

The Need for Consistent U.S. and Israeli Public Messaging on Iran

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Brief Analysis

Washington and Israel need to address their public messaging on Iran, which has undermined mutual trust and efforts to achieve their common objective: a diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis.

Iran seems certain to be the main topic of discussion during Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's March 5 White House meeting with President Obama. Whatever the substantive content of their conversations on the Iranian nuclear program, they need to address their public messaging, which has undermined mutual trust and efforts to achieve their common objective: a diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis with Tehran.

For its part, the Obama administration must spend less time messaging Israel and Congress, and more time messaging Iran. It also needs to iron out contradictory elements in its public messaging that undermine ongoing efforts to reach a diplomatic solution with Iran and risk bringing about the very outcomes it hopes to avoid: an Israeli preventive strike or a fateful miscalculation by Tehran that could lead to war. Specifically, these contradictory elements pertain to U.S. policy objectives (no nuclear weapons capability, or no nuclear weapons), the red lines that flow from these policy objectives (achieving a capability to rapidly build a bomb, or the actual decision to build one), and U.S. attitudes toward the use of force (as a last resort, or never).

For example, on Wednesday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted that U.S. policy "is to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons capability." What exactly this means in practical terms is unclear, as Defense Secretary Leon Panetta stated on December 19 that Iran could build a bomb within a year should it decide to do so. Similarly,

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the Senate on January 31 that "Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, making the central issue its political will to do so."

Moreover, senior U.S. officials (including Panetta) frequently emphasize that there is no evidence Iran has decided to build a nuclear weapon. Yet U.S. intelligence did not learn of Tehran's 2003 decision to suspend major elements of its weaponization program until four years after the fact. In light of this history, how can U.S. officials be confident that they would learn of a decision to build a bomb in time to stop it through force -- assuming they were willing to do so?

Furthermore, Panetta has stated on several occasions that Iranian development of a nuclear weapon would cross a U.S. red line and spur Washington to "take whatever steps [were] necessary to stop it." Yet both he and his senior military advisor, Joint Chiefs chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey, have also repeatedly emphasized in public that a military attack would be destabilizing and have undesirable, unintended consequences. Although neither has explicitly ruled out a U.S. strike, their public statements make it sound highly unlikely. When asked on the January 8 edition of *Face the Nation* whether the United States has the ability to take out Iran's nuclear program using conventional means, Dempsey responded, "I certainly want them to believe that's the case." But his and Panetta's statements undermine just such a perception. Such mixed messages help neither to restrain an increasingly nervous Israel nor deter an increasingly confident Iran.

Israel has likewise engaged in mixed messaging regarding the effectiveness of sanctions and the amount of time left for diplomacy. In January, Netanyahu told an interviewer, "For the first time, I see Iran wobble under the sanctions that have been adopted, and especially under the threat of strong sanctions on their central bank." Yet during his February visit to Cyprus, he stated, "I hope that sanctions work, but so far they haven't worked." Similarly, in mid-January, Defense Minister Ehud Barak hinted that a strike was "very far away" and "certainly not urgent," but in early February he stated, "Whoever says 'later' may find that later is too late." Such flip-flops risk casting Israel as a capricious, inconstant ally in Washington's eyes, and a hesitant, wavering adversary in Iran's.

For nuclear diplomacy with Iran to succeed, messaging from Washington and Israel must be internally consistent, supporting rather than undercutting U.S. diplomacy, sanctions, and military signaling. The United States and Israel do not have to say the same things -- rather, aligning messaging means that public comments should not undermine common objectives. And the best way for the Obama administration to influence Israel and Congress is by more effectively messaging Iran. Assertions that all options are on the table have no weight when military officials undercut them via detailed public critiques of the military option, and when U.S. red lines are tied to an Iranian decision to weaponize, which Washington might not be able to discern until it is too late.

Finally, regardless of any private understandings the two leaders reach on Monday, Washington should continue to emphasize one idea in public: while the United States and Israel share the same objective regarding Iran and the same preference for a diplomatic solution, Israel ultimately makes its own decisions about its own security. Such an approach would further ratchet up pressure on Tehran, turning the all-too-visible differences in U.S. and Israeli policy over military action into a factor that advances common U.S. and Israeli policy objectives. As Vice President Biden's national security advisor Antony Blinken put it in a speech this week, "Israel has to make its own decisions. We are not in the business of telling our allies and partners what to do when it comes to their own national security."

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