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Romney Edges U.S. toward War with Iran

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The major newspapers all understood that GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney's expressions in Jerusalem last weekend were important, which is why they played the story on page one. But only the *New York Times* captured the subtle significance of what he said. The paper's [coverage](#) [3], by Jodi Rudoren and Ashley Parker, reported that Romney sought to adhere to the code that says candidates shouldn't criticize the president on foreign soil. "But," they added, "there were subtle differences between what he said—and how he said it—and the positions of his opponent."

Most significantly, while Obama talks about stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, Israel insists Tehran should be prevented from having even the *capacity* to develop nuclear

weapons. This means no nuclear development even for peaceful purposes. Romney embraced the Israeli language. In doing so, he nudged his nation closer to war with Iran.

Based on Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's oft-repeated expressions, he clearly seems bent on attacking Iran to destroy or delay its nuclear program and, if possible, undermine the Iranian regime. And he wants America at his side when he does it. Obama has been seeking to dissuade Israel from contemplating such an assault in order to give the president's austere sanctions regimen a chance to work. But what does he mean by "a chance to work?"

If he means a complete capitulation by Iran, he's dreaming, of course. History tells us that nations don't respond to this kind of pressure by accepting humiliation. That's the lesson of Pearl Harbor, as described in my [commentary](#) [4] in these spaces. Many close observers of the Iran drama believe there may be an opportunity for a negotiated outcome that allows Iran to enrich uranium to a limited extent—say, 5 percent—for peaceful purposes. Iran insists, and most experts agree, that the Non-Proliferation Treaty allows such enrichment for energy production. In any event, numerous signatories to the NPT do in fact maintain limited enrichment programs for peaceful ends.

Obama seems torn between pursuing such an outcome and embracing the Israeli position, which demands that Iran forswear all enrichment and any peaceful nuclear development. In last spring's Istanbul meeting between Iran and the so-called P5+1 group (the United States, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany), there seemed to be a genuine interest on the part of those six nations to explore an outcome that would allow for some enrichment by Iran. Five weeks later in Baghdad, the P5+1 group seemed to backtrack and insist upon zero enrichment. Talks are ongoing but only among low-level technical people; any serious negotiations are on hold pending the election. Thus Obama has managed to maintain his flexibility during the delicate campaign period.

But now we have Romney in Israel essentially telling the people there that they need fear no ambivalence on his part. If elected, he will embrace the Netanyahu position, which is designed to ensure the collapse of any negotiations attending anti-Iran sanctions, which Netanyahu already has labeled a failure. "We have to be honest," he said over the weekend, during Romney's visit, "and say that the sanctions and diplomacy so far have not set back the Iranian program by one iota." That's the view that Romney subtly embraced in Jerusalem.

True, it was all done with a wink and a nod. In actual language, Romney didn't diverge too far from what the president had been saying. Certainly in declaring that Americans "recognize Israel's right to defend itself," he echoed similar expressions that Obama has uttered on many occasions. But when he added, "and it is right for America to stand with you," he was offering just a touch more of a free pass for an Israeli attack on Iran than Obama has done.

But all this apparently was just a little too subtle for Dan Senor, Romney's senior foreign-policy aide, who told reporters just prior to Romney's Jerusalem speech, "If Israel has to take action on its own, the governor would respect that decision." This led to much back-and-forth afterward, but the message was clear: unlike Obama, and unlike George W. Bush before him, Romney harbors no inclination to dampen Netanyahu's determination to solve his perceived Iran problem

through force of arms. And, since an Israeli strike on Iran inevitably would thrust America into the resulting conflict, the Romney-Senor expressions, taken together, moved America that much closer to another Mideast war.

Arguably, this is true even if Obama is reelected in November and Romney is tossed to the side of the campaign trail. That's because the mere expression of such sentiments from a major-party presidential candidate confers an added legitimacy to the idea that the United States would accept or even welcome a unilateral Israeli preemptive attack on another nation, whatever its leaders say in public. Such an attack almost surely would unleash a powerful wave of instability throughout the Middle East, with incalculable consequences for global peace and prosperity. It's inconceivable that, in such circumstances, America could avoid getting drawn into the maelstrom that would ensue. In the meantime, the economic consequences would be nearly catastrophic as oil prices soared, dealing a heavy blow to an already unsteady global economy.

Thus, Romney's words may have been subtle, but this is foreign-policy mischief on a very large scale. If he becomes president, two of Mitt Romney's primary responsibilities will be to ensure peace and prosperity in the nation he leads. Those imperatives certainly didn't seem uppermost in his mind over the past weekend. He may have looked frivolous and unprepared for the office he seeks when he arrived in London last week and, responding to a routine question about the Olympics, promptly demonstrated a tin ear for the nuances of diplomatic expression. But that was child's play in comparison to what he did in Jerusalem.