

Obama's Super-Bowl Fumble on Iran

Exclusive: In a televised interview before the Super Bowl, President Obama had the chance to send a clear signal to Israel not to launch a preemptive war against Iran but instead offered ambiguous remarks that Israeli hard-liners might read as a partial green light, reports ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Before President Barack Obama's interview with NBC's Matt Lauer, aired before the Super Bowl on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu probably hoped that, if Obama discussed Iran, he would give him the strong backing that Israeli leaders crave, freeing them to lash out at Iran, militarily, if they so choose.

Few could have been more keenly interested than he in what the President would say in an interview beamed to a hundred million American TV viewers. The problem was that Netanyahu could not have been completely sure of what to expect, given the confusing mixed signals coming out of Washington in the past several weeks.

Some of those signals had been disquieting to Netanyahu and other Israeli hard-liners, for example, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta saying flat-out on Jan. 8 that Iran is NOT "trying to develop a nuclear weapon" undercutting the key casus belli for war and Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey visiting Israel on Jan. 19, reportedly to repeat that in person and warn his hosts against provoking war with Iran.

In Netanyahu's world, though, functionaries like Panetta and Dempsey are to be listened to politely but not taken all that seriously. It is what the American President says, **in public**, that may require more attention, and that is enhanced when he has the eyes and ears of multiple millions of super-prime-time viewers.

For Obama's part, he was walking a political tightrope, having sent out two of his top national security aides to signal Israel that he doesn't want a new war in the Middle East, but not wanting to give his hawkish Republican rivals new reasons to question his support for Israel.

Obama is reportedly hopeful that a peaceful settlement can still be reached over Iran's nuclear program, but he understands that he has little margin for error in this high-wire act of political diplomacy especially with so many crosswinds in an election year.

So, President Obama decided to forgo his best chance to inject a loud, unmistakable note of caution into recent warmongering over Iran, not only in

Israel but also among influential neocons in the United States who have been jumping up and down, demanding another preemptive war over hypothetical WMDs, much as they did with Iraq.

When the interview was over, Netanyahu could breathe a sigh of relief. With Obama's words and body language, there was nothing that would constitute a red light and some things that Netanyahu might interpret hopefully as nearly a green light.

Heightened Danger

Bottom Line: The way the President chose to handle Lauer's leading questions on Israel-Iran tensions has brought the world closer to hostilities that would deeply destabilize not only that region but the world economy.

Lauer: [Regard] building tension between Israel and Iran: It seems now the Israelis are signaling they may act, and conduct a strike inside Iran at their nuclear sites sooner than later. Do they have your full support for that raid?

Obama: I don't think Israel has made a decision on what they need to do. I think they, like us, believe that Iran has to stand down on **its nuclear weapons program**, and we have mobilized the international community in a way that is unprecedented. And they [the Iranians] are feeling the pinch, they are feeling the pressure.

But they have not taken the steps they need to take diplomatically; which is [for the Iranians] to say, "We will pursue peaceful nuclear power; we will not pursue a nuclear weapon." Until they do so, I think Israel, rightly, is going to be very concerned, and we are as well.

Lauer: Has Israel promised you that they would give you advance warning to any such attack? Should they give you that warning?

Obama: I won't go into the details. I will say that we have closer military and intelligence consultation between our two countries than we've ever had. And we are going to make sure we work in lockstep, as we proceed to try to solve this, hopefully diplomatically.

Our preferred solution here is diplomatic; we're going to keep on pushing on that front. But we're not going to take any options off the table, and I've been very clear that we're going to do everything we can to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon and creating an arms race, a nuclear arms race in a volatile region.

Delicate Positioning

Though the various elements of Obama's delicate positioning are there such as his desire for a diplomatic solution to the crisis and his hope to avoid another war there were also problematic references that reinforced the case for a preemptive Israeli strike, such as the President's bizarre assertion that Iran must declare that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only when that is exactly what Iran has been saying for years.

So, did Obama fumble or intentionally drop the ball? I think the latter, but it hardly matters. The consequences are pretty much the same either way.

The Israelis could not have been sure that Obama would decide to regurgitate their prevarication about Tehran's notional nukes and contradict what his own Defense Secretary had said just four weeks ago, but that is what the President did.

What probably exceeded the Israeli leadership's fondest expectations, though, was Obama's pledge that in addressing Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions, the U.S. will "work in lockstep" with Israel.

("Lockstep?" What does Webster's say of "lockstep?")

noun:

1 a mode of marching in step by a body of men going one after another as closely as possible;

2 a standard method or procedure that is mindlessly adhered to

adjective:

in perfect, rigid, often mindless conformity or unison.)

