

U.S.-Israeli Dialogue on Iran's Nuclear Program

by [Chuck Freilich \(/experts/chuck-freilich\)](/experts/chuck-freilich)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Chuck Freilich \(/experts/chuck-freilich\)](/experts/chuck-freilich)

Chuck Freilich is a senior fellow in the Belfer Center's International Security Program and a former Israeli deputy national security advisor.



Brief Analysis

On December 4, 2007, Chuck Freilich and Geoffrey Kemp addressed a Washington Institute Policy Forum marking the release of Mr. Freilich's new Institute paper [Speaking about the Unspeakable: U.S.-Israeli Dialogue on Iran's Nuclear Program \(www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=284\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=284). The author, the Institute's 2007 Ira Weiner fellow, teaches at Tel Aviv and Harvard Universities; previously, he served as Israel's deputy national security advisor for foreign affairs and as a senior analyst at Israel's Ministry of Defense. Mr. Kemp, director of regional strategic programs at the Nixon Center, served with the National Security Council during the Reagan administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

CHUCK FREILICH

The recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) is an earthquake with overwhelming strategic importance for both the United States and Israel. It is not clear whether the two countries discussed the NIE assessments, and any future consultation faces a fundamental asymmetry in how each country approaches the issue of a nuclear Iran.

For Israelis, it has become a mantra that Iran represents a threat to their country's very existence. For the United States, Iran is a major national security interest and an important focus of global counterterrorism and nonproliferation efforts, but by no means constitutes a threat to America's existence. This asymmetry colors U.S. and Israeli perceptions of both the Iranian threat and the timing and means of addressing it. Israel is focused solely on the nuclear issue and would be willing to accept the easing of international pressure on Iran if that threat were eliminated. For the United States, however, the nuclear issue is one of a number of ongoing issues regarding Iran.

The two nations face many obstacles in openly discussing Iran's nuclear program and its threat to Israel's existence. Unfortunately, the failure to communicate could lead to miscalculations, with one side possibly choosing an option that is in the best interests of neither country. That said, Israel and the United States face no particular problems discussing preventive diplomacy and sanctions. Although both agree on this strategy, Israel would like the United States to draw a red line for the diplomatic approach, after which point it would pursue other options.

If the diplomatic approach proves fruitless, considerations will turn to preventive military action. It would be extremely difficult for Israel and the United States to discuss this option. Whether or not Israel has the operational capability to strike Iran, it would be hesitant to divulge its military secrets to the United States. If it does have the

capability, then raising the possibility of a strike may risk an American veto. Moreover, Israel may be less likely to discuss its own potentially effective military options out of fear that this would remove pressure from the United States and the international community to resolve the problem multilaterally. After all, given the greater American capability to conduct a successful operation, Israel would prefer that the United States carry out any strike.

For its part, Washington may also be averse to discussing military options with Israel for several reasons. First, it would not be wise for the United States to make any far-reaching commitments. Second, Washington fears that Israel might interpret U.S. willingness to discuss military options as legitimization of such action.

In addition to the military option, both sides would find it difficult to discuss the presumable alternative option: living with a nuclear Iran. The Israelis would be more hesitant than the United States to engage in such a discussion, given their adamant opposition to the nuclear program's existence. Moreover, Israel may fear that it would be signaling its willingness to forgo military options by agreeing to discuss the issue, and that the United States would then feel freer to explore various means to contain and deter the threat.

GEOFFREY KEMP

The new NIE does not detract from the basic argument that Iran is on track to produce nuclear weapons if it should decide to do so. In a May 2005 report on the same subject, intelligence experts were confident that Iran was determined to develop a nuclear weapon. But eighteen months later, they have judged, again with high confidence, that Iran halted its weapons program in 2003. This dramatic change in judgment reflects the unreliability of this sort of intelligence. Whether or not the newest report is accurate, the fact that Iran was attempting to make a bomb is a violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Regardless of these facts, the NIE will change political dynamics in the United States. Unfortunately, it will reduce the American sense of urgency and, conversely, create more urgency on the Israeli side. There is a grave risk that the United States and Israel may develop different views on the timeline for action. The U.S.-Israeli dialogue should focus more urgently on what red lines can be established before the use of force would be considered.

Israel has correctly understood that Iran's nuclear program is not only an Israeli problem, but also a global problem that needs to be dealt with internationally. The idea of unilateral Israeli military action is not realistic at the moment because the backlash would be severe, complicating U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and endangering assets all around the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the Iranian government has the ability to retaliate against Israel by using Hizballah and possibly Hamas.

Therefore, if the military option is necessary, U.S.-led action is preferable. The question then becomes which military options are best. Unfortunately, there is no way to completely destroy Iran's nuclear capability and know-how. All a military strike would do is set back the enrichment program and destroy various other targets. But would this buy enough time to assuage U.S. fears and allow for political change to occur within Iran?

Nuclear installations are not the only potential targets. Iran is highly dependent on its energy exports, which are extremely vulnerable to attack. The fallout from this option would cause a dramatic rise in the price of oil, however, and it is unlikely to get much support. Furthermore, such attacks could lead to full-scale war with Iran.

At the same time, the United States and Israel should consider how living with a nuclear Iran would change their relationship. Israel's sense of isolation and the threat of an Iranian bomb would seriously affect the U.S.-Israeli security partnership. Indeed, Washington needs to think about how it would respond to the threat that a nuclear Iran would pose to the security of the entire region. In the event Iran produces nuclear weapons, its Gulf neighbors would fear for their security, and the United States would have to factor in their needs toward the creation of an overarching security umbrella.

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