

The US and Israel on Iran: Whither the (Dis)Agreement?

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The Iranian nuclear program has been a principal issue in discussions between the American and Israeli governments in recent years. The intensive contacts and American statements indicate that there are differences of approach between the two sides. This article examines where the two governments agree and where they diverge in how they define objectives concerning Iran, and how they would design an answer to the threat.

While the American and Israeli governments are quite close in their perceptions of the Iranian nuclear threat and have shared objectives in this regard, a concrete dispute between them has developed as to how to meet the threat, particularly concerning a military operation in Iran. The US is considering the military option, but unlike Israel, opposes it in the current circumstances, owing to a different understanding of its ramifications. Assuming that Israel does not change its position that military action against Iran is necessary in the not too distant future if it becomes apparent that the diplomatic process has reached a dead end, the dispute will be decided primarily by Iran's behavior and the attitude of the US administration. If the administration agrees to a deal with Iran with loopholes that Israel finds difficult to accept, or if it decides to switch from a strategy of denying Iran nuclear weapons to one of containment, the gap between Israel and the US will widen. If the administration concludes that an attack in Iran is unavoidable, the gap will narrow.

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Perception of the Iranian Threat

Perception of a threat from Iran began to emerge in the US and Israel following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when both countries saw that the change of regime in Tehran turned a former ally into a rival and enemy. The Iranian threat became especially significant to both countries in the early 1990s when Iran, no longer occupied by the war with Iraq, began a military buildup and accelerated its nuclear and missile programs.

Perceptions of the Iranian nuclear threat by the US and Israel have converged over the years. Since 1993, every Israeli prime minister has cited Iran as the gravest strategic threat to Israel and to Middle East stability. The understanding was that the Iranian threat stemmed from the combination of a fundamentalist Islamic regime dedicated to destroying Israel and to attaining a capability to deal Israel a severe blow. The US has demonstrated understanding of Israel's perception of the Iranian threat, agreeing that Iran potentially poses an existential threat to Israel.¹ This understanding constitutes a key consideration in the American administration's decision to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the US regards a nuclear Iran as a threat to its most important interests in the Middle East, namely, the security of its allies in the region, US influence in the region, the supply of energy, and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The American and Israeli perceptions of the regional consequences of a nuclear Iran are close, although it is clear that the US has broader considerations on the matter. Both countries believe that a nuclear Iran will increase instability in the Middle East, deal a critical blow to the arms control regime, and spark a nuclear arms race in the region. Both believe that possession of nuclear weapons by Iran will make it more aggressive vis-à-vis its neighbors, the American presence in the region, and Israel; reinforce its status as the cornerstone of the radical camp; increase the pressure on the moderate countries in the area to fall in line with Iranian policy; and motivate its allies to exhibit a more brazen stance against Israel.

While the US and Israel share similar perceptions of the Iranian nuclear threat, there are differences between their intelligence assessments concerning the development of the nuclear program. There is a broad consensus in both Israel and the US – although this consensus is not undisputed in the US – that years ago Iran made a strategic decision to obtain nuclear weapons. The intelligence assessments on the timetable

for Iran to become technically capable of attaining nuclear capability are not substantially different: in the early 1990s, the intelligence communities in both countries estimated that Iran would be able to reach nuclear capability within 5-8 years. This estimate proved questionable, because it is now clear that Iran was unable to produce fissile material in the 1990s. Furthermore, this estimate was based on a worst case scenario, predicated on a misunderstanding of Iran's cautious strategy. Ultimately it became clear that Iran prefers development of a range of advanced nuclear capabilities, and is in no hurry to break out to nuclear weapons. Its reasons are twofold: Iran wishes to wait and find the optimal timing for a breakout in order to limit the price it will have to pay the international arena, and it is important for Iran to develop capabilities that will enable it to build a nuclear weapons arsenal, not merely a single bomb.

