculation over the past several years about the potential impact of technology on them. Looking toward the year=2020, respondents to this survey were fairly evenly split on whether the results will be primarily positive or mostly negative. They were asked to read two statements and select the one they believe that is most likely to be true and then explain their answers.

Some 55% agreed with the statement:

In 2020 the brains of multitasking teens and young adults are "wired" differently from those over age 35 and overall it yields helpful results. They do not suffer notable cognitive shortcomings as they multitask and cycle quickly through personal- and work-related tasks. Rather, they are learning more and they are more adept at finding answers to deep questions, in part because they can search effectively and access collective intelligence via the internet. In sum, the changes in learning behavior and cognition among the young generally produce positive outcomes.

Some 42% agreed with the opposite statement, which posited:

In 2020, the brains of multitasking teens and young adults are "wired" differently from those over age 35 and overall it yields baleful results. They do not retain information; they spend most of their energy sharing short social messages, being entertained, and being distracted away from deep engagement with people and knowledge. They lack deep-thinking capabilities; they lack face-to-face social skills; they depend in unhealthy ways on the internet and mobile devices to function. In sum, the changes in behavior and cognition among the young are generally negative outcomes.

While 55% agreed with the statement that the future for the hyperconnected will generally be positive, many who chose that view noted that it is more their hope than their best guess, and a number of people said the true outcome will be a combination of both scenarios. The research result here is really probably more like a 50-50 outcome than the 55-42 split recorded through survey takers' votes. Respondents were asked to select the positive or the negative, with no middle-ground choice, in order to encourage a spirited and deeply considered written elaboration about the potential future of hyperconnected people.

We did not offer a third alternative – that young people's brains would not be wired differently – but some of the respondents made that argument in their elaborations. They often noted that people's patterns of thinking will likely change, though the actual mechanisms of brain function will not change.

Survey participants did offer strong, consistent predictions about the most desired life skill for young people in 2020. Among those they listed are: public problem-solving through cooperative work (sometimes referred to as crowdsourcing solutions); the ability to search effectively for information online and to be able to discern the quality and veracity of the information one finds and then communicate these findings well (referred to as digital literacy); synthesizing (being able to bring together details from many sources); being strategically future-minded; the ability to concentrate; and the ability to distinguish between the "noise" and the message in the ever-growing sea of information.

Here is a sampling of their predictions and arguments:

- * The environment itself will be full of data that can be retrieved almost effortlessly, and it will be arrayed in ways to help people – young and old – navigate their lives. Quick-twitch younger technology users will do well mastering these datastreams.
- * Millennials' brains are being rewired to adapt to the new information-processing skills they will need to survive in this environment.
- * "Memories are becoming hyperlinks to information triggered by keywords and URLs. We are becoming 'persistent paleontologists' of our own external memories, as our brains are storing the keywords to get back to those memories and not the full memories themselves," argued Amber Case, CEO of Geoloqi.
- * There is evidence now that "supertaskers" can handle several complicated tasks well, noted communications expert Stowe Boyd. And some survey respondents noted that it is not necessarily only young adults who do this well.
- * Young people accustomed to a diet of quick-fix information nuggets will be less likely to undertake deep, critical analysis of issues and challenging information. Shallow choices, an expectation of instant gratification, a lack of patience, are likely to be common results, especially for those who do not have the motivation or training that will help them master this new environment. One possible outcome is stagnation in innovation.
- * Another possibility, though, is that evolving social structures will create a new "division of labor" that rewards those who make swift, correct decisions as they exploit new information streams and rewards the specialists who retain the skills of focused, deep thinking. New winners and losers will emerge in this reconfigured environment; the left-behind will be mired in the shallow diversions offered by technology.
- * There are concerns about new social divides. "I suspect we're going to see an increased class division around labor and skills and attention," said media scholar danah boyd.
- * A key differentiator between winners and losers will be winners' capacity to figure out the correct attention-allocation balance in this new environment. Just as we lost oral tradition with the written word, we will lose something big in the coming world, but we will gain as well. "As Sophocles once said, 'Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse,'" noted Tiffany Shlain, director of the film Connected and founder of the Webby Awards.

* "The essential skills will be those of rapidly searching, browsing, assessing quality, and synthesizing the vast quantities of information," wrote Jonathan Grudin, principal researcher at Microsoft. "In contrast, the ability to read one thing and think hard about it for hours will not be of no consequence, but it will be of far less consequence for most people."⁹⁴

* Some argued that technology is not the issue as much as bedrock human behavior is. The "moral panic" over digital technology "seems to be wed into us,"—it parallels previous concerns about media that have not led to the downfall of civilization, noted Christopher J. Ferguson, a professor from Texas A&M whose research specialty is technologies' effects on human behavior.

* Reform of the education system is necessary to help learners know how to maximize the best and minimize the worst. Reform could start by recognizing that distractions of all kinds are the norm now. Educators should teach the management of multiple information streams, emphasizing the skills of filtering, analyzing, and synthesizing information. Also of value is an appreciation for silence, focused contemplation, and lessons in ignoring people," as futurist Marcel Bullinga put it.

* Others noted research that challenges the idea that people can be "multitaskers." People really toggle between tasks and "time slice" their attention into ever-smaller chunks of time, argued Nikki Reynolds, director of instructional technology services at Hamilton College.

Futurist John Smart—president and founder of the Acceleration Studies Foundation, recalled an insight of economist Simon Kuznets about evolution of technology effects known as the Kuznets curve: "First-generation tech usually causes 'net negative' social effects; second-generation net neutral' effects; by the third generation of tech—once the tech is smart enough, and we've got the interface right, and it begins to reinforce the best behaviors—we finally get to 'net positive' effects," he noted. "We'll be early into conversational interface and agent technologies by 2020, so kids will begin to be seriously intelligently augmented by the internet. There will be many persistent drawbacks however [so the effect at this point will be net neutral]. The biggest problem from a personal-development perspective will be motivating people to work to be more self-actualized, productive, and civic than their parents were. They'll be more willing than ever to relax and remain distracted by entertainments amid accelerating technical productivity.

"As machine intelligence advances," Smart explained, "the first response of humans is to offload their intelligence and motivation to the machines. That's a dehumanizing, first-generation response. Only the later, third-generation educational systems will correct for this."

Another comprehensive insight came from Barry Chudakov, a Florida-based consultant and a research fellow in the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. He wrote that by 2020, "Technology will be so seamlessly integrated into our lives that it will effectively disappear. The line between self and technology is thin today; by then it will effectively vanish. We will think with, think into, and think through our smart tools but their presence and reach into our lives will be less visible. Youth will assume their minds and intentions are extended by technology, while tracking technologies will seek further incursions into behavioral monitoring and choice manipulation. Children will assume this is the way the world works. The cognitive challenge children and youth will face (as we are beginning to face now) is integrity, the state of being whole and undivided. There will be a premium on the skill of maintaining presence, of mindfulness, of awareness in the face of persistent and pervasive tool extensions and incursions into our lives. Is this my intention, or is the tool inciting me to feel and think this way? That question, more than multitasking or brain atrophy due to accessing collective intelligence via the internet, will be the challenge of the future."