

Israel's Window to Bomb Iran

Exclusive: Israeli leaders continue to pound the drum about taking out Iran's nuclear program and some hardliners may want to strike soon, fearing the window of opportunity will close if President Barack Obama wins reelection and is less susceptible to political pressures, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern observes.

By Ray McGovern

There are mounting signs that the right-wing Israeli government may think the timing is right for an attack on Iran, with growing alarms inside Israel about alleged Iranian progress on building a nuclear bomb and with President Barack Obama fearing loss of key Jewish political support in 2012 if he doesn't go along.

On Sept. 26, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated Iran's alleged progress, telling interviewer Charlie Rose that "time is short" before Iran obtains nuclear weapons and poses a direct threat to Israel and the rest of the world.

Yet, the key factor in any Israeli decision to send its aircraft and missiles to Iran is the degree to which Netanyahu and other hard-line Likud leaders believe that President Obama is locked into giving blanket support to Israel, particularly as Election 2012 draws near.

The Israelis might well conclude that the formidable effectiveness of the Likud Lobby and kneejerk support of the U.S. Congress as well as still powerful neoconservatives in the Executive Branch (and on the opinion pages of major American newspapers) amount to solid assurance of automatic support for pretty much anything Israel decides to do.

If Israel translates this into a green light to attack Iran, the rest of the world, even Washington, may get little or no warning.

Netanyahu and his associates would presumably be reluctant to give Obama the kind of advance notice that might allow him to consult some adult political and military advisers and thus give him a chance to try to spike Israeli plans.

Consequences of blindsiding? There would be a strong argument in Tel Aviv that past precedent amply demonstrates that there are few if any consequences for blindsiding Obama on Israeli actions.

There is also the precedent of how an earlier generation of Likud leaders reacted to a possible second term by a Democratic president who was suspected of

having less than total loyalty to Israel.

In 1980, Prime Minister Menachem Begin was angered by President Jimmy Carter's pressure that had forced Israel to surrender the Sinai in exchange for a peace treaty with Egypt. Begin made clear to his followers at home and abroad that Carter, if freed from the political pressure of facing reelection, might push Israel into accepting a Palestinian state. So, Begin quietly shifted Israel's political support to Republican Ronald Reagan, helping to ensure Carter's lopsided defeat.

Similarly, some Israeli hard-liners suspect that Obama in a second term might be liberated from his fear of Israeli political retaliation and thus renew pressure on Netanyahu to halt Jewish settlements in the occupied territory of Palestine and to reach a true accommodation with the Palestinians.

Under this analysis, a second-term Obama might add to Israel's growing isolation in the Middle East, which even Defense Secretary Leon Panetta noted Sunday, telling reporters that Israel must restart negotiations with the Palestinians and work to restore relations with Egypt and Turkey.

"Is it enough to maintain a military edge if you're isolating yourself in the diplomatic arena?" Panetta asked. "And that's what's happening."

A Very Bad Year

Indeed, 2011 has been the worst year in recent memory for Israel, ushering in a highly unfavorable sea change in its strategic position.

Israel has lost the support of formerly friendly governments in Egypt and Turkey and finds itself increasingly isolated internationally, as the occupation of Palestinian territory begins its 45th year and the plight of the Palestinian people garners more and more attention and sympathy.

As Netanyahu and his right-wing advisers look at the new constellation of stars, it is a safe bet they discern an imperative to readjust them in Israel's favor.

But, by attacking Iran? Okay, I know it sounds crazy. It is crazy. The question, however, is whether it sounds crazy to Israel's leaders, accustomed as they are to a reality in which the tail can wag a large dog at will.

Besides, the Israelis are sounding increasingly desperate and the notion of attacking Iran and involving the U.S. might well be seen by desperate leaders as a way to stem further erosion of their strategic position, or at least to show they still have a very powerful supporter.

In my view, an attack on Iran would have a two-fold purpose: (1) to set back

Iran's nuclear development program and infrastructure, and (2) to mousetrap Washington into an even closer military relationship with Israel. Let's put some context around these one by one.

First, the bugaboo about an Iranian nuclear weapon. Let me say at the outset that I could readily believe that Iran is working on a nuclear weapon. There are all sorts of reasons why one could understand Tehran seeing this as a reasonable course of action.

(As has been pointed out, Iraq had no nukes and we know what happened to it; North Korea has a handful of nukes and we know what did not happen to it.)