According to the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), Iran evinced the technical capability that would allow it to produce nuclear weapons in 2010-2015. While Israeli intelligence estimated that Iran was capable of producing nuclear weapons on much shorter notice, the difference between the estimates was not significant. The dispute between the US and Israel intelligence communities centered on a different element of the American assessment: that Iran had a weapons program until 2003 that was discontinued, and there was no factual basis for concluding that it had been renewed. Israel, on the other hand, held that Iran's nuclear weapons program was indeed discontinued in 2003, but was later renewed. The 2007 American assessment was also criticized for not sufficiently recognizing the significance of Iran's acceleration of its uranium enrichment program, which could indicate not only its improved ability to attain nuclear weapons capability, but also its intention of doing so.²

The US intelligence assessment in 2012 went a step beyond the 2007 assessment. This assessment was not made public, but its main points were leaked to the media, and a summary appeared in a report by the US Director of National Intelligence published in March 2013. This assessment indicates that the US and Israel both agree that Iran is building a nuclear infrastructure and enriching uranium in order to reserve the option of obtaining nuclear weapons, that Iran is conducting basic research related to its nuclear weapons program, and that it has the scientific, technical, and industrial capability to produce nuclear weapons, subject to a political decision. The US agrees that Iran advanced

in 2012 to a situation enabling it to enrich uranium to a military level, should it decide to do so. The US and Israel also agree that thus far there is no solid evidence that Iran has already decided on a breakout to nuclear weapons, but is liable to do so in the future. Nevertheless, press reports say that the American intelligence community believes that Iran has not yet decided to go ahead with a nuclear weapons program like the one that was discontinued in 2003. Israel disagrees with this assessment, asserting that Iran has already made great progress in uranium enrichment, the most difficult step on the way to nuclear weapons, such that the path to building a nuclear weapon itself is relatively short.³

It therefore appears that the points of agreement between the US and Israeli intelligence assessments are greater than the differences between them. This was the sense of the remarks of former Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who said that the US President had received new information that Iran had made significant and surprising progress in its nuclear program that was bringing it close to achieving nuclear weapons capability. He added that this information was changing previous US intelligence assessments, which were now very close to those of Israeli intelligence.⁴

Objectives Concerning Iran

United States objectives vis-à-vis Iran are more extensive than Israel's, because as a superpower the circle of US interests is wider and its ability to achieve those objectives is superior. The administration wishes to rein in Iran's ability to achieve regional hegemony, halt its military buildup and involvement in terrorism, strengthen the confidence of American allies threatened by Iran, and promote human rights in Iran. Iran believes that though Washington does not admit it, the US aspires above all to overthrow the Islamic regime. Achievement of these American objectives is also important for Israel, whose ability to help realize them is limited.

The most important objective for both Israel and the US is preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. President Obama made this objective a US commitment in March 2012, when he said that his policy was not to contain but to deny Iran a nuclear weapons capability, because a nuclear Iran could not be contained. In other words, the US administration is unwilling to accept the scenario of a nuclear Iran and then have to use all means to deter it from using these weapons to promote Iranian interests. Nonetheless, an important question is whether the US administration will change its position by switching from a policy of

prevention to one of containment if it reaches the conclusion that only an attack will stop Iran on its road to nuclear weapons, and it is unwilling to risk such an attack.

Responding to the Iranian Nuclear Threat

While the US and Israeli governments share similar perceptions of the Iranian threat, they disagree on the response. Both countries agree that in principle, the best way to deal with the Iranian nuclear program is through diplomacy, whereby if Iran is persuaded through negotiations to halt its nuclear program, the serious risks incurred by a military strike will be avoided. After a decade of fruitless negotiations, however, the chances of persuading Iran to forego its ambition to obtain a nuclear military capability are slim. Israel in particular is pessimistic about the chances of stopping Iran's nuclear program through diplomacy and points to two inherent risks. The first is that the Iranians will continue their efforts to gain time through negotiations in order to make progress in their nuclear activity until it is too late to stop them through a military strike. The second is that the six governments negotiating with Iran will reach a settlement that does not eliminate the possibility of Iran producing nuclear weapons. For these reasons, Israel expects the American administration to set a timetable that will prevent Iran from prolonging negotiations indefinitely, and demonstrate that military action is a viable option.

