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Obama Slouching Towards an Iran War?

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“The Obama Administration has given Israel a green light to attack Iran.” That was the takeaway reported by leading U.S. news outlets as well the major papers and broadcasters across the spectrum in the Middle East from Sunday’s comments on ABC by Vice President Joe Biden.

A careful read of the Biden interview transcript, of course, makes clear that while the Vice President kept reiterating that Israel was a sovereign state free to act as it deemed necessary in response to perceived threats, and to which the U.S. could not prescribe, he did also make clear — when asked about whether the U.S. would allow Israeli planes to overfly Iraqi airspace — that the U.S. would act in its own national interest on the Iran question. Given that he noted earlier in the same exchange that an attack on Iran *was not in U.S. national interests* — or Israel’s, for that matter — the media reporting of the exchange may have distorted his meaning. Indeed, the White House rushed to insist Monday that the U.S. position remained unchanged, and Obama himself underscored on Tuesday that he had NOT given Israel any such “green light”, and had instead told it to allow diplomacy to work. Biden, he said, had simply “stated a fact”, i.e. that Israel is a sovereign country that will make its own security decisions. (And the Israelis helpfully came out with reports suggesting that the Netanyahu government won’t ask permission — a frankly fanciful claim.)

Unfortunately, Obama’s “sovereignty” argument is not good enough. Unless the White House declares loudly and clearly not only that it opposes any attack on Iran by Israel, but also that it will do whatever is in its power to prevent such an attack, the Obama Administration will be read as having made a plausibly-deniable but nonetheless real threat that Iran faces military action. The Great Sage of Statecraft, Dennis Ross (wait, what exactly are his achievements, again?) may think such ambiguity is devilishly clever, but it’s more

likely to bring closer a war Obama obviously doesn't want, helping him bring about through act and omission a strategic catastrophe that would dwarf Bush's Iraq misadventure.

Even if Biden was, in his signature foot-in-mouth way, trying to affirm U.S. opposition to a military strike on Iran, his comments were at best reckless — and disingenuous. The argument that Israel is a sovereign state over which Washington has no control when it comes to mounting an unprovoked and illegal attack on another country using U.S. weapons and transiting U.S. controlled air space is as absurd as it is dangerous. The very fact that his comments have been universally reported as a “green light” to Israel underscore the fact that nobody buys the fig leaf of Israeli “sovereignty” in this instance; Israel will not be in a position to initiate a disastrous war if the U.S. Administration firmly resists it. It's an open secret that Israel alone lacks the technical capability to make a successful job of wrecking Iran's nuclear program from the air. (A dubious enterprise, to be sure, because most assessments conclude the setbacks to Iran's technical capabilities would be temporary, and would almost certainly leave behind a dramatically more dangerous situation.)

The idea that the U.S. can do nothing to stop Israel from attacking Iran, without provocation, in violation of international law and norms, on the basis of a perceived threat, is the equivalent of the U.S. saying that out of respect for Iran's sovereignty, it couldn't act to stop Tehran from attacking Israel should it deem such action necessary on the basis of a perceived threat. It's precisely this absurdity that had most of the Middle East reading Biden's “sovereignty” comments as a fig leaf for green-lighting an Israeli attack on Iran.

The fact that the Biden comments coincided with a report in Britain's Sunday Times — subsequently denied by all sides — that the Saudis have given the go-ahead to an Israeli strike on Iran suggests a concerted campaign to make the Iranians believe an attack is coming.

Does the Obama Administration think an Israeli attack on Iran is a good idea? Obviously not, they've made clear many times that they are quite aware of the disastrous consequences that would follow such an event. But I have a suspicion, as does Aluf Benn, that these comments are calculated to make Iran, and others, think that an Israeli military attack is possible and even likely if Iran declines Obama's negotiating terms. Dennis Ross, ostensibly now a more senior Obama adviser, makes absolutely clear in his book his view that a diplomatic solution requires the Iranians and others to believe that an Israeli attack is a real and imminent threat. Ross even advocates sending the Israelis around European capitals threatening to bomb Iran as a way of stampeding the Europeans into backing tougher sanctions.

If this is the playbook the Obama Administration is adopting, it's going to blunder its way into war. Because the Iranians are unlikely to simply fold in the face of threats, and will instead more likely raise the ante.

As I recently argued elsewhere, the post-election situation in Iran makes it unlikely that the Iranians will be ready to engage with the U.S. any time soon. There's a high probability that the regime believes its own propaganda about the election debacle having been orchestrated by Western forces, and it is circling the wagons — whatever political compromise may be in the works, its narrative will likely be national unity against foreign designs. Now, it could be that Ahmadinejad had always planned to be the one to “deliver” an honorable accord with the U.S. — which his opponents would not want to block — but it's equally, or perhaps more likely that the political turmoil rules out any short term engagement with Washington.

Yet Obama is now talking about waiting only weeks or months to see whether Iran is willing to engage, before moving on to escalate sanctions. Already, his Congress (at Ross' behest) is passing legislation designed to create a blockade on Iran importing petroleum (it imports as much as half of its need, despite being an oil producing country - it's refining capacity is very limited). And Ross's people in Washington are putting out the spin that Obama is going to be seeking intensified UN sanctions this fall.

Even Obama says “the clock is ticking” on Iran's nuclear program. But frankly, this is also somewhat misleading and dangerous. There were some wry smiles around the world last week when the new head of the IAEA — and remember, the U.S. worked so hard to get rid of Mohammed ElBaradei because he declined to chant the catechisms of alarmism over Iran's nuclear program — declared that the IAEA had no evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. Of course he hasn't, because there isn't any; there are only suspicions of Iran's motives. My own view, oft stated, is that Iran is building a civilian nuclear infrastructure that puts the option to build weapons closer to hand, i.e. a “breakout” capacity like Japan has. But let's be clear, no matter how much low-enriched uranium gas Iran creates in its centrifuges, until it reconfigures those centrifuges (a process that would take at least six months) and then reprocesses that gas to higher levels of enrichment (at least another six months), it won't have nuclear weapons materiel. And in order to even begin that process, Iran would have to withdraw from the NPT and kick out IAEA inspectors — an unambiguous signal of its intent to build weapons. And even once it had the weapons grade materiel, turning it into serviceable nuclear warheads could take another three years or more. Indeed, even the Mossad has publicly declared its assessment that the earliest date at which Iran could have a nuclear weapon would be 2014.

So, in fact, the urgency proclaimed by those who would escalate things along the road to confrontation this fall is hugely overstated. Combining efforts to engage Iran with escalating sanctions is unlikely to draw a positive response from Iran — although those sanctions are unlikely to happen via the UN, because Russia has no more interest in supporting the Obama Administration on Iran than it had in supporting the Bush Administration on Iran. Dangling the threat of Israeli military action over Iran is more likely to trigger nasty unintended consequences than to help stabilize the Middle East. And when it comes to the question of an Israeli air strike, Obama can profess neither neutrality nor powerlessness.