Trouble is, it doesn't matter what I, or anyone else, might believe. For substantive analysts faith-based analysis is not an option (or, at least, it didn't use to be). Empirical evidence is the coin of the realm for us.

Unlike Israel, which has refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and has some 200 to 300 nuclear weapons, Iran did sign the NPT and insists it has no interest in nuclear weapons, only enriched uranium for medical research and energy. Unlike Israel, Iran has allowed UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors in to verify compliance with its commitment not to build nukes.

Still, there continue to be "beliefs," and suspicions that Iran, for example, may be laying the groundwork for an eventual break-out capability, and Tehran has not always fulfilled all its obligations under the safeguards regime.

Yet, despite the spin often applied to IAEA reports by the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) and particularly The New York Times, the IAEA has never detected the diversion of enriched uranium from declared sites for the purpose of building a nuclear weapon. That is fact.

Intelligence Analysts Thwart War

Beyond that inconvenient truth, some other recent history may be worth bearing in mind.

In 2007, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, with full-throated support from Israel and the FCM, were drumming up support for countering what they claimed was Iran's determination to build a nuclear weapon. On Oct. 22, 2007, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States insisted publicly that "very little time" remained to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Really? Even were there to have been a nuclear program hidden from the IAEA, no

serious observer expected Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon until several years later. Actually, truth be told, every other year since 1995 U.S. intelligence had been predicting that Iran could have a nuclear weapon in about five years.

It became downright embarrassing, like a broken record. The repetition was punctuated by the likes of former CIA Director James Woolsey, a dyed-in-the-wool neocon who kept warning that the U.S. may have no choice but to bomb Iran to halt its nuclear weapons program.

In mid-2006, Woolsey, who has called himself the “anchor of the Presbyterian wing of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs,” put it this way: “I’m afraid that within, well, at worst, a few months; at best, a few years; they [the Iranians] could have the bomb.” That was five years ago.

The Russians Get It Right

In early October 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin, unencumbered by the Likud Lobby which enforces Washington’s neocon-dominated “group think,” publicly mocked the “evidence” that had been adduced to show that Iran intended to make nuclear weapons.

Then, during a visit to Iran on Oct. 16, 2007, Putin sprinkled salt on the wounds of “bomb-Iran” neoconservatives; he warned, “Not only should we reject the use of force, but also the mention of force as a possibility.”

This brought an interesting outburst from President Bush the next day at a press conference.

Q. “Mr. President, I’d like to follow on Mr. – on President Putin’s visit to Tehran about the words that Vladimir Putin said there. He issued a stern warning against potential U.S. military action against Tehran. Were you disappointed with [Putin’s] message?”

Bush: “I – as I say, I look forward to – if those are, in fact, his comments, I look forward to having him clarify those. And so I will visit with him about it.”

Q. “But you definitively believe Iran wants to build a nuclear weapon?”

Bush: “I think so long – until they suspend and/or make it clear that they – that their statements aren’t real, yes, I believe they want to have the capacity, the knowledge, in order to make a nuclear weapon. And I know it’s in the world’s interest to prevent them from doing so. I believe that the Iranian – if Iran had a nuclear weapon, it would be a dangerous threat to world peace.

“But this is – we got a leader in Iran who has announced that he wants to

destroy Israel. So I've told people that if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon. I take the threat of Iran with a nuclear weapon very seriously."

Honest Intelligence

Just weeks later in November 2007, the U.S. intelligence community completed a formal National Intelligence Estimate in the best tradition of speaking truth to power. The NIE was the fruit of a bottom-up investigation of all evidence over the years on Iran's nuclear activities and plans.

But the NIE's conclusions bore no resemblance to what Bush, Cheney, their Israeli counterparts and the FCM had been claiming about the imminence of a nuclear threat from Iran.

The following is from the paragraph introducing the Key Judgments of the NIE of November 2007 that headed off war with Iran:

"A. We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.

"Tehran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005. Our assessment that the program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously."

Having reached these conclusions, it is not surprising that the NIE's authors make a point of saying up front (in bold type) **"This NIE does *not* (italics in original) assume that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons."**

There being no guarantee that, even with an honest Estimate, reason would prevail in the White House, Joint Chiefs Chairman Mike Mullen and other senior officers like CENTCOM commander Adm. William Fallon took the unusual step of insisting that the Estimate's key judgments be declassified and made public.

They calculated, correctly, that this would put an iron rod into the wheels of the juggernaut then rolling toward a fresh disaster, war with Iran.

