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Campaign Stops

STRONG OPINIONS ON THE 2012 ELECTION

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Israeli Fallout

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It should go without saying, but apparently does not, that the tragic crisis unfolding in the Middle East calls for sober statesmanship rather than political posturing. The jihadist murder of the American ambassador to a newly liberated Libya; the carnage unleashed by the Assad regime on the Syrian people; the emergence of a Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt; the conundrum of Iranian nuclear ambitions - the region presents decades worth of complex challenges telescoped into real time.

Responding to these challenges, Mitt Romney mixes crude political theater with neocon bromides. Attacking President Obama for [supposedly apologizing to Islamic radicals](#), he appears unable or unwilling to understand the responsibilities of a president trying to deal with a volatile situation while Americans are in harm's way.

Romney shows no respect for diplomacy in general. He declares that "God did not create this country to be a nation of followers" and maintains that "[in an American century, America leads the free world.](#)" His surrogates repeatedly mock President Obama's "apology tour" and his unfortunate "leading from behind" formulation on Libya. His principal advisers, John Bolton and Dan Senor, are part of a neocon hard core that [opposes any policy](#) that would diminish American sovereignty or freedom of action. Yet faced with the vexing issue of whether the Middle East should be further roiled by an Israeli attack on Iran in an attempt to stop its nuclear program, Romney is willing to outsource that decision to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Speaking [earlier this week](#), Netanyahu said that if the Obama administration was unwilling to set fixed red lines that Iran could not cross, it "has no 'moral right' to restrain Israel from taking military action of its own." The fundamental moral and political issue here, however, is whether it is the sovereign prerogative of the United States to make the decision of whether to start a regional war, a war that will certainly require American resources and may well require American troops to finish.

The threat to international security posed by the Iranian nuclear program should not be underestimated and the Obama administration takes the threat seriously. It continues to keep all options on the table, but believes that there is additional time for sanctions to work. Romney is apparently prepared to delegate to Netanyahu the decision to start a conflict that the United States military believes is, at best, premature, that is unlikely to be fully effective, that will send oil prices skyrocketing, that will further destabilize Lebanon and Syria (and possibly the shaky governments in Libya and Egypt), and that will be likely to consolidate domestic support for a

deeply unpopular Iranian regime. But the question in the presidential campaign is not whether attacking Iran now or later is a good idea, but whether a decision with enormous geo-strategic consequences should be made by the American president or by the leader of an ally dependent upon American power.

Strong, even passionate, supporters of Israel should be troubled by the prospect of an Israeli government not only ignoring the policy choices of its powerful ally but also willing to intrude into American domestic politics in an attempt to influence or override the president's foreign policy. Imagine, for example, that South Korea decided it was going to invade North Korea to destroy its nuclear facilities, potentially triggering a war on the Korean Peninsula that could bring in China and possibly other countries in the region. Indeed, South Korea could take its policy argument directly from Mitt Romney's Web site:

A nuclear weapons capability in the hands of an unpredictable dictatorship with unknown leadership and an unclear chain of command poses a direct threat to U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere in East Asia, threatens our close allies South Korea and Japan, destabilizes the entire Pacific region, and could lead to the illicit transfer of a nuclear device to another rogue nation or a terrorist group.

But Mitt Romney is not suggesting an attack on Pyongyang and he certainly is not offering carte blanche to Seoul.

Analogous situations would be equally untenable. If India decided that, once and for all, it refused to live under the threat of an unstable and nuclear-armed Pakistan and intended to invade, we would never tell them it was up to them. If Taiwan had feared an attack from China across the Formosa Strait during the early 1970s, would Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger have told them it was their call rather than ours whether to launch a surprise attack? Even to put the question shows the absurdity of a superpower's acquiescing to allies on critical questions of war and peace in a nuclear age.

To be sure, Israel is a special ally, but that does not entitle it to make the decision on matters where United States interest and power are inextricably and centrally engaged. It is inconceivable that the United States would permit another ally dependent on American funds and American defense systems to take such a decision unilaterally. It is also inconceivable that we would permit another foreign government to intervene directly and forcefully in our political process to garner popular support for its policies over the objections of the administration.

Yet senior Israeli officials take the view that the Israeli government believes it can defy American wishes and bypass the president. [According to the Israeli daily Haaretz](#), "Ehud Barak says that if Israel were to act now against U.S. wishes, the U.S. Congress would still favor Israel over Iran." Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to Washington, who was appointed by Netanyahu, says "the American people and Congress would support Israel right now if it were engaged in a war with Iran." Netanyahu and Obama appear to recognize that airing their toxic relationship publicly is to neither one's advantage and both have been walking back stories that Obama refused to meet before the approaching United Nations meetings in New York. They have both

called attention to the hourlong telephone conversation they had this week. Attitudes in Israel are fluid, and Defense Minister Barak **appears to have moved** against an imminent attack (or **maybe he hasn't** - as I said, the situation is fluid), but it is remarkable that senior officials of a foreign government would suggest that the president's judgments could be bypassed and foreign policy should be subject to Congressional or popular choice.

The Romney campaign seems to think that all of this is just fine. "If Israel has to take action on its own, in order to stop Iran from developing that capability, the governor would respect that decision," **says Dan Senor**, Romney's senior national security adviser and someone widely tapped as a future national security adviser in a Romney administration. Romney expresses a similar view, stating blandly, "Prime Minister Netanyahu always has to do what he feels is in the best interests of his own nation." In his convention address, he accused President Obama of threatening to throw Israel "**under the bus**." Apparently, Romney thinks Israel should drive the regional bus, leaving the United States to deal with any crashes.

It is American policy to support Israel's right to exist within secure borders, and the United States has supported its ally with billions of dollars and sophisticated weaponry. That support should earn reciprocal cooperation and respect for American policy from its ally, not to mention non-interference in its domestic politics.

Despite all his talk about American power and sovereignty, Mitt Romney seems willing to let someone else decide whether to start what may be the first potential regional war of the new "American century." That is not real leadership; it is dangerous pandering and a strong indication of a prospective president without a genuine foreign policy compass. Once again, we are left with the question of whether Romney means what he is saying and whether he would govern sensibly. But as we have learned to our great detriment over the last decade, the Middle East is no place for loose talk or lazy thinking.

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