The military option is the focus of the controversy between the US and Israel. In principle, their positions are similar: they are the only two governments that have stated publicly that all options, including the military option, are on the table. In practice, however, their positions diverge: while Israel wants to give the military option credibility, it contends that the US is undermining this option's credibility by emphasizing repeatedly that conditions are still not ripe for a military strike, that Israel's capabilities are inadequate for an effective independent military strike, and that it demands that Israel not surprise the US with independent military action. Israel fears, probably rightly, that this attitude eases the pressure on Iran, and is liable to convince it that the United States does not actually intend to attack.

Why does the US object to military action under current conditions? Senior administration officials give two main reasons. The first is their assessment that a military strike will only delay the Iranian nuclear

program for a limited period, not stop it, and that Israel's ability to damage the Iranian nuclear sites is limited. Former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that an attack would delay the Iranian nuclear program for only one year or two.⁵ The second reason is that Iran's response to a military attack could drag the Middle East into a broad military conflict and lead to chaos. Panetta alleged that such an attack could potentially cause severe security and economic damage in the Middle East and throughout the world. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen also believes that an Israeli attack would lead to escalation, upset stability in the Middle East, and endanger the lives of American soldiers in the Persian Gulf. General Martin Dempsey, who succeeded Mullen as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, held that an attack on Iran would harm regional stability "to an unbelievable degree" and would constitute a very big problem, and added that if Israel attacks, he would not want to be a part of it.⁶ Other sources in the US argue that an attack is liable to prompt Iran to accelerate its nuclear program and actually break out to nuclear weapons while taking advantage of an attack to force the lifting of the sanctions, and that an attack is liable to strengthen Iranian popular support for the regime.

The administration has not clarified its predictions of escalation following an attack on Iran. It probably fears, however, that the Iranian response to an attack will not be confined to missile and rocket attacks at Israel, but will lead to an attack against American targets in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan and against US allies in the Persian Gulf. Such a measure would force the US to respond to Iran, and would be liable to ignite an oil crisis and anti-American unrest in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Israel's view is different. Israel's assessment is that a successful attack against Iran will cause a longer delay in the Iranian nuclear program than the US believes – possibly three to five years.⁷ Furthermore, according to Israel's assessment the US possesses superior capabilities for a military operation, particularly in a series of attacks against the Iranian nuclear sites that could halt Iran's nuclear program for a long period and even result in its cancellation, if Iran realizes that the US is determined to continue attacking until the program is completely stopped. Under this scenario, the US could decide to extend its attacks to other targets beyond the nuclear sites, and possibly attempt to paralyze the entire Iranian response system in advance. A scenario of general escalation in

the Middle East is also unlikely according to these assessments, because it ignores constraining factors: Iran's response capability is limited, and it is likely to shrink from an all-out confrontation with the US. Iran may therefore confine itself to a symbolic response, and the conflict will eventually be limited to a small number of players. In addition, proper use of a successful attack would prevent the Iranians from renewing their nuclear program and breaking out to nuclear weapons. Israel believes that in all, a military attack will have negative consequences but will not cause a dramatic change in the Middle East, and the consequences can be dealt with.