Recall that Adm. Fallon, who became CENTCOM commander in March 2007, let the press know that there would be no attack on Iran "on my watch." He was fired in March 2008.

His senior military colleagues, while not as outspoken as Fallon, shared his

disdain for the dangerously simplistic views of Bush and Cheney on the use of military power.

Bush and Cheney Aghast

What is perhaps most surprising is the disarming (if that is the correct word) candor with which George W. Bush has explained his chagrin at learning of the unanimous judgment of the intelligence community that Iran had not been working on a nuclear weapon since late 2003.

Bush lets it all hang out in his memoir *Decision Points*. Were one to assume that he and Cheney were genuinely worried about a threat from Iran, a long sigh of relief, or at least some follow-up questions, might have been reasonably expected in reaction to the NIE's judgment.

Instead, Bush complains revealingly that the NIE "tied my hands on the military side," noting that the NIE opened with the "eye-popping" high-confidence finding that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003.

The former president adds that the "NIE's conclusion was so stunning that I felt it would immediately leak to the press." He writes that he authorized declassification of the key findings "so that we could shape the news stories with the facts." Facts?

Sure. New and different "facts." Did not the experience on Iraq prove that the "intelligence and facts" could be "fixed around the policy," as the famous Downing Street Memo of July 23, 2002, put it regarding the need for the U.S. and U.K. to cook the intelligence and facts to "justify" attacking Iraq?

On Iran, though, a crestfallen Bush writes, "The backlash was immediate. [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad hailed the NIE as a 'great victory.'" Bush's apparent "logic" here is to use the widespread disdain for Ahmadinejad to discredit the NIE through association, i.e. whatever Ahmadinejad praises must be false.

But can you blame Bush for his chagrin? Alas, the NIE had knocked out the props from under the anti-Iran propaganda machine, imported duty-free from Israel and tuned up by neoconservatives here at home.

How embarrassing. Here before the world were the key judgments of an NIE, the most authoritative genre of intelligence report, unanimously approved "with high confidence" by all 16 intelligence agencies and signed by the Director of National Intelligence, saying, in effect, that Bush and Cheney had been lying about the nuclear threat from Iran.

Quid Est Veritas?

In his memoir, Bush laments: "I don't know why the NIE was written the way it was. Whatever the explanation, the NIE had a big impact, and not a good one." Spelling out how the Estimate had tied his hands "on the military side," Bush included this (apparently unedited) kicker:

"But after the NIE, how could I possibly explain using the military to destroy the nuclear facilities of a country the intelligence community said had no active nuclear weapons program?"

Well, bummer!

Thankfully, not even Dick Cheney could persuade Bush to repair the propaganda juggernaut and let it loose for war on Iran. The avuncular Cheney has made it clear that he was very disappointed in his protégé. On Aug. 30, 2009, he told "Fox News Sunday" that he was isolated among Bush advisers in his enthusiasm for war with Iran.

"I was probably a bigger advocate of military action than any of my colleagues," Cheney said when asked whether the Bush administration should have launched a pre-emptive attack on Iran before leaving office.

And it is entirely possible that the Iran-war juggernaut would have been repaired and turned loose anyway, were it not for strong opposition by the top military brass who convinced Bush that Cheney, his neocon friends and the Israeli leaders had no idea of the chaos that war with Iran would bring.

Regrettably, Adm. Mullen just retired, and Adm. Fallon was fired in 2008 for speaking truth. It is far from clear that their replacements will be as able to act as counterweight to the neocons who continue to wield extraordinary influence in Official Washington.

For the record, despite the periodic alarms being raised among the usual suspects about the growing danger from Iran, U.S. intelligence analysts and top officials, to their credit, have continued to play it straight, so far as I can tell.

Although they have pretty much worn out the subjunctive mood in their testimony to Congress, the bottom line is that there is no new intelligence information that would warrant significant change in the judgments of the NIE of November 2007.

There is still no intelligence to "justify" a preventive attack on Iran (as if preventive attacks are ever justified under international law).

And this time senior intelligence officials should be called to testify under oath about the evidence and analytical conclusions, before Israel gets the U.S. embroiled in another catastrophic war that would make Iraq and Afghanistan look like a skirmish.

Mousetrapping the President

I promised, so many paragraphs ago, to address how Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu might see an attack on Iran as “mousetrapping” Washington into an even closer military relationship with Israel.