Obama poured icing on Israel's cake when he emphasized that Israeli-U.S. military and intelligence consultation has never been closer. The result? Up in smoke went any possibility of plausible denial of foreknowledge on Washington's part, if, despite Panetta's oft-repeated pleas that Israel and the U.S. must "work together", Israel follows its customary practice of shunning any advance warning (much less requests for permission), in favor of seeking post-hoc forgiveness for launching armed attacks.

Carte Blanche for Israel?

For those of us who thought that the White House, recognizing the stakes involved and the benefit of keeping some space between Washington and Tel Aviv, had been trying to restrain the Israelis from attacking Iran, it is hard to fathom why Obama took the line he did.

His words were less surprising to those who have long since concluded that in the coming months he will choose to act out of a felt need to be at least in as much in “lockstep” with Israel as any Republican contender, never mind the risk of giving Netanyahu the impression that there are few if any restraints on what Israel might do to Iran.

It’s also possible that Obama has concluded that there isn’t much he can do to restrain Netanyahu who has strong reason to believe that whatever the President of the United States may want doesn’t really matter when the Congress and much of the Fawning Corporate Media are already in lockstep behind whatever Israel does.

Think back on when Netanyahu gave Obama a public tongue-lashing in the Oval Office and then went to Capitol Hill to receive a hero’s welcome from Republicans and Democrats who engaged in a bipartisan competition to see who could jump to their feet the fastest and applaud the loudest.

Whatever school of thought you may favor regarding Obama’s Iran “strategy,” let me suggest that you put yourself in Netanyahu’s shoes as he watches the pre-game interview. Do you agree that he is likely to come away with the idea that Obama has just applied a fresh coat of high-gloss paint to the box into which the Israelis and their supporters believe they have painted him?

Four months ago, I wrote an article entitled “Israel’s Window to Bomb Iran,” as the war-drumming on Iran began its crescendo. What has happened since has reinforced my assessment that:

“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.”

We need to add two important new factors since then:

1- Somehow the main focus has shifted from (a) how soon Iran could get a nuclear weapon to (b) how soon Israel is likely to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities,

whether they are shown to be related to nuclear weapons development, or not.

2- The evolving discourse in the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) has accustomed many Americans to assume that the Israelis would be within their rights to start a war on a convenient "IF", i.e., IF the Iranians are working on a nuclear weapon. Never mind that Defense Secretary Panetta stated publicly just four weeks ago that they are NOT.

Of course, Panetta was simply reiterating the consensus conclusion of the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies that declared in 2007 that Iran had halted work on a nuclear weapon in 2003 and that it did not appear that such work had resumed. And even if you don't want to believe the U.S. intelligence community and Panetta, there was the recent acknowledgement by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak that the Mossad apparently has concluded the same thing.

Barak gave the interview on Jan. 18, the day before JCS Chairman Martin Dempsey arrived for talks in Israel:

Question: Is it Israel's judgment that Iran has not yet decided to turn its nuclear potential into weapons of mass destruction?

Barak: confusion stems from the fact that people ask whether Iran is determined to break out from the control [inspection] regime right now in an attempt to obtain nuclear weapons or an operable installation as quickly as possible. Apparently that is not the case.

Question: How long will it take from the moment Iran decides to turn it into effective weapons until it has nuclear warheads?

Barak: I don't know; one has to estimate. Some say a year, others say 18 months. It doesn't really matter. To do that, Iran would have to announce it is leaving the [UN International Atomic Energy Agency] inspection regime and stop responding to IAEA's criticism, etc.

Why haven't they [the Iranians] done that? Because they realize that when it became clear to everyone that Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons, this would constitute definite proof that time is actually running out. This could generate either harsher sanctions or other action against them. They do not want that.

[For more details, see Consortiumnews.com's ["U.S./Israel: Iran NOT Building Nukes."](#)]

Yet, in the United States, the FCM's constant repetition that Iran is working on a nuclear weapon despite the intelligence consensus that Iran is NOT doing so

has created widespread acceptance for an Israeli preemptive war. In many circles, the idea is almost greeted with a yawn, with another yawn given to the notion that “of course” the U.S. would have to march “in lockstep” with Israel, if it got into a war.

A few days ago, I was given eight full TV minutes on RT to discuss whether it is a good idea to start wars in the subjunctive mood, and what I believe are Israel’s true aims vis-À -vis Iran. In my view, the principal aim, pure and simple, is regime change in Tehran, not the destruction of Iran’s notional nukes.

Remember, there have been U.N. inspectors crawling all over Iran, which has yet to be shown to be in violation of the basic Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Iran has signed and Israel has not. (Another relevant fact that is typically left out of FCM articles about the theoretical possibility of Iran building one nuke is that Israel has a sophisticated and undeclared arsenal of some 300 nukes.)

Is it conceivable that this kind of information has been kept from President Obama?

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