

Israel's Closing Window to Strike Iran

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

Nov 22, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[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.



Brief Analysis

Although Israel is in favor of economic and diplomatic sanctions against Iran, its calculus is also based on how much time is left for military strikes to be effective.

In a revealing interview with CNN last weekend, Israeli defense minister Ehud Barak hinted that Israel and the world may reach the limit of their capacity to effectively strike Iran's nuclear facilities within as little as six months. His comments suggest that unless additional international sanctions deter Tehran's nuclear efforts, Israel is increasingly likely to opt for a military option while it still can.

New Statements Reflect Longstanding Concerns

Israel has repeatedly warned of the need to halt the Iranian nuclear program -- whether by sanctions or a military strike -- in light of its pace and the quantity of enriched uranium it has produced. Yet Barak's statements mark the first time an Israeli official has made clear that the ability to target the program may be limited by technical capacity, firmly indicating that the window for a military option may be closing.

Whether or not Iran is able to produce a nuclear weapon in the coming years, Barak argued, the regime's efforts to disperse and fortify its facilities mean that attempted strikes against them are unlikely to have the desired impact after next year. As he explained, "It's true that it won't take three years -- probably three quarters [of a year] -- before no one can do anything practically about it because the Iranians are gradually, deliberately entering into what I call a zone of immunity, by widening the redundancy of their plan, making it spread over many more sites." When pointedly asked about the date at which a strike becomes impossible, he replied, "I cannot tell you for sure, nor can I predict whether it's two quarters or three quarters [of a year]. But it's not two or three years." Yet he refused to answer direct questions about an Israeli strike, insisting that such a subject should not be discussed on television.

Barak has repeatedly made clear in the past that inaction now guarantees inaction later, since a nuclear Iran would be as untouchable as nuclear North Korea is today. From this perspective, a nuclear Iran would profoundly change

the balance of power in the Middle East, intimidating moderate forces and unleashing a regional arms race that could even proliferate nuclear technology to nonstate actors.

If Barak is to be believed, little time remains for sanctions to have the necessary effect. Indeed, the potency and timing of new sanctions are inversely related to the probability of an Israeli military strike. Israel will presumably try to determine whether the latest sanctions are likely to succeed before it loses its ability to attack. And if the window for a strike will close by next fall, waiting until late 2012 to impose even tougher sanctions would already be too late for Israel.

Although there is wide agreement in Israeli decisionmaking circles that sanctions are preferable to a military strike, and that they are better led by the United States in its capacity as a superpower, many Israelis also fear that their allies will eventually abandon them on this issue. And their fears are reinforced when U.S. officials such as Defense Secretary Leon Panetta comment on the inadvisability of a strike. These comments may therefore have the opposite effect than intended, convincing Israel that no one will come to its aid and that it has no other choice but to attack.

Impact of the IAEA Report

If Israel does attack Iranian nuclear facilities in 2012, the turning point in its decisionmaking may have already occurred earlier this month. On November 8, the International Atomic Energy Agency's Board of Governors endorsed a report citing "credible" information "that Iran has carried out...activities that are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device." Notably, this was the board's first meeting since the discovery that Iran's Qods Force had plotted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador on American soil.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Barak likely sparked the latest policy debate in Israel to see whether the assassination plot and the expectedly dramatic IAEA report would provide the political leverage needed to tighten sanctions. Both men believe a strike may be necessary -- although they agree with the rest of the cabinet that sanctions are preferable, they are more skeptical that the international community will muster the political will to pass sufficiently robust sanctions before an attack becomes technically impossible.

This belief is not unfounded. Despite the strong evidence in the latest report, the IAEA deferred action for now, perhaps burying its prospects to do so in the foreseeable future. And European officials have stated that the quantum leap taken in the new report does not augur other such leaps in the near term -- as in the past, the IAEA report slated for next spring is likely to be more incremental, in part because Iran's concealment of the bulk of its nuclear program greatly impedes the agency's efforts to regularly document its progress. Furthermore, the Qods Force will probably not be clumsy enough to allow future assassination efforts to be exposed, so the unique pressure generated by that development may have been a one-time affair.

Israelis may therefore interpret the latest signs of hesitation -- namely, the U.S. and IAEA failure to fully sanction the Central Bank of Iran -- to mean that the clock has virtually run out. If so, this would break the deadlock among the Israeli political and military elite over whether sanctions obviate the need for military action. Sanctioning the Central Bank would have prohibited Iran from engaging in dollar-denominated transactions of any kind. Yet the Obama administration fears that such a move would rattle oil markets and already-fragile economies. U.S. officials have also said in the past that there is more time to stop Iran, whether out of trust in America's greater military capacity or a belief that sanctions will ultimately force Tehran to back down. Indeed, in her announcement Monday of new U.S., British, and Canadian sanctions against aspects of the Iranian petrochemical and financial sectors, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "these measures represent a significant ratcheting up of pressure on Iran, its sources of income, and its illegal activities."

In the meantime, vociferous debate will likely continue in the Israeli cabinet regarding the utility of military action. Apart from Israel's technical capacity, other points of contention include the extent to which a strike would actually

set back the Iranian program, as well as potential regional consequences. In a speech this spring, former Mossad chief Meir Dagan argued against the move, hinting that there are other means of stopping Iran. He may have been alluding to the Stuxnet computer worm that infected centrifuges in Iran's Natanz plant in 2010, or the numerous deaths and disappearances among Iran's leading nuclear scientists -- both of which Israel is suspected of having a hand in.

Lesson from Osiraq?

Samuel Lewis, the U.S. ambassador to Israel during the latter's 1981 attack on the Osiraq nuclear reactor in Iraq, once suggested that Washington misread Israeli intentions at the time. Israeli officials had been very vocal in their concerns about the site in closed-door meetings with the United States, but they dropped the issue in the months leading up to the strike. Washington therefore assumed that Israel had lost interest, when in fact preparations for the attack were entering their final stage.

Today, Israeli officials remain firm advocates for international sanctions. Yet if the Osiraq model holds, a military strike may be more imminent than just a few months away if and when Barak and his colleagues cease giving interviews on the subject.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. ❖

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