



PolicyWatch 1973

Israel Debates a Strike on Iran

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Israelis agree that Iran's nuclear program must be stopped, and their debate regarding a strike's cost-effectiveness, urgency, and impact on relations with the United States is coming to a head.

With the heat of the summer has come an unprecedented flare-up in Israel's public debate on whether and when to unilaterally strike the advancing Iranian nuclear program. Broadly speaking, Defense Minister Ehud Barak seems to advocate early Israeli action, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu appears inclined to act but remains undecided, President Shimon Peres and most of the current and former defense establishment oppose an independent Israeli strike in the near future, and the rest of the government and the public at large are divided or uncertain. Peres has gone public with his opposition in recent days, further elevating the flames.

Following a wave of press reports pitting the bulk of the defense establishment against political decisionmakers on this issue, senior officials launched a media counteroffensive in a bid to defend the unilateral military option, prepare the public for a possible strike, and influence Washington and Tehran's calculus. First, Netanyahu publicly emphasized that threats directed at Israel's home front are "dwarfed" by the danger of Iran attaining nuclear weapons. In private, he reportedly stated, "If there is an inquiry commission [after a strike], I will say that I am responsible."

Second, leading Israeli columnists detailed Barak's arguments in several high-profile articles last weekend. In an extensive discussion with Ari Shavit of *Haaretz*, an anonymous "decisionmaker" -- easily identifiable as Barak -- discussed the aims and strategic rationale of a preemptive Israeli strike and offered a number of justifications for such a move, including: the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran; Israel's inability to wait much longer given the risk of losing its capacity to stop Iran militarily; Israel's need to rely on itself concerning the most critical aspects of its national security, not on its best friend, the United States; and the notion that containing a nuclear-armed Iran down the road would be exponentially more complicated and costly than prevention now.

Meanwhile, another leading newspaper, *Maariv*, came out with an extensive opinion poll on the issue. In line with previous surveys, the results reflected a somewhat divided and confused Israeli public. Although the responses suggested that a relatively large portion (40 percent) of the public trusts the prime minister and defense minister with this critical decision, a similar plurality does not want a political decision to trump the defense establishment's professional opinion. And while a majority regards a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat to Israel, 39 percent prefer Israel to act in concert with the United States -- only 35 percent stated that Israel should act independently before it is too late, and the remaining respondents were unsure.

To place this debate in context, most Israelis believe that Iran is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. They also regard a nuclear-armed Iran as a mortal threat to their country's future and are highly skeptical that international sanctions and diplomacy will curtail Tehran's aims. Therefore, the debate focuses on the cost-effectiveness of a unilateral Israeli strike (in both strategic and practical terms), as well as its timing and potential impact on U.S.-Israeli relations.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS

Assuming an Israeli strike can delay the Iranian nuclear program by a few years, the focal question debated is what international, regional, and domestic dynamics it would generate in the short and long term. Some decisionmakers believe military action would create an environment that effectively forces Tehran to halt the program for the long term, and perhaps hasten regime change, while others believe a strike would further push the regime to nuclearize. Commentators have also expressed concerns about Israel's national security risks in the event of poststrike confrontation with Iran and its proxies. Is the Israeli home front ready for a conflict that, while far from a doomsday scenario, might still result in several hundred civilian fatalities, according to Israeli military estimates? And in terms of monetary costs, some Israeli experts have warned of the negative impact a strike could have on the economy. For their part, Netanyahu and Barak continue to emphasize weighing the costs of prevention against the costs of allowing Iran to obtain nuclear weapons.

TIMING AND URGENCY

Despite increased sanctions, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program, including its military-related aspects, thereby shortening the timeframe for a breakout and making potential preventive action more difficult. In particular, Israeli decisionmakers cite the regime's unabated uranium enrichment to 3.5 and 20 percent (which adds to its breakout capacity), a hardened and dispersed program that is becoming less vulnerable to attack, continued development of delivery systems, and -- if Israeli press accounts about a new U.S. intelligence report are correct -- weaponization efforts focused on nuclear warheads. Some officials claim that Iran's expanding "zone of immunity" may close Israel's window to act on its own by the end of this year, making the decision an urgent one. Yet opponents question whether the window is really that narrow, urging the government to give Washington and the international community more time. They also want Israel to avoid being seen as interfering in the U.S. presidential election with a pre-November strike.

EFFECT ON BILATERAL RELATIONS

Israeli-U.S. relations are a key element of the Israeli public debate. Implicit in the position of Israeli decisionmakers is deep skepticism regarding whether Washington, for its own domestic and strategic reasons, will ultimately deliver on its commitment to keep Iran from going nuclear. They are particularly disappointed about the lack of a defined timeframe for sanctions and diplomacy, as well as a clear roadmap for U.S. action should these measures fail. Indeed, they frequently cite the failure to curtail Pakistan and North Korea's nuclear ambitions despite U.S. commitments to do so.

Israeli officials also believe that their intimate dialogue with U.S. officials has failed to impact the latter's definition of red lines for military action against Iran. In Israel's view, postponing action until Tehran begins moving toward a bomb is too risky. Iran is capable of standing at that threshold for years, developing its capabilities, immunizing them to outside attack, and choosing to break out when efforts to stop it would be too late or too costly even for the United States. Israel wants to deny Tehran any such breakout capacity, and it questions U.S. assurances that "we will know" when Iran moves to arm itself with nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Israelis are well aware and appreciative of the special importance of their relationship with the United States, and the fact that they will depend on Washington's support the day after a preemptive strike, particularly in leading the crucial international campaign to prevent Iran from reconstituting its nuclear capabilities. This realization is consistently articulated by decisionmakers and reflected in polls indicating the public's preference for coordinated action with the United States. Israelis also believe that the United States has sought to influence their debate through high-profile official visits, leaks and briefings to the Israeli media, and public statements and gestures. Yet the recent plethora of visits and the very close ongoing dialogue between the two governments have been insufficient to convince Israeli decisionmakers of U.S. intentions and, in turn, close the bilateral gaps.

CONCLUSION

The intensifying public debate in Israel is, first and foremost, a testimony to the fact that the country is nearing a decision on Iran, probably in the coming weeks. Despite being a tribute to a healthy democracy, the debate might also come with an unintended cost: convincing Tehran that it can safely discount the prospect of military action, whether Israeli or American. In reality, while the debate may complicate Netanyahu's effort to win the required approval for such action within his divided cabinet, he may yet secure the necessary votes for a strike despite the controversy.

Whatever the case, public daylight between Israel and Washington on this critical issue is bad for both parties and is certainly unhelpful in their efforts to deter Iran. Although the window is closing, it is not too late to bridge the gaps. The parties must make an effort to do so while simultaneously lowering the public profile of their differences. If Washington wants to influence Israeli decisionmaking, it must reach out to its ally at the highest level both publicly and privately, presenting a clearer roadmap that seriously addresses Israel's concerns in words as well as deeds. Now is the time for such dialogue -- it cannot wait until after the U.S. election.

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