

Israel Evades 'Ambush' at Nuclear Summit

PM Benjamin Netanyahu decided at the last moment to cancel his attendance

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When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided at the last moment to cancel his attendance at this week's 47-nation nuclear security summit in Washington, a great deal of speculation ensued about the bad blood between him and Barack Obama and about whether the United States president might allow the conference to turn into a forum for criticism of Israel's nuclear program.

That possibility was alarmingly real for the Israelis. "I think that the sense amongst the Israeli delegation coming back from [Washington] DC right now is that they fell into a trap." This was the comment three weeks ago of prominent Israeli journalist, Ehud Yaari, writing in Foreign Affairs after Netanyahu's most recent visit to the White House. "The general sense in Israel right now is that the prime minister was sorely humiliated by President Obama."

Compounding Israeli fears, a number of Arab states had threatened to bring up the issue of Israeli nuclear weapons, which are widely believed to exist but never officially confirmed. "In the last few days," an unnamed high-ranking Israeli government official was quoted in the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz as saying following the announcement of Netanyahu's withdrawal from the conference, "We have received reports about the intention of several participant states to depart from the issue of combating terrorism and instead misuse the event to goad Israel over the NPT [nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty]."

Now that the summit is over, Israeli fears have not materialized. Even Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor, who attended the summit in Netanyahu's place, acknowledged that. "I have yet to run into any 'ambush' either in my talks with world leaders as well as those from Arab countries," he said on Tuesday, adding nevertheless that this might be connected to the prime minister's absence.

What did happen during the summit was a surprising show of force by Obama. Admittedly, expectations were low. "I would have to say, like all summits, particularly large ones, it has significant and insignificant parts," said George Friedman, the chief executive officer of Stratfor, a strategic intelligence company, in an interview last Friday. "I am not impressed by the nuclear part." Instead, Friedman predicted, US-China talks would carry greater significance.

However, Obama came out of the nuclear negotiations looking strong. He was well served by his skills as a facilitator, and he set the primary focus of the summit on an issue that practically everyone could agree on: prevention of nuclear terrorism.

He achieved a number of important agreements designed to destroy or secure nuclear materials, including the signing of a protocol with Russia mandating the mutual elimination

of “excess weapons-grade plutonium from defense programs” and a commitment from Ukraine and Canada to dispose of high-enriched uranium. As far as securing loose nuclear materials goes, Obama’s performance won the praise of leading international nuclear non-proliferation non-governmental organizations. [1]

In terms of confronting Iran’s nuclear program, another key focus of the summit, the American president achieved less glamour. He had to admit that, as the New York Times put it, “tough choices lay ahead on many of the far more politically volatile issues in stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons”.

Nevertheless, even in this respect he scored some points. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev spoke out in favor of smart sanctions in front of ABC News on Monday, even as he advised caution and avoidance of crippling sanctions. “If we’re talking about energy sanctions,” he said, “I’ll tell you my opinion. I don’t think on that topic we have a chance to achieve a consolidated opinion of the global community on that.”

China, too, seems to be slowly coming on board. “President Obama secured a promise from President Hu Jintao of China on Monday to join negotiations on a new package of sanctions against Iran,” the New York Times reported. Chinese officials have been more laconic, but nevertheless also voiced support for US-led non-proliferation. China and the United States “share the same overall goal on the Iranian nuclear issue”, said the spokesman of China’s Foreign Ministry, Ma Zhaoxu.

In light of this successful and no doubt carefully orchestrated performance, it seems unlikely that Obama ever intended to focus on Israel. In fact, it seems much more likely that the president wanted as little attention on Israel as possible, particularly in light of his new “calculated ambiguity” policy toward allies. [2] In other words, if Netanyahu thought he was being lured into a trap in Washington, it was quite the opposite: the president may well have created that impression in order to keep the Israeli prime minister away.

It is possible that Obama simply asked Netanyahu discreetly to keep a low Israeli profile during the summit, and Netanyahu had to invent an excuse. Regardless, the general state of crisis, compared to a year ago, in US-Israeli relations cannot be overlooked. Neither can be overlooked the fact that this cooling off of relations may prove profitable to the US in some ways: for example, in securing Arab and international support against Iran.

Moreover, it is possible that Obama sees such a pattern as beneficial to Israel, too. “Nothing has been more central to the president’s foreign policy approach than the theoretical lessons he learned as a community organizer in Chicago,” writes Michael Sherer in an article in Time Magazine in July 2009. For a successful community organizer faced with intractable disputes, an integral first step in mediation is to establish a neutral space with no favoritism on the part of the facilitator. This is what Obama appears to be doing. The fundamental logic is that having a neutral mediator serves the interests of everybody.

It is a different question how well that would work in practice. “The United States looks short of Iran options,” reads a Reuters analysis on Monday. “Even President Barack Obama acknowledges that new sanctions might fail, but has not laid out another plan.” The president, nevertheless, appears upbeat. “Today is a testament of what is possible when nations come together in a spirit of partnership to embrace our shared responsibility and confront a shared challenge,” he said at the summit’s conclusion.

The shrill Iranian reaction to the summit only appeared to confirm his words. Representatives of North Korea and Iran weren't invited, and in response, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad declared that the conference was "intended to humiliate human beings". "[Iran] will join the world nuclear club within a month in a bid to deter possible attacks on the country," Iranian news agency Fars News reported on Tuesday. Such threats betray Tehran's agitation over the summit rather than anything else. This suggests that Obama's strategy may work, or at least that it is attracting enough attention to be significant.

The US president faces tough odds, and while he may in the end garner support for a new round of sanctions against Iran, it is unlikely that the sanctions would be strong enough to work. Military action is undesirable, but in the absence of other options there are indications of increasing pressure on Obama to consider that option. "There is a legitimate concern," said Trita Parsi, president of the Washington-based National Iranian American Council in an interview for Reuters, "that if sanctions are considered a political necessity now, will military action be regarded as a political necessity in 2011, once the sanctions have been deemed a failure?"

It is hard to call the outcome. Obama faces an uphill battle, but it is not the first time he has been in that position, and somehow up to now he has always managed to come out on top. Admittedly, most of his big victories so far have been on the domestic front, where his brilliant mediating skills carry much more weight. So far, his foreign progress has been rather slow. Now that he has passed his monumental healthcare overhaul, however, he is freer and stronger to deal with foreign policy.

Notes

1. [NGOs Praise US Leadership on Nukes](#) Inter Press Service, April 12, 2010.
2. [US updates Israel on nuclear policy](#) Ynetnews, April 10, 2010.
3. See [A pundit's guide to the post-health-care bill world](#).

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