

New York Times Falsifies Obama-Netanyahu Meeting

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The New York Times assigned to the story a campaign-trail reporter, Sheryl Gay Stolberg, whose political perceptions are bland and whose knowledge of Israeli-American relations is an antiseptic zero. At the newspaper of record, a thing like that does not happen by accident. They took the most anxiously awaited meeting with a foreign leader of President Obama's term thus far, and buried it on page 12. The coverage of a major event, which the same newspaper had greeted only the day before by running an oversize attack-Iran op-ed by Jeffrey Goldberg, has officially now shrunk to the scale of a smaller op-ed.

What is more disturbing and far more consequential is that the Times made this meeting into a story about Iran. They read into Obama's careful and measured remarks exactly the hostile intention toward Iran and the explicit deadline for results from his negotiations with Iran that Obama had taken great pains to avoid stating. Obama's relevant remark was this:

My expectation would be that if we can begin discussions soon, shortly after the Iranian elections, we should have a fairly good sense by the end of the year as to whether they are moving in the right direction and whether the parties involved are making progress and that there's a good faith effort to resolve differences. That doesn't mean every issue would be resolved by that point, but it does mean that we'll probably be able to gauge and do a reassessment by the end of the year of this approach. "Shortly after," "fairly good sense," "the right direction," "good faith effort," "probably," "by the end of the year." This was a language chosen deliberately to cool the fever of Netanyahu and his far-right War Coalition in Israel. But Stolberg, writing for the Times, converts these hedged and vague suggestions into a revelation that Obama for the first time seemed "willing to set even a general timetable for progress in talks with Iran."

In fact, as any reader of the transcript may judge, President Obama sounded a more urgent note about the progress Israel ought to make in yielding what it long has promised to the Palestinian people. Palestine was the proper name that dominated Obama's side of the news conference. In the Times story, by contrast, the word Iran occurs three times before the first mention of "Palestinians." Iran is mentioned twice more before the words West Bank are uttered once.

Regarding the necessity of a Palestinian state, President Obama was explicit:

We have seen progress stalled on this front, and I suggested to the Prime Minister that he has an historic opportunity to get a serious movement on this issue during his tenure. And when Netanyahu said the Israeli attitude toward Palestine would completely depend on the details of progress toward securing Iran against the acquisition of a single nuclear weapon,

Obama replied that his view was almost the reverse. In a leader as averse as Barack Obama to the slightest public hint of personal conflict, this was a critical moment in the exchange; how far, a reporter asked Obama, did he assent to the Netanyahu concept of “linkage” — the idea that first the U.S. must deal with Iran, and a more obliging Israeli approach to Palestine will surely follow. Obama answered:

I recognize Israel’s legitimate concerns about the possibility of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon when they have a president who has in the past said that Israel should not exist. That would give any leader of any country pause. Having said that, if there is a linkage between Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, I personally believe it actually runs the other way. To the extent that we can make peace with the Palestinians — between the Palestinians and the Israelis — then I actually think it strengthens our hand in the international community in dealing with a potential Iranian threat. This was a reluctantly formulated but direct and inescapable inversion of the Netanyahu doctrine on linkage. Not a trace of it appears in the Times account.

Finally, Gaza was much in President Obama’s mind and on his conscience at this meeting; so much so that he broke decorum and stepped out of his way to mention it:

The fact is, is that if the people of Gaza have no hope, if they can’t even get clean water at this point, if the border closures are so tight that it is impossible for reconstruction and humanitarian efforts to take place, then that is not going to be a recipe for Israel’s long-term security or a constructive peace track to move forward. And yet not a word from Stolberg and the Times about these words of Obama’s on Gaza. Nor was any analytic piece offered as a supplement — the usual procedure in assessing an event of this importance.

To sum up, what happened at the meeting can be judged plainly enough by the news conference that followed. Binyamin Netanyahu tried to make it all about Iran. Obama declined, and spoke again and again about the importance of peace in the entire region, and the crucial role that Israel would have to play by freezing the West Bank settlements and negotiating in good faith to achieve a Palestinian state.

Let us end where we began, with Barack Obama on the good of peaceable relations with Iran, and the New York Times on the importance of thinking such relations are close to impossible.

President Obama: “You know, I don’t want to set an artificial deadline.”

Now the Times headline: “Obama Tells Netanyahu He Has a Timetable on Iran.” And the Times front-page teaser for their A12 story: “Obama’s Iran Timetable.”

The decision-makers at the New York Times are acting again as if their readers had no other means of checking the facts they report. They are saying the thing that is not, without remembering that the record which refutes them has become easily and quickly available. A great newspaper is dying. And on the subject of Israel, it is doing its best to earn its death-warrant.

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