

How Close Was Israel to Bombing Iran?

Israel's former Defense Minister Ehud Barak claims Israel was poised to bomb Iran several times in recent years but kept encountering internal government resistance. But this new report may just be part of a continuing game of geopolitical chicken, says Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

New evidence has now surfaced from former Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak that Israel came close to attacking Iran three times over the past few years – if you believe what “major” news media reported about the story. But you shouldn't believe it.

The latest story is only a continuation of the clever ploy that has been carried out by Israeli administrations from Ehud Olmert to Benjamin Netanyahu to convince the world that it was seriously contemplating war against Iran in order to pressure them toward crippling sanctions against Iran, if not military confrontation with it.

And there is even very strong circumstantial evidence that the Obama administration was consciously playing its part in a “good cop/bad cop routine” with the Israelis over the ostensible Israeli war threat until early 2012 to influence other states' Iran policies and gain political leverage on Iran.

The latest episode in the seemingly endless story of Israel's threat of war followed the broadcast in Israel of interviews by Barak for a new biography. The New York Times' Jodi Rudoren reported that, in those interviews, Barak revealed new details to his biographers about how close Israel came to striking Iran.

Barak said that he and Netanyahu were ready to attack Iran each year, but claimed that something always went wrong. Barak referred to three distinct episodes from 2010 through 2012 in which the he and Netanyahu were supposedly maneuvering to bring about an air attack on Iran's nuclear program. But a closer look at Barak's claims shows that in reality neither Barak nor Netanyahu was really ready to go to war against Iran.

One of the episodes occurred in 2010 when Netanyahu ordered the Israeli army to put Israeli forces on the highest possible state of alert reserved for preparation for actual war, only to be frustrated by the refusal of Israeli army chief of staff Ashkenazi to the order. But an Israeli television program on the episode aired in a television special in 2012 “suggested” that the order was not intended as a prelude to war.

Although the television account was not allowed to give the date of the episode, it is consistent with what happened on May 17, 2010, when Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Da Silva reached an agreement with Iran on a “fuel swap” deal. Netanyahu regarded the agreement as a maneuver to derail a new UN Security Council agreement on sanctions, but the government issued no public statement that day.

Barak denied on the Israeli program that he and Netanyahu had intended to go through with an actual attack, which implied that it was to be a short-term bluff to ensure that the sanctions agreement would go through. Ashkenazi’s opposition to the order was not that it was intended to take Israel into war, but that it could easily provoke a military response from Iran.

Both Barak and Ashkenazi agreed on the program, and moreover, that the Israeli army lacked the capability to carry out a successful strike against Iran without U.S. involvement. That agreement reflected a broad consensus within the Israeli security elite that Israel could not carry out a successful operation against Iran without the full involvement of the United States.

Nevertheless, that elite believed that the threat was necessary to pressure the rest of the world to act on Iran. As Yossi Alpher, a former aide to Barak, told me in 2012, most retired national security officials were totally opposed to an attack on Iran, but they remained silent because they did want to “spoil Bibi’s successful bluster.”

A second episode to which Barak refers to in his interviews involves his demanding that the United States postpone the joint military exercise planned for spring 2012, which he now says he did in order to be able to order an attack on Iran during that period without implicating the United States in the decision. But the postponement was announced in mid-January 2012, in plenty of time for Barak to plan the strike against Iran – if that is indeed what he and Netanyahu had intended. Instead, it didn’t happen, and Barak offers no real explanation, commenting that they were “still unable to find the right moment.”

The Obama administration pretended to be alarmed about Netanyahu’s readiness to attack. But Obama was actually playing along with the Israeli strategy in order to line up support for a more aggressive regime of sanctions and then to put pressure on Iran to enter into negotiations aimed at closing down its enrichment program.

Gary Samore, Obama’s adviser on WMD, had openly espoused the notion before taking that job that the United States should exploit an Israeli threat to attack Iran to put pressure on the Iranians over their nuclear program. At a Harvard University symposium in September 2008, Samore opined that the next

administration would not want to “act in a way that precludes the [Israeli] threat, because we’re using the threat as a political instrument.”

The Obama administration’s policy toward Iran clearly applied that Samore strategy early and often. Within weeks of his arrival in the White House, on April 1, 2009, Obama’s Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Commander of CENTCOM David Petraeus both commented publicly that Israel was bound to attack Iran within a matter of a few years at most, unless Iran came to heel on its nuclear program.

And in mid-November 2009, Obama sent Dennis Ross and Jeffrey Bader of the White House staff to Beijing to warn the Chinese that the United States could not restrain Israel from an attack on Iran much longer unless the Security Council adopted a strong package of tough economic sanctions against Iran.

That diplomatic exploitation of the Israeli threat came seven months after Haaretz reported in May 2009 that CIA Director Leon Panetta had just obtained a commitment from Netanyahu and Barak that they would not take military action without consulting Washington first. That commitment reflected a reality that most senior national security officials accepted – that Israel could attack Iran without U.S. cooperation.

What happened in late 2011 and early 2012 was a “good cop/bad cop” routine by Panetta and Barak at a historical juncture when the United States and Israel were cooperating closely in a strategy to get crippling sanctions against Iran approved in the UN Security Council while pressuring Iran to begin negotiating on its enrichment program.

Panetta’s role in the routine was to wring his hands over alleged indications that Israel was intent on a strike in the spring. But Panetta’s interview with David Ignatius in early February 2012 in which he warned of the “strong likelihood” of an Israeli attack in “April, May or June” included a clear give-away that the real purpose of his warning was to gain diplomatic leverage on Iran. He suggested to the Iranians that there were two ways to “dissuade the Israelis from such an attack”: either Iran could begin serious negotiations on its nuclear program or the United States could step up its own cyber-attacks against Iran.

Later that year, of course, Obama would break dramatically with Netanyahu’s strategy. But despite that clear indication in early 2012 that Panetta was playing a game that suited the interests of both administrations, consumers of the world’s commercial news media were led to believe that Barak and Netanyahu were on the brink of war.

Barak himself is still peddling that same warmed-over, patently false tale of near war-war with Iran. And in one more indicator of the degree to which the media parrot the Israeli line on Iran, they are still reporting it as unquestioned fact today.

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