The attitudes of the Israeli and US governments to a military attack on Iran are also influenced by their differing assessments of the deadline for carrying it out. From an operational standpoint, the US has a longer timetable than Israel because its military capabilities enable it to attack at a later date, even at a stage when Israel would have difficulty attacking. Furthermore, the two countries define the red line, beyond which a military option will be considered, in different ways. The US has not actually defined a clear red line for military action, but various statements suggest that its red line will be crossed when there are signs of an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons – for example, if Iran starts enriching uranium at a military level, expels the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, and/or revokes its signature on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. For the US, therefore, Iran has not yet neared the “zone of immunity.” For Israel, the red line will be crossed when Iran enters the zone of immunity. It will then lose its ability to conduct an independent nuclear strike, and will be dependent on the willingness of the US to take such a measure. Where Israel is concerned, Iran's entry into the zone of immunity will occur when the defense of its nuclear sites, especially in Fordow, reaches a stage so that it would be difficult to ensure the success of an attack. An entry into the zone of immunity can also occur when Iran is so close to producing fissile material that the process can no longer be stopped. In other words, the US will consider an attack to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons when Iran breaks out to nuclear weapons, while Israel believes that it will have to attack earlier to render Iran unable to break out. In August 2012, then-Minister of Defense Ehud Barak said that Iran was liable to enter the zone of immunity very soon, i.e., it had not yet done so. Some in Israel, however, believe that

Iran entered the zone of immunity already in the fall of 2012, and that this concept therefore no longer has any meaning.⁸

Questions for the Future: Agreement and Discord

Can the United States and Israel reach an understanding in the future about the diplomatic and/or military solution to the Iranian threat? This question is especially important because the three main actors are likely to reach a fateful crossroads in a year or two. Iran will have to decide whether to make real concessions that will enable it to conclude a deal limiting its nuclear program for the sake of easing the stringent sanctions against it. The American administration will have to decide whether to agree to real concessions in negotiations with Iran in order to conclude a deal, initiate military action – American or Israeli – against the nuclear sites in Iran, or switch from a policy of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons to a strategy of containing Iran, which means accepting its possession of nuclear weapons. Israel will have to decide whether to embark on military action, if no other way is found to stop Iran.

Can the US and Israel reach an understanding on a deal with Iran that will include significant restrictions on its nuclear program, and delay that plan's completion for a significant period of time? Presumably the administration is also aware that Iran will not voluntarily forego its ambition to produce nuclear weapons, or at least build a capability of producing such weapons on short notice, and that Iran is likely to persist in the policy of deception and concealment that it has pursued in the nuclear realm. This assumption can be used as a basis for a rudimentary understanding between the US and Israeli governments on how to handle the Iranian nuclear program diplomatically. From Israel's standpoint, such an understanding can include various elements, such as:

- a. Continued American commitment to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and no switch to a containment policy.
- b. A common definition of red lines concerning progress in the Iranian nuclear program, and an understanding that the US will consider military action if diplomacy fails. This definition must also clarify what will be considered failure in the negotiations with Iran.
- c. Basic terms for an agreement with Iran, such as removing all uranium at an enrichment level of 20 percent or higher from Iran, and removing most of the uranium that has been enriched to a lower level, in order to prevent an Iranian breakout to a bomb and its development within

- a short span of time, and closing the enrichment facility at Fordow, or at least suspending its activity. These terms mean stopping the ticking Iranian clock and winding it back by several years at least.
- d. Stepped up supervision of the nuclear sites in Iran in accordance with the Additional Protocol.
 - e. Retention of most of the painful sanctions until a satisfactory agreement with Iran is achieved.
 - f. Coordination mechanisms between the US and Israel for formulation of a joint strategy on the Iranian nuclear question.

In practice, an understanding of this type between the US and Israel is possible, because at least some of these terms are acceptable to the American administration. However, the two countries have diverging attitudes regarding the diplomatic option. Israel believes that there is only a slight chance for the negotiations to succeed, while the US believes that there is enough time to test whether the painful sanctions in force against Iran will prove effective. The administration wants to pursue every possibility for the diplomatic option, even if the prospects appear poor. This will postpone military action as long as possible, and may somehow achieve results; and if the administration decides to attack Iran, important legitimacy for an attack will be achieved by waiting until all diplomatic possibilities have been exhausted.

