# By Avoiding a Strike on Iran before U.S. Election, Israel Is Learning from History

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## Israel's non-strike against Iran means it is keeping its options open while avoiding once-familiar tensions with the United States.

Just days before the U.S. presidential election, it is worth considering how -- barring an unforeseen development -- one of the most widely trailed military operations in recent years will not in fact have taken place: Israel will not have attacked Iran before Americans go to the polls.

We do not know with absolute certainty if Israel did not attack because it chose not to do so, or if it felt compelled not to attack because of the red light for the operation from Washington. In an interview with Britain's *Daily Telegraph* at the end of October, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said that the delay of the strike was due to Iran diverting uranium from its military to civilian programs. Yet, based on private conversations, one cannot preclude the possibility that Defense Minister Barak withdrew his support because he feared it would be viewed as interfering with the upcoming U.S. election. The premise of any pre-election strike was that Israel would be taking advantage of a time when it had maximum political influence in Washington, since President Obama would have been constrained in his reaction. The implication is that the pre-election period could be 'insulated', and therefore the consequences would not be felt after the election.

In the context of this non-strike it is worth recalling the events of 1956. The Suez Crisis/Sinai Campaign occurred only days before the U.S. elections called for November of that year, but its consequences over the months that followed marked the worst months in the history of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

The pre-election strategy to attack at Suez was not Israel's, as some may believe, but was the initiative of France's Foreign Minister Christian Pineau. He was confident that the U.S. would not criticize its friends for a firm stance against a hostile Soviet Union and a difficult President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. In this effort, Israel was a bit player. Pineau thought incumbent U.S. President Eisenhower would be concerned about the American Jewish vote and therefore would allow the British-French-Israeli move to go forward and that this would be a massive setback to

Nasser.

Pineau believed that the attack could not wait until after the U.S. elections, since Eisenhower may subsequently have changed course. He thought Eisenhower, in a second term, might seek to be more accommodating of Nasser as part of a wider relaxation of tensions with the Soviets. In a meeting on September 28 with his counterpart, then-Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir, Pineau said, "If Eisenhower is reelected...[he would possibly favor] a consensus with the Russians."

Indeed, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion did not share Pineau's confidence that the U.S. would acquiesce, but felt Israel had little choice. One month later, on October 28, at an Israeli cabinet meeting, Ben-Gurion declared, "I know that our operation will not find favor with Mr. Dulles," referring to the American Secretary of State. While Pineau was the mastermind of the strategy, President Eisenhower immediately blamed Israel. In a letter to a friend at the very time that the war was unfolding, Eisenhower wrote about Ben-Gurion, "We realized that he might think he could take advantage of this country because of the approaching election." Abba Eban, Israel's ambassador to the U.S. at the time, concurred with this analysis. In his memoirs, Eban wrote, "Official Washington was in an angry mood. It had no doubt that we had deliberately chosen election week as an occasion for our operation. This suspicion increased the President's rage."

One of Pineau's miscalculations was how he overstated the strategic value of the American Jewish vote for Eisenhower. If he had been more perceptive or informed about the American national mood, he would have realized that Eisenhower would win by a landslide against candidate Adlai Stevenson in 1956, and therefore, was not worried about the Jewish vote, which he did not win anyway.

The aftermath of the 1956 war is well known. The newly reelected Eisenhower embarked upon a very public effort to press Israel to fully withdraw from the Sinai, including a national televised address for this very purpose. In February 1957, Dulles said the U.S. would employ sanctions against Israel via the UN. To this day, Eisenhower's post-1956 approach is viewed as the high-water mark for Arab states who want the U.S. to twist Israel's arm and "deliver" Israel.

However, the U.S. of 2012 is not the U.S. of 1956, even if there are some commonalities. Indeed, during both the Cold War and today, the U.S. viewed close ties with the Arabs as a component of a wider objective. In the 1950's, the wider objective was the Cold War against the Soviets, amidst hope to keep the Arab states away from the Soviet side. In post-9/11 America, both the Bush and Obama administrations see Arab democracy as providing closer ties with Arab peoples in order to create political distance between mainstream Muslim countries and radical elements like Al-Qaida. The success of such efforts is a different story.

Elections in 1956 trumpeted Eisenhower keeping the U.S. out of war, and today, neither major presidential candidate shows any interest in continuing the war in Afghanistan or returning to Iraq. Then, as now, the incumbents are proud of their commitment to multilateralism and international law.

Yet, there are profound differences between 1956 and today. While ties between Obama and Netanyahu have often been tense, the security web of bilateral ties is much thicker today, beyond anything imaginable in 1956, a time when the U.S. maintained its arms embargo upon Israel despite the fact that Egypt was being supplied with Soviet weaponry via Czechoslovakia. In 1956, there was no U.S. President and Congress identifying an Egyptian threat in concrete terms as it does today, when it comes to Iran. Israel's clout in Congress is immeasurably stronger now than it was in 1956. Then, there were no repeated UN Security Council resolutions against Egypt. Today, against Iran, there are UN and EU-sanctioned international oil embargoes and financial sanctions.

It is not 1956 today, but concerns in Israel linger. Notwithstanding all the sanctions and the international diplomacy that aim to halt the Iranian nuclear program, the international negotiations will probably be invigorated no matter who wins on Tuesday. Israel today fears the worst-case scenario. Israel fears it will ultimately be left alone to act, so

that it does not live in the shadow of a nuclear Iran. Israel's inaction until now reflects a sense that it is better off going along with the international community for as long as possible -- until it has no choice but to act. As such, Israel keeps its options open; and the non-strike means it does not have to worry about the prospect of the consequences of a pre-election attack regarding its relations with post-election America.

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