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## New Evidence That Israel Is Bluffing About Iran

By Robert Wright

8/15/2012

Israel to world: This time we mean it!

Given the number of times Israeli officials have convinced journalists to report that Israel is really, really, really going to bomb Iran pretty soon unless somebody takes the problem off its hands, you'd think that nobody would pay attention to these alarms any more.

Maybe that explains why this time around Israeli officials have cranked the volume up louder than ever. (See the first few paragraphs of [this](#) Jeffrey Goldberg post for a partial summary of the media blitz, which has continued since he wrote them.) This volume has led credible analysts--such as former Obama pentagon official Colin Kahl, interviewed [here](#) by Laura Rozen--to say that this time Israel *does* seem to mean it.

But in the past 24 hours two pieces of evidence have emerged suggesting that, once again, Israel isn't broadcasting its actual intentions, but, rather, trying to influence President Obama--not necessarily trying to get him to bomb Iran now, but at least trying to get him to ramp up his threat to do so if necessary.

*First piece of evidence* : Israeli journalist Ron Ben-Yishai [conveys](#) a clear message from an unnamed Israeli official in the first sentence of a piece on Ynet: "Israel may rule out a unilateral attack in Iran should the US toughen its stance with regards to the Islamic Republic's nuclear

program, a senior official in Jerusalem claimed. "What does "toughen its stance" mean? It could mean that Obama has to redefine his "red line"--the line that if crossed by Iran would bring American military action. Specifically: The line could move from Iran's actually trying to build a nuclear weapon (where Obama currently has it) to Iran's possessing mere nuclear "capability" (which, as I explained [here](#), is a concept so vague that it could be used to justify bombing now even though Iran isn't close to having a nuke).

But it could be--as *Time's* Tony Karon and *Foreign Policy's* Blake Hounshell [suggested](#) on Twitter--that Israel is just hoping for a high-profile reaffirmation of Obama's existing red line. In particular: Obama could say at the UN General Assembly meeting in September what he's already said: that America would use military force to keep Iran from actually getting a bomb. (One side benefit for Prime Minister Netanyahu, Karon suggested, would be to distract the world from a Palestinian attempt to use the General Assembly meeting to again raise the issue of statehood.)

*Second piece of evidence* : The Times of Israel, citing Israel's Channel 10, [reports that](#) Israeli and White House officials are "working to arrange" a meeting between Netanyahu and Obama this fall at which Obama will agree to "attack Iran by June 2013" if "the Iranian nuclear weapons drive has not halted by then." The suggestion that American officials have more or less signed on to this deal may be total nonsense--but the point is that if so it's probably nonsense leaked by Israeli officials who hope to make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. So it's yet more evidence that their hope is to get action out of Obama, not to bomb Iran themselves.

None of this means that Israel couldn't possibly wind up bombing Iran in the next few months. Bluffs can be hard to back away from, and a bluff this loud makes for a particularly embarrassing climbdown. But the calculation seems to be that Obama, in high-anxiety pre-election mode, will deliver at least enough rhetoric--if only a more high-profile or in some other sense more binding articulation of things he's already said--to make for a graceful climbdown.

Personally, I hope Obama doesn't deliver.

I understand why Israelis, both for historical reasons and because of their current geopolitical environment, are themselves in high-anxiety mode. But the fact is that the Iran threat is exaggerated in the minds of many Israelis along all three dimensions: (1) Iran's proximity to actually having a deliverable weapon (at least two years, and we'd know long before that if Iran embarked on an attempt to actually build one); (2) the chances of a nuclear Iran launching a nuclear strike (which even Ehud Barak, lately competing with Netanyahu for the title of alarmist-in-chief, [acknowledged](#) is roughly zilch back when his political station permitted candor); and (3) the extent to which possession of a nuke would give Iran greater ability to throw its weight around--which is only slightly more than zilch, as Paul Pillar has [powerfully argued](#). (Also, there's the fact that bombing Iran--whether the U.S. or Israel does it-- [will not keep Iran from getting a nuclear weapon](#) in the long run, but will ensure its determination to do so.)

A country situated in a hostile environment, as Israel is, needs to be coolly rational and to avoid freaking out in ways that could spin out of control. A true friend of such a country would try to abet the rationality and would not indulge the freaking out. If Bibi Netanyahu has to endure an

embarrassing climbdown, that will teach him a valuable lesson. And if he can't endure the embarrassment and does something as unfathomably reckless as bombing Iran within the next few months--which I consider very unlikely--then the chances of keeping him from starting a war were never very good to begin with.