



If the United States Attacks Iran: Possible Consequences for Israel

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Differences of Opinion Between Israel and the United States on Iran

In the past month, it has looked as if the Israeli-American dialogue on Iran and its nuclear activity has reached an impasse. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has publicly demanded that the administration translate into practice its commitments to prevent Iran from going nuclear. In a concrete way, he has demanded that the administration set out “red lines” that will lead to U.S. military action if Iran crosses them. Administration officials have stated publicly that they are not happy with this demand, and that the United States does not believe it has an interest in limiting its room to maneuver by defining red lines vis-a-vis Iran.

Moreover, the U.S. administration believes that the current situation still allows room for diplomatic negotiations with Iran about Iranian nuclear activity. During a public quarrel with the administration, Netanyahu emphasized his position that if Iran knows that there is no red line; it will continue to work without hindrance toward acquiring a nuclear weapon. “The world,” Netanyahu continued, “tells Israel ‘wait, there’s still time.’ And I say, ‘Wait for what? Wait until when?’ Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don’t have a moral right to place a red light before Israel” [1].

Ultimately, after it became apparent that the administration was not prepared to publicly define a red line, the prime minister explained the nature of the red line in the context of Iranian nuclear activity from the podium of the UN General Assembly. Using a drawing to explain his positions regarding the requested red line, he made it difficult for the administration to refrain from its realization, if and when it would be crossed by the Iranians. During his visit to the United States and after the visit as well, an intensive dialogue between Israel and the United States was continuing. It appears that this dialogue has brought Israeli and American positions on the Iranian issue a good deal closer.

The increasingly heated U.S. election campaign is enhancing the prime minister’s power vis-a-vis the U.S. administration. His demand that the Obama administration states its red lines for Iran, which, if crossed, will lead to a U.S. attack, was sympathetically received by large swathes of the American public. Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has repeatedly attacked the president for

his weak policy on Iran and for “throwing Israel under the bus.” The president cannot ignore these criticisms, especially when his position in the polls is far from granting him certain victory in the elections. He must assume that the Iranian issue could harm his chances of winning the election, even if foreign policy issues are not receiving a great deal of attention in the current U.S. election campaign [2].

From the Iranians’ point of view the period until the U.S. elections is very convenient. They are well aware of the president’s desire to avoid, to the extent possible, conflicts that are liable to harm his chances of reelection. They also know well that the U.S. administration will make every effort to prevent Israel from carrying out an attack on Iran during this time. The president’s main fears are that such an attack would, most probably, lead to the following main consequences: a. Harm the export of Iranian oil; b. lead to a dramatic increase in the price of oil; c. Bring about the outbreak of a regional war; d. Harm U.S. bases and forces in the area; E. lead to a widespread terrorist operations against U.S. targets. Each of these events is likely to drag the United States into taking steps that ultimately will lead it into a military conflict with Iran. Against this backdrop, we can perhaps understand Iran’s assessment that at this period of time it should not fear an American attack. Thus, it has accelerated its efforts regarding the buildup of its nuclear project.

This Iranian situation assessment appears reasonable under the current circumstances. However, history teaches us that in many cases, assessments that appeared entirely plausible were proven wrong. In the Iranian context, too, we must take into account the possibility that the current assessments will be proven incorrect in the face of unanticipated events. If it turns out that Iran is intensifying its nuclear operations while exploiting the period of immunity until the elections, the U.S. administration may be unable to avoid the conclusion that military action against Iran is required. Deterioration in the president’s position in the polls is liable to act as a catalyst for such an action. The president may make an assessment that a successful military action in Iran would restore his leadership position, eliminate the criticism of his weakness, and encourage many Jewish and conservative voters to vote for him.

Consequences for Israel

From Israel’s point of view, the main question is what would be the possible consequences of such a move? Ostensibly, this would be a very positive step for Israel. Over the years, Israeli leaders have repeatedly claimed that Iranian nuclear activity constitutes a threat not only to Israel, but to the entire world, and especially to European states and U.S. allies in the Middle East. Israel claims that if the United States allows Iran to achieve nuclear capability, processes will take place that severely harm U.S. national interests. First and foremost, it will almost certainly lead to proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. In addition, the danger to regional stability will increase significantly, with all the attendant ramifications. Furthermore, Iranian possession of nuclear weapons will significantly increase Iran’s capabilities in the Middle East, and it will therefore cause great harm to the position of U.S. allies in the region, especially Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan, and Lebanon.

From almost every point of view, Israel’s interest is for the

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United States to lead the attack on Iran. It can be assumed that if the United States attacks Iran, it can bring about the almost complete destruction, perhaps even the complete destruction, of Iran's nuclear facilities. This would certainly be a welcome result from the point of view of Israel, which sees the Iranian nuclear project as a real threat to its very existence.

Moreover, a U.S. attack on Iran would greatly enhance Israel's image as a country with great influence in Washington. This image is the reason why many states aspire to associate themselves with Israel and ask it to use its influence to help them in the U.S. capital. An attack by the United States would greatly enhance this image, which would significantly strengthen Israel's standing in various countries around the world.

However, a U.S. attack is liable to have not only these positive consequences, but also negative consequences for Israel.

First and foremost, Israel must assume that a U.S. attack on Iran would harm its deterrent image. The State of Israel's security doctrine since its founding has been that Israel must be prepared to respond by itself to any threat against it, without direct aid from any large power. Israel has repeatedly made clear, especially to the U.S. administration, that all it wants is to receive the tools that would allow it to defend itself on its own, and that it has no desire for the forces of any large power to come to its assistance.

The political campaign that has been taking place in the past year, which is intended to exert heavy pressure on the United States to act against Iran, is eroding the validity of this doctrine to some extent. Even if Israel can claim, and with great justification from its point of view, that it has the ability to defend itself on its own, and that it has a credible and effective military option against Iran, it cannot escape the image of a small country pleading for its life and asking a superpower, the United States, to remove an existential threat. This is a very undesirable consequence from Israel's point of view.

Moreover, a U.S. attack on Iran would greatly strengthen those in the government and the academy in the United States who have been claiming for some time that Israel's power and influence on U.S. policy is out of all proportion, and that this has very negative

consequences for the United States. They argue that Israeli and Jewish pressure forces the government to take steps that are not necessarily in the U.S. national interest. Thus, for example, they claim that U.S. entry into the war against Iraq stemmed largely from capitulation to continuing pressure on the United States by Israel and Jewish groups [3].

If the United States decides to attack Iran, these groups will claim that once again, their position has been proven correct. Iran, they will almost certainly claim, is not a direct threat to the United States, and there is no reason that U.S. soldiers should pay with their lives in order to realize the interests of another state, even if it is considered a friendly state and has had special relations with the United States for years. Israel and the international community will have a hard time opposing this claim. The strength of this claim will presumably grow if the U.S. attack leads to retaliatory measures by Iran that force the United States to enter into a comprehensive military campaign. This campaign, we can assume, would have a dramatic impact on the U.S. economy, which is in critical condition in any case.

Ultimately, Israel must assume that if the United States decides on a military attack on Iran, it is likely to demand something from Israel in return, perhaps even before the attack, and perhaps after. The United States could argue that at a time when it is prepared to endanger its interests and its soldiers in a campaign that is mainly intended to protect Israel, it is entitled to expect that Israel will also take risks that are supposed to serve the national interests of the United States. We can assume that most of the demands made of Israel would be geared toward renewing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and a real willingness on Israel's part to meet the Palestinians halfway with a variety of gestures. The right-wing government headed by Netanyahu would find it difficult to refuse such a demand by the United States after a U.S. attack on Iran.


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