

Obama's Dilemma: Israel's Threat to Strike Iran

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A recent statement by the chief of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Gen. David Petraeus, that Israel may decide to attack Iranian nuclear sites has been followed by indications of a debate within the Barack Obama administration on whether Israel's repeated threats to carry out such a strike should be used to gain leverage in future negotiations with Tehran.

In the latest twist, Vice President Joseph Biden, who has been put in charge of the administration's non-proliferation agenda, appeared to reject the idea. "I don't believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu would [launch a strike]," he told CNN's Wolf Blitzer Tuesday. "I think he would be ill-advised to do that."

His remarks suggested that any proposal to exploit the threat of an Israeli attack as part of a "good cop, bad cop" tactic with Iran would run into stiff opposition within the administration, since it would rest on the credibility that the threat was real and that the U.S. would not actively oppose its being carried out.

Petraeus invoked the possibility of an Israeli attack in prepared testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee last Wednesday. "The Israeli government may ultimately see itself as so threatened by the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon that it would take pre-emptive military action to derail or delay it," he asserted. In contrast to past statements by U.S. officials on the issue, he added nothing to indicate that Washington would oppose such an attack or was concerned about its consequences.

Moreover, a CENTCOM spokesman later told IPS that Petraeus' testimony had been reviewed in advance by the Office of the Secretary of Defence (OSD), suggesting that brandishing of the Israeli threat had the approval of Pentagon chief Robert Gates.

But the Pentagon now appears to be backing away from the Petraeus statement. In an email message to IPS, Lt. Col. Mark Wright, an OSD press officer declined to confirm or deny that Petraeus's statement had been reviewed by his office. Wright insisted that it "would be inappropriate to characterise the General's view on this from the Pentagon" and referred the question back to CENTCOM.

Gates himself had appeared to go along with Petraeus' approach in an interview published in the Financial Times Apr. 1, in which he implied strongly that Israel would indeed attack Iran if it crossed an Israeli "red line." Asked whether Israel would attack Iran, Gates said, "I guess I would say I would be surprised...if [Israel] did act this year."

"I think we have more time than that," he said, referring to the moment when progress on Iran's nuclear-enrichment programme might provoke an Israeli attack. "How much more time I don't know. It is a year, two years, three years. It is somewhere in that window."

Within 24 hours, however, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Adm. Michael Mullen, like

Biden several days later, reiterated his own publicly stated reservations about any such Israeli action in a meeting with the Wall Street Journal's neo-conservative editorial board Apr. 2.

While conceding that the Israeli leadership "is not going to tolerate" a nuclear Iran and that its military could inflict serious damage on Iran's nuclear programme, Mullen also warned that such an attack would pose "exceptionally high risks" to U.S. interests in the region, according to a record of the interview quoted to IPS by Mullen's office. In an editorial about the meeting published Monday, the Journal stressed that Mullen understood that Tehran's nuclear ambitions were "a matter of 'life or death' for the Jewish state" and downplayed the threat to the U.S.

Mullen, in fact, has consistently spoken out against an Israeli strike since early July 2008, when, after returning from consultations with his Israeli counterpart, he publicly warned against an Israeli attack which, he said, in addition to further destabilising the region, would be "extremely stressful on us...."

The issue of how to handle the Israeli threat to attack Iran has been made more urgent by the installation of a far-right government led by Likud Party chief Binyamin Netanyahu, who has been particularly hawkish on Tehran and deeply sceptical that Obama's diplomatic engagement with Iran will yield acceptable results before Israel's "red lines" are crossed. Israeli officials have called on the U.S. to strictly limit the amount of time it will devote to its diplomatic effort before resorting to punitive measures, a demand echoed by key U.S. lawmakers - Democrats, as well as Republicans - who are considered close to the so-called 'Israel Lobby' here.

Some administration officials had embraced the brandishing of the threat of an Israeli attack on Iran as a means of exerting pressure on Iran even before they joined the Obama administration.

Dennis Ross, who is now "Special Adviser" on Iran to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton had endorsed an early draft of a report published last month by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) - a think tank that often reflects the Israeli government's views - which included the statement, "If the international community appears unable to stop Iran's nuclear progress, Israel may decide to act unilaterally."

Both Gary Samore, the new White House co-ordinator on weapons of mass destruction, and Ashton Carter, now under secretary of defence for acquisition, technology and logistics, expressed support for a diplomatic strategy of exploiting the Israeli military threat to Iran at a forum at Harvard University's Kennedy School last September.

Referring to negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue, Samore said, "My view is that, unless it's backed up by a very strong bashing alternative, it probably won't be successful."

Samore called the threat of such an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites "a good diplomatic instrument" for the United States. Carter, who is also a non-proliferation specialist, referred to making the Iranians "wonder whether the Israelis are going to do something" as "not an unreasonable game to play."

But Samore also acknowledged that such a strategy could be dangerous. "[W]e have to be careful when we use that instrument," he said, "that the Israelis don't see that as a green light to go ahead and strike... before we're ready to have that actually happen."

Still, he argued that any new administration would not want to "act in a way that precludes the threat, because we're using the threat as a political instrument."

That danger is particularly acute with Netanyahu's accession to power, because he represents

Israeli political and military circles that hold most firmly to the idea that Iran's enrichment program poses an "existential threat" to Israel, a view reportedly also shared by his defence minister, Labour Party leader Ehud Barak.

According to the New York Times' David Sanger, President George W. Bush last year rejected a request from then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for over-flight rights and other support needed to attack Iran.

Mullen was then sent to Israel to personally convey Washington's opposition to such an attack. It was on his return that he made that opposition public. In the end, Olmert apparently decided against taking any action without a green light from Washington. But, much as Samore anticipated, the new government is widely regarded as more likely to act unilaterally.

Bush reportedly feared that such a strike would further destabilise Iraq and expose U.S. troops there to retaliation, according to his top Middle East adviser, Elliott Abrams, who has recently argued that the those dangers have since been significantly mitigated. In the one cautionary quotation that the Journal chose to include in its editorial about Mullen's views on a possible Israeli attack on Iran, the JCS chief noted that Tehran's ability to retaliate in Iraq "has not maxed out at all."

P.S.

* From Counterpunch:

<http://www.counterpunch.org/porter0...>

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