

# Washington and Israel on Iran: Unresolved Differences

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Mar 16, 2012

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**Notwithstanding their differing perspectives on the subject, the less daylight seen between Washington and Israel regarding Iran, the better.**

**T**he March 5 summit between President Obama and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu marked an important milestone in the U.S.-Israeli decisionmaking process on Iran's nuclear program. The meeting helped clarify positions and narrow gaps, yet significant differences remain to be addressed in the coming months.

According to Israeli government sources, the two leaders refrained from sharpening their differing red lines on Iran. This is understandable given that neither country is likely to forsake its freedom of action on such a crucial issue. Israelis are pleased that the Iranian nuclear file has moved to the top of the U.S. and global agenda, with the international community adopting sharp sanctions for the first time. They also appreciate Obama's strong public statements rejecting containment, depicting a nuclear-armed Iran as a threat to U.S. national security, pledging to keep all options on the table -- including the military one -- and, above all, respecting Israel's sovereign right to protect its vital national security interests. Such statements are important to Israeli ears because they create a sense of commitment no less significant than what is said behind closed doors.

Yet respecting Israel's sovereign rights or appearing open to Israeli requests for certain military wherewithal does not mean that Washington has given its ally a green light to strike Iran. The White House apparently reiterated its negative attitude toward a premature strike during the summit, urging Israel to allow sufficient time for sanctions and diplomacy to work first. For its part, the Israeli leadership clarified that it had not yet made a decision and would wait to see whether Iran yields to international pressure. In interviews with the Israeli media following his return from Washington, however, Netanyahu stated that the time to decide is measured "not in days or weeks, but also not in years."

In this context, the Israeli government demands even tougher sanctions, and it is more skeptical than Washington that such measures will produce results. Prior to the summit, Netanyahu set the bar high for sanctions to be deemed successful. His benchmarks -- cessation of all Iranian enrichment activities, removal of all enriched material from

Iran, and dismantlement of the Fordow enrichment facility -- are probably too high for the international community to adopt or for Iran to accept.

Regarding the U.S. military option, Israelis did not fail to note the toughening up of presidential and other official utterances on the subject, but they remain unsure about whether and to what extent Washington is ready to moderate its previously stated red line of Iran actually developing a weapon. On March 6, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) that if all nonmilitary options fail, "we will act." Some have interpreted this as readiness to set a time limit for sanctions and diplomacy rather than wait endlessly until Iran moves to weaponize.

## "Zone of Immunity"

Looming over the meeting was a growing sense of urgency in Israel, driven by the fact that Iran has begun to immunize critical components of its advancing nuclear capabilities against military strikes. Most notably, Tehran has moved to operationalize the Fordow enrichment facility near Qom, which is protected by heavy mountainous rock and appears invulnerable to Israeli airstrikes. Israelis are concerned that a nuclear program entrenched in what Defense Minister Ehud Barak has called a "zone of immunity" would deny them a viable, cost-effective military option and make it easier for Iran to proceed toward a weapon.

## Differing Triggers

Israel and Washington share common ground in their assessment and understanding of the Iranian nuclear program; Obama's explanation of the consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran in a recent interview with the Atlantic could have come from Israeli lips. Yet they part ways when defining triggers for military action and, therefore, when determining the critical timeframe for stopping Iran's drive toward dangerous nuclear capabilities.

From Israel's perspective, Iran's nuclear program undoubtedly carries a military dimension, even if Tehran has not yet made a concrete decision to produce a bomb. This fact, along with the regime's nature and ideology, validates a military option once Iran acquires the essential capabilities to overtly or covertly weaponize. Waiting until Iran actually makes that dash is too risky. Israel therefore faces a dilemma: given that Iran has already crossed the critical capabilities threshold, and assuming international sanctions and diplomacy hold little promise, should Israel apply a risky, independent military option while it is still available, or should it rely on the United States to stop Iran? As indicated above, both Netanyahu and Barak have publicly asserted that Israel's decision time is measured in months.

From Washington's perspective, the window of opportunity to stop Iran's nuclearization affords much more time for sanctions and other types of pressure. The United States has far more effective capabilities than Israel and can take military action long after Iran immunizes its program to an Israeli strike. Moreover, many in the Obama administration believe that Israel's "zone of immunity" is too narrow a concept, since it focuses on only one element of the Iranian program and one countermeasure.

Washington is clearly unenthusiastic about an Israeli military strike and has expressed this both privately and publicly. It views Israel's options on this front as far weaker than America's, with questionable cost-effectiveness and great potential for serious unintended consequences, including regional escalation and a spike in oil prices. Ultimately, the administration fears being dragged into a war under circumstances that are highly sensitive internationally and domestically.

Furthermore, while Israel is focused on preventing a nuclear-capable Iran, the United States seems focused on preventing a nuclear-armed Iran. In recent months, Secretary Panetta has defined Washington's red line as the development of a nuclear weapon, and Obama elaborated on this concept in his Atlantic interview: "Iran...is not in a

position to obtain a nuclear weapon without us having a pretty long lead time in which we will know that they are making an attempt."

In Israel's eyes, this approach is too risky because it could allow for a protracted period during which Tehran stands at the threshold of weaponization while developing and immunizing its capabilities. Eventually, the Iranians could rush to a weapon in a considerably shortened timeframe and make it increasingly more difficult and costly to stop them, assuming their activities could even be detected early enough.

Behind these differences lies a psychological gap. The United States is driven by the global perspective of a superpower, while Israelis see the issue as much more immediate and dire. Although both realize that the Iranian nuclear problem is not an exclusively Israeli problem, the Israeli leadership is driven by a unique imperative to defend against a potentially existential threat. It therefore attaches more weight to the consequences of inaction. With memories of history burnt deeply into their collective psyche, Israelis are loath to leave their most critical national security interests in the hands of others, even their closest allies. Netanyahu clearly exhibited this mindset in his postsummit speech to AIPAC, when he mentioned the Holocaust while discussing Iran. On a more tactical level, Israel regards its impending decision as important leverage on Washington and the international community to act decisively, and it will not easily forsake this lever.

## Conclusion

**T**he U.S.-Israeli differences on Iran demand continued efforts to resolve them. Should the two allies fail to reconcile their red lines and synchronize their clocks in the coming months, Israel will face a critical unilateral decision.

In the meantime, both countries must work to intensify existing pressures on the Iranian regime. They should also better coordinate their public messages on the issue, seeking the right balance between unnecessary belligerence and statements that discredit the military option. Such balance is essential to the success of sanctions and diplomacy, and continued failure to find it could have a counterproductive impact on Iran's calculus.

Notwithstanding their differing perspectives, the less daylight seen between Washington and Israel, the better.

*Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog (Ret.) is The Washington Institute's Milton Fine international fellow, based in Israel. Previously, he served as head of the Israel Defense Forces Strategic Planning Division and chief of staff to the minister of defense.* ♦

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



## ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



## BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

## TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)