The administration's fear of a military strike against Iran suggests that it may ultimately relax its stance towards Iran. The US may even be willing, despite Israel's objections, to conclude an agreement that will leave loopholes enabling Iran to achieve nuclear weapons capability. The fact that the administration has softened its position in talks with Iran suggests as much. The US no longer demands the suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment program; it expressed willingness in principle to recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium under certain conditions. In 2012, the US administration demanded that Iran shut down the Fordow site. Today, reports say that it is willing to accept a suspension of enrichment in this facility under restrictions that will make it difficult to resume enrichment quickly. According to these reports, the American administration is also willing to allow Iran to continue producing and maintaining a small store of uranium at a 20 percent enrichment level, and it is not clear whether it will demand that Iran give up most of the uranium that has been enriched to a level below 20 percent.⁹ These concessions imply that the administration is liable to accept a deal even if

it has loopholes, and even if it is unacceptable to Israel – if it believes that the prospective deal will prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. The administration's consent to such a deal is also likely due to its assessment that if Iran possibly tries to take advantage of the loopholes in the agreement to move towards nuclear weapons capability, the option of a military strike will remain open.

Will the US administration be willing to attack Iran, or alternatively, give Israel a green light to carry out such an attack? The administration has stated unequivocally that it will prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and that all the options to this end are open. President Obama and other administration senior officials – the Vice President and the new Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State – affirmed this position in early 2013.¹⁰

Given the administration's commitment to a strategy of preventing Iranian nuclear weapons capability, the US will find it difficult to abandon this position without severe damage to its credibility, not only as perceived by Israel, but in the eyes of its other allies and the eyes of Iran as well. Therefore, it will presumably adhere to its prevention strategy, unless exceptional circumstances justify otherwise. A commitment to prevention, however, does not necessarily mean commitment to a military strike, however, and it is obvious that the US currently prefers diplomacy. In these circumstances, Israel will be forced to weigh whether it judges the administration willing, now or in the future, to commit itself to attacking Iran if diplomacy reaches a dead end. Will Israel be able to rely on the US to attack Iran, if it waits until its own attack capability is lost?

Several considerations are likely to influence the American administration's decision on whether to attack Iran. The administration states that current conditions are not yet ripe for an attack on Iran, but it does not say what constitutes ripe conditions. At the same time, its reasons for objecting to military action are not likely to change in the near future. For this reason, it appears that the administration will be in no hurry to attack Iran, unless it is convinced that the consequences of an attack will be less severe than it currently believes.

As long as the administration believes that there is chance of a reasonable arrangement with Iran, it will refrain from military action. This assumption poses a twofold problem: first, it is difficult to say when the diplomatic possibilities have been exhausted and there is no chance

of an agreement, because it can always be claimed that sanctions require more time to take effect, or that additional sanctions should be imposed, and that the diplomatic alternative has therefore not been exhausted. Second, the administration is liable to continue softening its position on Iran in order to achieve an agreement with it, under the assumption that it will also be able to manage a poorer agreement.

There is currently no international support for an attack on Iran, and the degree of internal support in the US for such a measure is unclear. In order to embark on an attack, the administration will need to prepare the groundwork on two fronts and gain a minimum level of support. The administration will want to obtain legitimacy for an attack from the UN Security Council. Since it will be difficult to obtain this legitimacy, however, it may forego such support in advance if and when it decides to attack.

The bottom line is therefore that the administration is likely to consider military action in Iran if it reaches the conclusion that Iran is breaking out to nuclear weapons. The likelihood of American military action could grow in two situations: if Iran takes an obvious step, such as a nuclear test à la North Korea, or if an agreement is reached with Iran, which then proceeds to violate significant parts of it.

