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## Is Obama Set on an Iran Strike?

One of Israel's leading political "insiders" is insisting that there has been a dramatic transformation of President Barack Obama's strategy in the Middle East. Israel is now back "In" as the White House occupant who had called for engagement with Iran not so long ago, is now placing the threat of a nuclear Iran on the top of his diplomatic agenda at the same time that his administration is also expressing concerns over the expected leadership changes in Cairo and Riyadh.

"When Obama came into office he assessed that the United States had been weakened in the Middle East and hoped to reach an agreement on sharing influence with the regional power, Iran," according to Aluf Benn, the respected senior diplomatic analyst for *Ha'aretz*, Israel's liberal - not left-wing - daily newspaper. "So he cooled toward Israel and pulled out of the closet the well-worn club called settlements," writes Benn. But that apparently didn't work. "The Iranians waved off Obama's goodwill gesture, and the Arab states ignored the Palestinian issue and made it clear that blocking Iran was more important," explains the journalist who tends to reflect the political state of mind of Israel's leaders.

So "instead of "beat on Israel and gain the applause of the Muslims," the stance on Iran is toughening. Sanctions on Tehran have become tougher, and the rhetoric has become more blunt," Benn writes in an analysis published in the aftermath of the recent meetings between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin ("Bibi") Netanyahu in Washington. "Israel has moved from being a burden to a welcome partner, perhaps because there is no choice in view of the expected instability in Cairo and Riyadh with the changes at the top," he concludes.

It is quite possible that Benn may be echoing the spin promoted by Bibi and his aides which in turn, reflects the Israeli PM's wishful thinking or for that matter, a misleading narrative which portrays what is nothing more than a Barack-Bibi political cease-fire as a major step towards the restoration of the strategic relationship between the U.S. and Israel.

Hence while Benn is suggesting that wooing pro-Israeli Democratic voters is nothing more than a political byproduct of Obama's reassertion of his commitment to the Jewish State - "And if this belated love also helps Obama and his party in the upcoming congressional elections, the deal will be worthwhile in his view" - the cynic observer would propose that that has been the main purpose of

the entire public diplomatic exercise.

And it is quite possible that the media images of the American-Israeli love fest in Washington are aimed at exerting diplomatic pressure on Iran by trying to convince the Ayatollahs in Tehran that contrary to what Obama's conservative critics are alleging (that Obama is a wimp and an appeaser), the Democratic President is "dead serious" on Iran and unless the Iranians agree on a deal on freezing Iran's nuclear program sooner than later, the Americans could end-up giving a "yellow light" to strike Iran's nuclear installations.

Interestingly enough, the *New York Times's* Roger Cohen who points to the language of statement issued after the recent Obama-Netanyahu meeting -- "The president told the prime minister he recognizes that Israel must always have the ability to defend itself, by itself, against any threat or possible combination of threats, and that only Israel can determine its security needs" -- wonders whether it seems to provide the Israelis with that kind of yellow light. "Is that plain language or a hall of mirrors?" Cohen asks.

Since I am not a members of Top Secret America and hence do not have a direct access to the secret deliberations taking place in Washington and elsewhere over the Iran policy, I find it difficult to determine whether the show-off of tough line vis-à-vis Iran that has been emanating from the White House is more than just a pseudo or media event aimed the changing the political calculations in Tehran, or whether are now at a point where diplomacy is being applied as a way of buying time as Washington mobilizes resources in preparation for an Israeli action, not unlike the make-believe diplomacy employed by President George W. Bush after the decision to do "regime change" in Baghdad had already been taken,

Or perhaps the Obama Administration is once again "muddling through" studying various options on Iran while testing the domestic and international political waters before making a final decision?

Based on my own reading between the lines of news reports and analyses and the deconstructing of the body language of American and Israeli officials, my guess- and it is good as yours! - is that a combination of anticipated changes in Israeli and American politics coupled with regional and international developments that have weakened Iran, may be creating the conditions for a decision in support for military action sometime this year. That could help answer the questions raised by Mark Lynch in *foreignpolicy.com* ("Why Put an Attack on Iraq Back on the Table?") and by Bret Stephens in the *Wall Street Journal* ("Why Israel Hasn't Bomb Iran Yet?")

Lynch concludes that Obama's diplomacy has been successful in changing the strategic balance of power in the Middle East -- that had resulted from Bush's disastrous policy -- by weakening Iran and its partners, Lebanon's Hizbollah and Hamas. "Iran today is considerably weaker than it was when he took office," he writes, concluding that "while Iran may continue to doggedly pursue its nuclear program (as far as we know), this has not translated into steadily increasing popular appeal or regional power." Stephens explains that one of the main reasons that the Israeli leaders have been hesitant about striking Iran is the concern over a repeat of the 1956 scenario when then US President Dwight Eisenhower blasted the attack by Israel (in collusion with Britain and France) against Egypt and forced Israel to withdraw from Sinai, the result being a diplomatic victory for then Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

While Lynch is basically correct about the positive effects of Obama's diplomacy, the other part of his argument "that Iran may continue to doggedly pursue its nuclear program" suggests that the Americans have not been able to achieve their most important strategic goal here and that they may have concluded that notwithstanding all of Obama's popularity in the Middle East, a nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran could alter and balance of power once again and turn it into an indisputable regional power. I think that Obama and his aides are calculating that the costs of "doing something" about Iran's nuclear program would not be so high as to outweigh the costs of allowing Iran to go nuclear which could undermine whatever is left of American credibility as a global power in the Middle East.

But I also think that Obama wants to get Bibi to do something substantial -- if not dramatic -- on the Israel-Palestine front before a decision is made to attack Iran. In theory, the growing likelihood that the more moderate Kadima Party would join the Israeli coalition could allow Netanyahu to move in that direction and could bring about an accord between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) on the West Bank in a way that responds to the concerns of Saudi Arabia and other Arab moderate states who have implied that under such conditions - progress on Israel-Palestine -- they could live

with a strike against Iran.

At the same time, the anticipated Republican victories in the coming midterm elections - increasing the number of pro-Israeli and anti-"Islamofascist" lawmakers -- could actually help strengthen Obama's ability of effectively manage the diplomatic and military (and economic) consequences of a strike against Iran. In a way, notwithstanding all the talk about the rise of anti-war Republicans, the "triangulation" of Obama after the November election could encourage him to take up the mantle of a War President, which based on his predecessor's experience, could help him another term in office (even if his own party continues to lose power). In any case, as the evolution of his Afghanistan policies has demonstrated, Obama seems to lack the power and the will to resist the pressure from the War Party in Washington and has probably concluded that if you cannot beat them, joining them is the next best option.

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