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## Biden and the Iran Attack Scenario



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Until even a month ago, few thought about it, but most believed it to be unthinkable. Now, however, many seem to be thinking about it and none seem to consider it unthinkable. The “it” in question is the idea of an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear installations.

Last weekend, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden pushed it into the headlines by announcing, in effect, that Washington would have no objection if Israel did just that.

Biden’s remarks merit special attention for a number of reasons.

To start with, Biden has always been recognized as a supporter of the Islamic Republic in Iran, having welcomed the Khomeinist revolution from the start. For years, he was one of few American politicians who argued in favor of engaging the mullahs rather than exerting pressure on them. That even such a person is now prepared to talk of an Israeli attack without even hinting at its potential downsides shows that, as far as the global analysis of the Iranian situation is concerned, we are facing a new situation.

The second reason why Biden’s remarks deserve attention is that they were not “put into context” by President Barack Obama or his aides. Biden is known as a loose cannon who has forced the Obama administration to “correct” his impolitic words and deeds on a number of occasions in the past four months. This time, however, there were no corrections. It is clear that the administration as a whole wanted to send a message: the U.S. would do nothing to stop an Israeli attack on Iran.

And that brings us to the third reason why Biden’s remarks are important.

For years, Israel has been trying to persuade the U.S. to keep the military option alive. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon even raised the issue with President George W Bush by asking for logistical help, including the right to fly through the Iraqi air space, in case of an attack on Iran. Bush, however, rejected the idea, insisting that the issue of Iran’s alleged nuclear ambitions be pursued through the Security Council.

What is remarkable is that Biden’s remarks, and a subsequent report about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s supposed warning to Obama that Israel cannot wait beyond the end of this year before

deciding “what to do about Iran”, have aroused little hostile reaction outside the Islamic Republic. A month ago, that would have inspired editorials and op-eds across the Western world warning against pre-emptive war, the supposed specialty of the much-maligned Bush.

### **What is one to make of this new situation?**

It is possible that the Obama administration wishes to prepare for all eventualities. Although still keen on engaging the Khomeinist leadership, it is not certain that such a course is sustainable. Even if formal talks start before the end of the year, as Obama clearly hopes, no one could guarantee that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would remain in power long enough to conclude a deal.

With Iran’s post-election crisis unlikely to fade away anytime soon, the Obama administration may find itself engaged in negotiations with a losing faction in a bitter power struggle in Tehran.

It is also possible that the post-election crisis would strengthen those in Tehran who reject any engagement with the United States and preach what is known as the “mongoose” strategy. According to their analysis, the Islamic Republic has nothing to gain from talking to the U.S. and everything to lose. Thus the best bet for the Khomeinist regime is to cultivate its image of the challenger, claiming the leadership of all anti-American forces across the globe.

The post-election crisis has certainly wakened the Islamic Republic by undermining its legitimacy and splitting its dominant elite.

President Ahmadinejad has already had to cancel much advertised visits to Libya, for the African Union summit, and to Egypt for the summit of the non-aligned movement. His declared ambition of assuming the leadership of the non-aligned has been put on hold, perhaps gone for ever. He has also been forced to cancel visits to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador, El Salvador, Brazil and Bolivia. During a brief visit to Russia to attend the summit of the Shanghai Group of nations last month, Ahmadinejad was pointedly denied a tête-à-tête with his Russian counterpart Dmitri Medvedev. (On the same occasion, the Russian leader held one-on-one meetings with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Afghan President Hamid Karzai, clearly snubbing Ahmadinejad.)

Another sign that the Islamic Republic’s image has been tarnished is the decision by a number of foreign leaders to postpone or cancel long scheduled visits to Tehran, among them the Sultan of Oman and the presidents of Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

Biden’s remarks, and the unprecedented chorus of approval they inspired show that, if attacked, the Islamic Republic will not attract the level of sympathy and support it would have secured before the 12 June presidential election. The dispute over the declared results has alienated many of Tehran’s long-time supporters and tactical allies. Even hard-core anti-Americans are no longer prepared to serve as human shields for a regime that is accused of having cheated in an election organized by itself, and contested only by individuals enjoying its approval.

Ahmadinejad’s controversial re-election has made the Islamic Republic more vulnerable than anytime in its 30 year history.

As always in politics, however, things may not be as simple as they look.

Today, an Israeli military operation against the Islamic Republic appears less likely to attract international opprobrium because the outcome of the power struggle in Tehran remains uncertain.

However, that very uncertainty makes an Israeli attack more problematic, and, perhaps, less likely. Why should Israel risk re-uniting the Khomeinist elite and possibly even rallying the entire Iranian nation

behind them by launching an attack that could not even guarantee the end of the controversial nuclear project?

Saber-rattling is no substitute for policy. What everyone needs to do is to seek a sober analysis of what is happening in Iran and the likely identity of the faction with the best chance of winning the current power struggle.

Launching a war against a regime heading for the precipice may be as unwise as trying to negotiate with it.

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