My own sense is that, despite his recent bravura performance in Washington, which included a speech to a joint session of Congress in which Republicans and Democrats competed to see who could jump to their feet fastest and applaud the loudest at every phrase uttered by the Israeli prime minister, Netanyahu is running scared.

I believe he thinks he needs the U.S. now more than ever. And on that I would have to agree.

This shone through his answers to David Gregory of NBC’s “Meet the Press” on Sept. 25. Gregory could hardly get a word in edgewise, but that was good in a way, since a loquacious Netanyahu provided ample grist for analysis. The Prime Minister seemed to be reaching, and came across, at least to me, as defensive:

GREGORY: “Israel is arguably as isolated as it’s ever been in the midst of Arab spring. Turkey has turned against you, the Arab world has moved away from dictators who supported Israel, had peace treaties with Israel, and is now more negative towards Israel. In this day and age, at this particular moment, despite Israel’s well-known and substantial security concerns, how can you occupy Palestinian territory at this moment?”

NETANYAHU: “Well, you’ve got two assumptions in your questions, and I want to parse out and actually suggest that they’re wrong. The first one is that we’re isolated. Well, we’re not isolated in this country, which happens to be the strongest country on earth.

“I walked yesterday in the – in, in Central Park. You know, people met me. Jewish-Americans, but many non-Jewish-Americans and they said, ‘Keep the faith. We’re strong. Be strong. We’re with you.’

“A former lieutenant colonel in the Marines who’s now a teacher met me in a restaurant in New Jersey, great view of the United – of New York City. He said, ‘We’re with you all the way. Stay strong.’ A New York NYPD policeman, he says, ‘I’m not Jewish. We support you. Stay strong.’ America supports Israel in

unparalleled way, unprecedented ways, number one.

“Every one of the U.S. presidents represents and acts on the tremendous innate friendship of the American people to Israel. And by the way, a piece of news, Israel is the one country in which everyone is pro-American, opposition and coalition alike.

“And I represent the entire people of Israel who say, ‘Thank you, America.’ And we’re friends of America, and we’re the only reliable allies of America in the Middle East.”

However, there can be little doubt with Israel’s loss of key allies in Turkey and Egypt that its strategic position in the region is more tenuous than it has been in recent memory. Grassroots movements are also taking root in America showing sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians, even if Official Washington continues to march in lockstep behind Netanyahu.

Yet what matters most, in my view, is how Netanyahu and his associates read Obama; specifically, how afraid is he of diverging one iota from the pro-Israel stance he has adopted. There is quite enough evidence they feel he is putty in their hands, and it is hardly necessary to rehearse that here.

Let me instead try to draw a lesson from my experience last summer as a passenger on the U.S. Boat to Gaza, “The Audacity of Hope.”

Activism Exposes Cowardice

When we made a break from Greece for the high seas on July 1, it was a mere 33 minutes before a Greek Coast Guard boat intercepted us. After a standoff of well over an hour, black-clad, black-masked commandos showed up in a black rubber boat, climbed onto the Coast Guard boat, and pointed their machine guns at us.

It was more than a little bizarre: not one of us 37 passengers, 12 media journalists, or five crew flinched, much less hit the deck. When our captain discerned that his delaying tactics would not prevent us from being boarded, he acquiesced to the Greek Coast Guard orders to return to Piraeus, where “The Audacity of Hope” was (and is still) impounded.

We later learned that on that same day, the government of Greece issued a directive without precedent in that legendary seafaring nation. The order prohibited any boat from leaving Greek ports bound for Gaza.

It was clear that the Israeli government was pressuring Athens, in private and in public, to stop the ten boats of this year’s flotilla from setting out for Gaza. It is unlikely, though, that Israel alone would have been able to reverse

four millennia of Greek history and embarrass the Greeks so pointedly.

It became obvious to me that it was Washington that brought the most decisive pressure to bear on the Greeks. Why? In short, because Obama has far more influence with Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou than with Netanyahu. And this, despite the \$3 billion the U.S. gives Israel every year.

Before leaving the United States, I was cautioned by a source with access to senior staffers at the National Security Council that not only did the White House plan to do absolutely nothing to protect our boat from Israeli attack or boarding, but that White House officials "would be happy if something happened to us."

The way this happy message was phrased was that NSC officials would be "perfectly willing to have the cold corpses of activists shown on American TV." Former UK Ambassador Craig Murray was told essentially the same thing by former colleagues reporting what they had learned from senior State Department officials.

