

Joel Rosenberg: Will Israel and Iran Go to War in 2013?

Why has President Barack Obama come to Israel this week for his first foreign trip of his second term?

White House officials say three critical issues top the president's agenda: 1) preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons; 2) handling the implosion of Syria; and 3) jump-starting the moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

That's a tall order for a short trip—one that includes a stop in Jordan, as well—and the stakes could not be higher. Most Mideast analysts hold out little hope for a breakthrough on the peace talks on this trip. There also seems to be little the U.S. can do in the short term to significantly change the dynamic in the tragic bloodbath underway in Syria.

The big question hanging over this trip, therefore, is whether Israel and Iran are going to war in 2013 and whether President Obama is going to give Israeli officials the "green light" for preemptive military strikes on Iran's nuclear sites.

Porter Goss served as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 2004 to 2006. Previously, he had served as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee. I called him to get his insights into the president's trip and the sobering nuclear showdown developing in the Middle East, and found his analysis fascinating—and at times, surprising.

JR: What are two or three things you'll be watching during President Obama's first state visit to Israel to meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu?

G: Hopefully, substance and sincerity. I'll be looking at the chemistry between the president and Mr. Netanyahu. That's very important, how they interact together. I don't know if there

will be a more cordial relationship than there has been over the past four years, but more trust is much needed. I'm concerned there has been a failure by the president to recognize how important our relationship is with Israel, especially given the growing threats in the region.

I'll also be watching to see if the president makes real policy changes. The White House has a flawed concept that a "light footprint" works a lot better than what I'll call an "assertive attention" by the U.S. in problem areas. "Leading from behind" is seen as diffident and disengaged. In Maghreb, in the Arabian Peninsula, throughout the Middle East, we've watched a steady spiral of instability grow into widespread violence in the last several years. The troublemakers in the region deride our efforts at diplomacy and exploit what they see as the tentativeness or weakness in our foreign resolve. They're very accomplished at assessing our policies and determining whether we are strong and confident, or not.

So I'll be looking to see if there is any toughening by the president in his approach. And I'm not just talking about abandoning the bows to royalty in structured photo opps. No nation has done more than the U.S. in making things better in the world, but the president seems to favor a policy of apology for the way we conduct ourselves. His demeanor as commander in chief and his message as spokesman for American values have impact. A president is a mood setter. He sends global signals just by how he conducts himself, what he says and how he says it.

If he continues to tentatively tiptoe down the path he has been treading in world hotspots, we're going to see more mischief-makers emboldened to make more trouble.

Also, the narrative during the election that al-Qaida was on the run is false. Yes, damage has been done to the core of al-Qaida, but the franchise is growing vibrantly in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, the horn of Africa and the Arabian

Peninsula. The presence of the radicals has grown. Carnage abounds.

JR: How would you assess the president's approach so far towards preventing Iran from building nuclear weapons?

G: The president's approach to Iran is unrealistically hopeful. It involves unwarranted trust in Iran's negotiators and insufficient muscle in our posture. I don't feel that he has the inner commitment to forcefully deal with the Iranian nuclear proliferation. Indications are that the Iranians believe they have the upper hand by waiting out the intermittent resolve of Washington.

The president keeps saying, "Let's try another round of negotiations." But the talks aren't working. The sanctions aren't sufficiently effective. And I haven't seen a lot of evidence that President Obama has stacked his senior team in this second term with strong leaders on Iran. I'm a little worried about our Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State on this score. They apparently parallel the president's position on Iran, which is to keep talking even when the talk is going nowhere.

Mr. Netanyahu's view is a survival type position. He understands just how serious this problem is—and the brutal consequences of getting it wrong. I do not doubt his resolve to take action if he has to.

There is also little doubt the Iranian regime aims to get the Persian Bomb. That's what they want. They are willing to pay a high price. [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad leaving won't make a difference. The regime—led by the Ayatollah Khamenei—wants the Bomb. That's what is so dangerous.

Now Khamenei leaving is a different story, but an unlikely scenario. He is smart and calculating. If something should happen to him, I believe the situation would instantly destabilize—big trouble.

JR: How closely do you believe Iran and North Korea are working on the Bomb? Is Pyongyang essentially being paid by Iran to be a research and development lab to build operational nuclear warheads?

G: Hand in glove. Of course there is a relationship. The axis of evil is an old phrase, but an apt one. North Korea's foreign currency is coming through arms proliferation. They're in it for the money. Activity between Pyongyang and Tehran is nothing new. It does seem evident that North Korea is testing nuclear devices for Iran; and that makes some degree of sense from Iran's perspective. If Iran tested, it would clearly cause a problem for their current narrative about peaceful nuclear energy in the U.N.

There is little disagreement that some of Tehran's missile system reveals familiarity with certain North Korean rocketry, but selling nuclear hardware and know-how is not restricted to North Korea. The AQ Khan network in Pakistan has been publicly exposed as a global proliferator and there is still unaccounted for fissionable material from Russia somewhere out there. Tehran can undoubtedly find a number of sources to purchase help for their program.

JR: Do you see a war between Israel and Iran in 2013?

G: I told you last year I didn't think there would be a war in 2012, and that turned out to be right. I believe the Ayatollah is cautious enough about his own well-being that he does not want to disappear in a nuclear cloud or by a hit squad. He's playing his cards very carefully. Iran's nuclear capabilities are growing, to be sure. But I don't think the regime in Tehran would use a first strike Persian Bomb at this stage, which includes 2013.

It is worth noting that Iran has scheduled elections during 2013. It is hard to imagine the results will lead to significant change. Survival is paramount for Israel; the

triumph of the Twelfth Imam with a Persian Bomb overwhelms sound judgment in Tehran.

JR: I understand why you didn't think there would be a war last year, but with the red line approaching and North Korea testing a nuclear warhead with Iranian scientists present, won't Mr. Netanyahu believe he has to strike by summer or fall or risk losing his window of opportunity?

G: I think it boils down to this [Obama] administration not having the will or backbone to stand up for Israel unless the Iranians are actually nuking Tel Aviv. I assess the Iranians are not going to strike first unless they contrive some weird provocation that can withstand intense international scrutiny—highly unlikely because nobody trusts Tehran these days.

That gets us to Netanyahu. I do not think he can get first strike approval from this administration under almost any circumstance. Therefore, he has to calculate whether it is better for Israel to forsake U.S. support by unilateral action, or whether in the long run Israel is better off with the U.S. as a constant ally. At this point, and through the rest of 2013, I do not see a direct enough provable threat that Netanyahu can convincingly use. I do not think preempting a likely threat is enough to justify global approval for first strike in a hot war. This does not preclude taking other steps short of war to create disincentives and obstacles for the Tehran regime to ponder. And that's what I would expect.

Bottom line: Goss does not see Israel launching a massive preemptive military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities in 2013. Is he right? I hope so. I, like many Americans, are praying for the peace of Jerusalem. But with Iran so close to getting the Bomb, and North Korea apparently working "hand-in-glove" with the mullahs in Tehran, we may be in for a surprise this year, and a catastrophic one at that.