ANTIWAR.COM

PRINTTHIS

Click to Print

SAVE THIS | EMAIL THIS | Close

February 11, 2009

Will Obama Break the Law for Israel's Sake?

by Grant F. Smith

Since entering office, President Barack Obama has promised sweeping changes in three aspects of governance: transparency, law enforcement, and stewardship of American tax dollars. For a public weary of law enforcement forever prosecuting street but never elite crime, Obama's many statements about holding all individuals accountable under the law have been encouraging. He also called for government-agency compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in a White House mandate for transparency. Obama swore any bailouts of financial institutions and industries will hereafter avoid secretly funneling taxpayer funds into bloated Wall Street bonuses, executive junkets, and private jets.

But does Obama intend to follow these rules himself? Probably not. Obama's entire facade momentarily crumbled under a single withering question – "Do you know of any country in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons?" – launched by veteran reporter Helen Thomas during the president's first evening press conference on Feb. 9, 2008.

Obama dodged the substance of the question:

"With respect to nuclear weapons, I don't want to speculate. What I know is this: that if we see a nuclear arms race in a region as volatile as the Middle East, everybody will be in danger. And one of my goals is to prevent nuclear proliferation generally, I think that it's important for the United States in concert with Russia to lead the way on this, and I've mentioned this in conversations with the Russian president, Mr. Medvedev, to let him know that it is important for us to restart the conversations about how we can start reducing our nuclear arsenals in an effective way, so that we then have the standing to go to other countries to start stitching back together the nonproliferation treaties that frankly have been weakened over the last several years."

The evasion inherent in Obama's reply coupled with actions already taken may reveal the new administration's true framework for Middle East policy: deception, wastefulness, and lawlessness.

Fortunately, Americans don't need Barack Obama to "speculate" on what former President Jimmy Carter already confirmed on May 25, 2008: Israel possesses an arsenal of at least 150 nuclear weapons. Why does Obama trot out the discredited policy of "strategic ambiguity" – in which Israeli and U.S. officials officially refuse to confirm or deny the existence Israeli nuclear weapons – at this early moment? For one reason alone: to break the law. The 1976 Symington Amendment prohibits most U.S. foreign aid to any country found trafficking in nuclear

enrichment equipment or technology outside international safeguards. Israel has never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). If U.S. presidents complied with the Symington Amendment, they would not deliver yearly aid packages to Israel totaling billions of dollars. Presidents make-believe that Israeli nuclear weapons don't exist so Congress can legally continue shoveling the lion's share of the U.S. foreign aid budget to Israel. But this thin pretense is now over. Since Carter's revelation, press outlets such as Reuters chat openly about how Israel's nukes mean that it does not qualify for U.S. aid. But like Harry Markopolos incessantly nagging the SEC about Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, fourth-estate and nuclear-activist calls for compliance continue to be rebuffed by government agencies. Denying Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests about Israeli nukes has always been an integral tactic in preserving this hoary old ruse.

The National Security Archive at George Washington University has doggedly pursued public release of key CIA files about Israel's nuclear weapons programs under the FOIA. The Archive has so far obtained "only a small fraction of a large body of documents ... that remain classified." Keeping all kinds of damning information bottled up was a special priority during the George W. Bush administration, whose FOIA policy was to find reasons *not* to release documents. As Obama backtracks on transparency – as he must if he fully commits to the policy of "strategic ambiguity" – researchers will have to wait at least another eight years for documents already long overdue for public release. That could be very dangerous.

Placing declassified documents about Israeli nuclear capabilities on the table as part of U.S.-Iranian and other regional diplomatic and academic relations is the only way to prepare for good-faith negotiations. Iran is a signatory to the NPT and allows public inspections of its civilian nuclear facilities, though many doggedly insist without hard evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. U.S. policymakers will continue to have a difficult time convincing the public and allies that newer, tougher approaches are needed against Iran if the U.S. continues to avoid discussing Israeli nukes. Regional and American negotiators must be armed with enough facts to address whether Israel's military belligerence, coupled with a nuclear arsenal, is motivating others to seek the nuclear deterrents. Obama appears to be committing to Israeli regional nuclear hegemony rather than addressing it as a proliferation-driver. If this seems far-fetched, consider that Obama has already reauthorized a quiet blockade of Iran begun during the Bush administration.

George W. Bush responded to Israel lobby pressure to target Iran by creating a new U.S. Treasury Department unit by executive order in 2004. The secretive Office of Terrorist and Financial Intelligence (TFI) delivers most of its public briefings at an AIPAC-sponsored think-tank, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and even contracts the think-tankers for "consulting." Like other agencies during the Bush presidency, TFI denied FOIA requests [.pdf] for detailed information about its activities, but it is known to be targeting commercial shippers, international banks, and companies that do business with Iran. Clearly, if this quiet commercial and financial blockade were being waged by some powerful foreign entity against the United States, Americans would consider it a *casus belli*. But rather than slow or shut the operation down in preparation for promised attempts at U.S.-Iran diplomacy, Obama's new Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner recently announced that Stuart Levey will continue to lead this financial blockade unit at Treasury. This particular clandestine operations component of Obama's Middle East policy may soon spark a senseless military conflict with Iran, but perhaps that's the plan. Obama's policy, if honestly verbalized, may be the following: *As your president, I will continue to deceive you about Israeli nuclear weapons, so that my administration can violate the Symington Amendment and deliver unwarranted amounts of taxpayer dollars to Israel. My administration will negotiate in bad faith with Iran while clandestinely attacking it, in order to preserve Israeli nuclear hegemony in the Middle East.*

For Americans impoverished in both reputation and wallet by years of corruption and waning rule of law, such a crass public admission would be refreshing. But is not change we can believe in.

Find this article at:
http://www.antiwar.com/orig/gsmith.php?articleid=14229

Click to Print

SAVE THIS | EMAIL THIS | Close

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 Antiwar.com