In other words, senior national security and foreign policy officials in Washington were claiming they viewed with equanimity the possibility that we would meet the same type of welcome given by the Israeli Navy to last year's flotilla to Gaza though, on sober reflection, it appears to me that the Obama administration's preferred outcome was that we simply be bottled up in Greece.

In last year's attempt to break the Gaza blockade, Israeli commandos attacked the flotilla on the early morning of May 31, 2010, in international waters. The commandos killed eight Turkish civilians and a 19-year-old American, Furkan Dogan. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan protested, and Turkey continues to demand an Israeli apology, compensation, and an end to the blockade of Gaza.

In contrast, not a whimper came from President Obama. Actually, it gets worse. The White House and State Department did their level best to duck any responsibility to protect American citizens; instead, Official Washington spread the erroneous notion that Dogan was not a red-white-and blue American but rather some sort of hybrid "Turkish-American."

They knew that was incorrect. He was born in Troy, New York; he never applied for Turkish citizenship.

Blockade's Legality

As for the legality of the Israeli blockade, happily, there remain at the State Department some sticklers for international law, apparently with the courage to

quit loudly if State were to give its blessings to the outlandish notion that the Israeli blockade is legal.

There are enough recalcitrant professionals, experts on the Law of the Sea and international conventions, to put their weight down behind the notion that all countries, Israel included, should abide by those laws. Thankfully, their professionalism prevented even further embarrassment from U.S. behavior vis-à-vis international law.

That stubborn professionalism may account for one of the most bizarre State Department press conference I have seen. On June 24, AP reporter Matt Lee and some of his colleagues decided to be more matter-of-fact than diplomatic with State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland, the wife of Robert Kagan, a neoconservative national security adviser to Vice President Cheney from 2003 to 2005 (and now a Washington Post columnist).

Asked directly, three times, whether the U.S. government considers the Israeli blockade of Gaza legal, Ms. Nuland would give no answer.

"I am not a Law of the Sea expert," she insisted (four times). Her talking points were that the U.S. Boat to Gaza should not be a "repeat of what happened last year" (four times). As though last year's flotilla was responsible for the attacks by Israeli naval commandos and this year's flotilla would be considered responsible as well.

It seems likely that, however discreet we passengers on "The Audacity of Hope" tried to be with our messaging, U.S. officials became aware that we were on the verge of making a break for the high seas and Gaza (damn the torpedoes and commandos).

What seems clear in retrospect is that, whereas macho officials at State and the NSC would have been comfortable, as they claimed, seeing our cold corpses on U.S. TV, Obama had the presence of mind to consult his handful of adult advisers who understood that something had to be done, and quickly, since a PR disaster was in the making.

An attack on a U.S.-registered boat endangering us passengers, including author Alice Walker (not to mention the journalists on board from The New York Times, CBS, CNN, DemocracyNow.org, et al.) was to be avoided at all costs.

Mr. Milquetoast himself could not match Obama in pandering to the Israelis. That said, the President does try to keep to a minimum those times when it is acutely embarrassing to defend the kind of Israeli behavior the rest of the world finds heinous.

If there were a “repeat of what happened last year,” it would prove more difficult this time to avoid criticizing Israel (though, when push came to shove, Obama could probably summon the political “courage” to remain silent again).

However, if President Obama could not summon up the courage to ask Prime Minister Netanyahu to ensure safe passage for “The Audacity of Hope,” that display of timidity would not be lost on the Israeli leaders; one can imagine them being amused by it.

But if he did ask Netanyahu, Obama apparently received the gesture that seems to have become Netanyahu’s trademark in reacting to entreaties from Washington (right thumb on nose, fingers flapping).

In that case, Obama would have been forced to recognize that his influence with Netanyahu is nil, and rather than risk a dust-up with Israel, the safer course would be to put the screws to the less formidable Greeks to bring us back to shore and keep us there.

Fortunately for Obama, considerable leverage was available on Greece since it was in dire economic straits and in need of another fiscal bailout. With bigger fish to fry, so to speak, Greek Prime Minister Papandreou did what he was told and kept us ashore.

The middle-level Greek officials, including some of the Coast Guard, whom we encountered, were very apologetic, virtually holding their noses as they forced us to comply.

So, put yourself in the position of Netanyahu and his colleagues. Try to see Obama as they do and reflect on the various political equities and strategic considerations mentioned above. If you were Netanyahu, would you worry very much that Obama might get in the way if Israel decided to take a whack at Iran?

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