

## The U.S. and Israel:

### Same View of Threat, Different View on Force

Aug 20, 2010



Articles & Testimony

**P**atrick Clawson participated in an online forum sponsored by TheAtlantic.com discussing Atlantic magazine's September [cover story](#) (<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/09/the-point-of-no-return/8186>) by Jeffrey Goldberg outlining the prospects and implications of an Israeli strike against Iran. Read contributions by all forum participants [here \(http://www.theatlantic.com/debates/israel-iran/\)](http://www.theatlantic.com/debates/israel-iran/).

Over the last year, statements about the Iranian nuclear issue from Israel's leadership have emphasized how serious the problem is, rather than how immediately it will come to a boil. This is quite a shift from 2005, when -- during a visit to President George W. Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas -- Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stressed that, the moment Iran mastered uranium-enrichment technology, we would be past the point of no return. Yet meanwhile, Bush was hearing from his intelligence community that we had time; from his military leaders, that the United States should not be distracted from Iraq and Afghanistan; from his diplomats, that Europe and the Security Council were engaged with the issue; and from his political advisors, that Americans did not trust the administration about weapons of mass destruction in countries whose names start with the letters I-R-A.

While Jeffrey Goldberg emphasizes Israeli uncertainty about Obama, I would date deep Israeli fears regarding America's Iran policy to the Bush-era -- and the profound differences over timelines that we saw back then between Washington and Jerusalem. Jeff nicely captures how Bush did not, himself, share the Israeli leadership's urgent, "hair on fire" understanding of the risk that Iran posed. This was of course a problem for Jerusalem -- and one [that] got much worse after the December 2007 release of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). The cynical view among many in the Middle East was that Washington and Tehran had concluded what was, in effect, a deal: the United States was signaling that it would postpone action on the nuclear file, while Iran was signaling that it would dial back its support for Iraqi insurgents. In other words, U.S.-Israeli tensions on the Iranian nuclear issue are not new to the Obama era. They are rather based on much more longstanding differences of evaluation, both on Iran's progress and on what can be done about it.

Now, it appears that Washington and Jerusalem see eye-to-eye in their assessment of where Iran stands and how quickly it is moving forward. Their common view is the product of an extraordinarily close consultation among their respective intelligence, military, and political leaders. And the degree of their consensus is an important confidence-builder in Israel. The Bush administration's handling of the 2007 NIE -- releasing a summary with no advance notice to allies and no explanation about what the report meant for U.S. policy -- was a textbook example of how to scare the Israelis. What a contrast to the Obama administration's efforts to ensure that the Israelis are well informed on U.S. views and the direction of U.S. policy.

If the current intelligence consensus is correct that Iran's "nuclear clock" has slowed, there are many grounds for optimism. The country's all-but-stopped "democracy clock" may start racing ahead again, as it did in 2009. But the Obama administration makes a different argument about why time is on our side: The President's offer to engage Iran has significantly disrupted the perception that the barrier to progress is Washington rather than Tehran; the United States has had great success building international consensus for stronger pressure; and tighter sanctions are having a noticeable impact on Iran's economy.

If the apparent slow-down is illusory, or is reversed, then we will rapidly find ourselves in the world Goldberg describes. But in that event, Jeff would still have captured only one of two key reasons for Israeli-American disagreements about the use of force -- namely, the differing threat perception. The other factor, arguably as important, is the differing perception about military force. Americans tend to like and embrace the Powell Doctrine: the overwhelming use of force to achieve decisive results. The view of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) is encapsulated in the unfortunate expression "mow the grass": you cannot stop the grass from growing, you will have to mow it repeatedly, but each mowing brings a temporary respite. For the IDF, the December 2008-January 2009 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza was a success because it brought many months of relative quiet, whereas U.S. commentators assessed it as a failure because it did not achieve what they assumed was Israel's real goal: destroying Hamas. When Americans say to Israelis that attacking Iran's nuclear facilities will only set Iran back temporarily, Israelis respond that this is all they ever expect from the use of military force -- and that this is good enough.

Patrick Clawson is the deputy director for research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He also directs the [Iran Security Initiative](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=6&newActiveSubNav=Iran%20Security%20Initiative&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D6&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=6&newActiveSubNav=Iran%20Security%20Initiative&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D6&newActiveNav=researchPrograms>), a sector of the Institute aimed at fostering debate, dialogue, and critical analysis on Iran. Clawson has worked as a senior economist at the International Monetary Fund and as a senior research professor at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. ❖

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