

The U.S. Can Meet Israel Halfway on Iran

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross), [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



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There is no daylight between the United States and Israel on the objective and the preferred means for dealing with Iranian nuclear ambitions. Much has been written about possible differences, but the recent meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu highlighted key points of convergence: Both agree that the objective is prevention, not containment, and that a nuclear Iran could set off an arms race in an already-dangerous region. The heightened risk of a nuclear war in the Middle East is, in essence, why Obama has indicated that the issue is in the "American national interest."

The two leaders agree that a peaceful solution to ensuring that Iran does not achieve nuclear weapons is preferable. Iran faces sanctions that are tougher than ever before, giving diplomacy a chance to succeed in a way that it has not.

Any differences between the two countries stem from a basic reality: The United States, given its significantly greater military capability, can afford to wait longer than Israel to give diplomacy time to succeed. From Israel's perspective, as Defense Minister Ehud Barak has explained, there will come a point when, if no action is taken, the depth and breadth of the Iranian nuclear program will force Israel to forgo its military option. Forgoing the use of force against an existential threat would be a historic decision for any Israeli prime minister and goes against that country's ethos of self-reliance.

That said, Israeli military action need not be imminent or inevitable. After his meeting with Obama, Netanyahu said the time frame for the possible use of force is measured "not in days or weeks" but "also not in years." Although Obama has noted that the "window" for diplomacy is "closing," there is space for it to work.

Will diplomacy complicate efforts to synchronize the U.S. and Israeli clocks? Possibly, but here again we see more convergence than divergence. The United States, like Israel, has limits. Perhaps that is why Obama has also said that he is not bluffing, essentially signaling to Iran that this is its last chance: If Tehran wants to avoid military action

against its nuclear program, it must take the diplomatic route that remains available.

Given the stakes, the issue of Iran's nuclear program is a global responsibility. It is important that any military action be widely accepted internationally as a direct consequence of Iran's intransigence. If force is used, it must be because Iran brought it upon itself. Under such circumstances, it is far more likely that after the strike the world will be able to preserve the sanctions against Iran and maintain its international isolation. These are crucial if Iran is to be prevented from reconstituting its nuclear program.

With negotiations among Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) set to begin April 13, there is a need to assuage the Israeli fear that negotiations will drag on beyond a point at which Israel would lose its military option. Several actions could reconcile the U.S. and Israeli timetables with the ongoing diplomacy.

First, Washington should reassure Israel that it will be looking for concrete and verifiable signs that Iran is prepared to comply with its obligations on the nuclear program. Second, U.S. officials should discuss these concrete signs with the Israelis and consult with them about the ongoing negotiations. Third, Washington should discuss a time frame with the Israelis and the P5+1 during which progress must be made in the negotiations to justify their continuation. This must be conveyed to the Iranians as well. Fourth, the United States should make publicly clear that while it is serious about giving diplomacy a chance, it will not engage in a phony process; that time is running out for diplomacy to work and obviate the alternative the use of force.

Because Israel is the only country that Iran has repeatedly threatened to "wipe off the map," it is reasonable for it to have some input into the objectives of diplomacy and the timetable for progress in negotiations. The more Israelis feel their views are being taken into account, the more inclined they will be to give diplomacy a chance to work before resorting to force. Israel should also understand that if diplomacy fails and force proves necessary, the context in which force is used will be critical. A strike on Iran is likely to be limited in value if it is not followed by a sustained international sanctions effort to avoid importation of key material to reconstitute Iran's nuclear program.

It is possible to synchronize the U.S. and Israeli clocks and give diplomacy a chance to work. Ironically, the better these timetables are aligned, and the more Tehran understands this reality, the more likely the Iranians are to see that if they want to avoid force being used against them, they must take advantage of the diplomatic out that the United States is offering.

Dennis Ross, counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, was a special assistant to President Obama on the Middle East and a senior director on the National Security Council staff from July 2009 to December 2011.

David Makovsky is a distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute and director of its [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/project-on-the-middle-east-peace-process/\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/project-on-the-middle-east-peace-process/). ❖

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