If the American administration concludes that military action is unavoidable, it will likely prefer an American attack to an Israeli one. An Israeli attack will enable the administration to claim that it is not a partner in it, thereby avoiding both internal and international criticism, and perhaps cause Iran to limit its response against the US and its allies. The US believes, however, that an Israeli attack also has disadvantages: as Panetta said, Israel's military capabilities are inferior to those of the US, and the chances that an Israeli military strike will be successful are therefore poorer.¹¹ American deterrence against Iran is stronger than Israeli deterrence, and the US administration will wish to control developments as much as possible, without depending on Israel's behavior. Furthermore, Iran will likely regard the US as a partner in any Israeli strike. It is therefore also likely that if the administration decides to attack Iran, it will prefer not to include Israel in the action, aside from intelligence cooperation, which is secret by nature. Israel's participation will not contribute much from an operational standpoint, and is liable to aggravate criticism of the US, especially in the Muslim world, where an American-Israeli conspiracy will be alleged.

Will the American administration give Israel a green light for an independent military strike against Iran? The answer at this stage is negative, first and foremost because the administration still objects to the idea of military action. Its position on a green light will probably not change as long as it objects to the idea of an attack. If and when the American position changes and it concludes that an attack is essential, it will likely notify Israel that it is assuming responsibility for dealing militarily with Iran.¹² Alternatively, if Israel makes it clear to the US administration that it intends to attack Iran, a more likely scenario – as indicated by its public stance – is that the US will tell Israel to act as it sees fit, and that the decision about its security is in its own hands, but this does not mean that the US is giving Israel a green light to act.

Finally, can Israel attack Iran without a green light, or at least a yellow light, from the US? In other words, in a matter so critical for Israel, should the decision be in its hands, even if negative consequences ensue for its relations with its main ally? Or can Israel not afford to act contrary to the American administration's position in a matter so important to its interests? A scenario in which an Israeli attack without a green light is likely to be accepted by the US could occur if Iran commits an obvious act that shows its intention to achieve a nuclear breakout, without this measure leading to an American attack. In any other situation, Israel will need a green light. The reason is not only that an attack without an advance understanding from the American administration will do serious harm to its relations with Israel; a no less important reason concerns follow-up actions on the Iranian nuclear question after the attack. A military attack on Iran cannot be the end of a process; it is the beginning. Israel will need substantial American aid to cope with the results of the action: preventing Iran from rebuilding the sites that have been hit, preventing it from taking advantage of an attack to achieve a nuclear weapons breakout when it is ready, defeating an Iranian effort to have the sanctions against it removed, trying to deter Iran from a broad response against Israel and other targets in the region, helping Israel deal with international criticism following an attack and perhaps efforts to impose sanctions against it, preventing a negative response in the Arab world against Israel, especially if Arab countries threaten to disrupt peaceful relations with it, and finally, helping Israel cope with the failure of an attack, if such failure occurs.

Notes

My thanks to the INSS Director Amos Yadlin for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

- 1 See President Obama's speech in Jerusalem on March 20, 2013, White House, Office of the Press Secretary.
- 2 David Albright and Paul Brennan, "The New National Intelligence Estimate on Iran: A Step in the Right Direction," Institute for Science and International Security, March 2, 2012.
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- 8 Ari Shavit, "The Decision Maker Warns: You Can't Rely on the US to Attack Iran," *Haaretz*, August 10, 2012; see remarks by General (ret.) Amos Yadlin, "Amos Yadlin: 'Iran Has Crossed Already the Red Line,'" *Maariv*, April 25, 2013.
- 9 "Another Try at Nuclear Talks," *New York Times*, March 1, 2013.
- 10 Devin Dwyer, "Obama: Iran a Year Away from Nuclear Weapons," *ABC News*, March 15, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/03/obama-iran-a-year-away-from-nuclear-weapon/>; "Kerry: 'Do What We Must' To Stop Iran," *Yahoo News*, January 24, 2013; "Chuck Hagel on Iran at Senate Hearing," *The Iran Primer*, US Institute of Peace, February 4, 2013.
- 11 Interview with Secretary Panetta, *National Journal*, March 8, 2012.
- 12 For more discussion of the question of a green light and American considerations, see Ephraim Kam, "A Green Light on Iran?" *Strategic Assessment* 14, no. 4 (2011): 39-50.