



INSS Insight No. 317, February 29, 2012

The US on an Israeli Military Strike against Iran: A Change in Position?

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In a February 5, 2012 interview with NBC, President Obama was asked if Israel intends to attack Iran. The President answered that he doesn't think Israel has decided what it should do about Iran. The President clarified that Israel, like America, thinks that Iran must stop its nuclear development program. Israel, stated the President, is "rightly very concerned" about Iran's nuclear program. The United States is "working in lockstep" with Israel in order to prevent the nuclearization of Iran.

Only a few days earlier, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta was quoted as saying that there is a "strong likelihood" that Israel would attack Iran between April and June of this year, before Iran enters what Israel calls the "zone of immunity" in its efforts to attain nuclear capabilities. Later, Secretary Panetta clarified that Israel is worried that "very soon" Iran would be able to store enough enriched uranium deep underground to make a nuclear bomb. Should Iran reach that stage, only the US would be able to stop further development of the Iranian nuclear program.

The importance of these remarks lies not only in what was said, but also, and perhaps primarily, in what was not said. What is remarkable about the statements by both officials was the lack of any real attempt to dissuade Israel from taking independent action against Iran. Officials as experienced as these two are expected to know that these formulations are likely to be understood in Israel as a certain loosening of the reins on Israel should it decide to attack Iran, even if the statements were not intended as such.

These statements reflect a different attitude, in terms of phrasing and general tone, than the one characterizing American official pronouncements in recent months. Secretary Panetta's speech at the Saban Forum in December 2011, for example, included explicit expressions of American opposition to Israeli action in Iran. The Secretary of Defense made a point of listing the risks entailed by a military attack against Iran, as seen by the US. He also stressed the need for Israel to act in coordination with the US. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, made similar sentiments, expressing clear reservations about Israeli action against Iran during his visit to Israel in mid-January 2012.

Nonetheless it is important to stress that even in these statements there was no implied threat against Israel should it – despite American wishes – decide to attack Iran. The history of relations between Israel and the US is replete with incidents in which the administration knew very well how to caution Israel about punitive steps should it refuse to comply with American demands. Even in the dialogue between the Obama administration and Israel about the political process and the freeze on settlements, there were hints, both implicit and explicit, about the possibility of punitive measures should Israel refuse to comply with American demands. In this current situation, however, the administration has not emphasized to Israel that ignoring the administration's demands on the Iranian problem would be accompanied by a certain price tag.

It is difficult to answer definitively whether these recent statements are the tip of an iceberg indicating a possible change in the administration's stance regarding an Israeli military action against Iran. As opposed to the earlier statements, a more reserved tone was sounded by Gen. Dempsey on February 18, 2012. He stressed the ramifications on regional stability that such an action would have. Still, he found it sufficient to say that “at this point” attacking Iran would not be “prudent.” Dempsey reemphasized the timing element in a meeting with the Senate Budget Committee, when he made it clear that he did not advise Israel against striking Iran's nuclear facilities. “We've had a conversation with them about time, the issue of time,” he said.

If, in fact, some change is emerging in the Obama administration's attitude towards possible Israeli action against Iran, it almost certainly stems from an assessment about the effectiveness of the political-economic-clandestine approach to the Iranian problem. It may well be that on this issue, the administration is operating on two parallel levels: in the messages transmitted to Israel, it is called on to give the political-economic action against Iran a chance, based on the hope that it will actually cause Iran to cease its nuclear efforts. At the same time, the Obama administration may be sensing that the “basket of punitive measures” is not stopping – or even slowing down – Iran's efforts to attain a nuclear capability. Moreover, the Obama administration cannot overlook the fact that at this moment the Iranian regime is heightening its rhetoric in order to project self-confidence in the face of the threats against it.

Within the American administration there are serious concerns about the results of an American military attack against Iran. Administration representatives have often spoken about these worries. In the same NBC interview, President Obama himself made it clear that a military attack in the Persian Gulf would be “disruptive.” It is liable to increase oil prices dramatically, generate retaliations against American forces in Afghanistan, lead to attacks against US allies in the region, and more. All this might occur at a time when the Middle East is in the midst of upheavals that are changing the region in unprecedented fashion. The administration almost certainly fears that a military action would increase

hostility against the US in Islamic countries and end President Obama's efforts to spearhead some reconciliation between the US and the Arab states.

The administration's fears about an Iranian response to American military action were given prominent expression in its extraordinary attempts to clear itself of suspicion regarding the assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist Prof. Mustafa Ahmadi Roshan. The White House spokesperson, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense all rallied to a concerted effort to remove any suspicion about the administration's involvement in the incident.

Under current circumstances, the American administration continues to stress that there is a reasonable chance that the policy of economic sanctions, political isolation, and covert activity will ultimately lead Iran to compromise on its nuclear development and agree to at least some of the West's demands on the issue. Nevertheless, the administration is also certainly considering the possibility that the current actions against Iran will not deter it, despite the difficulties involved. Under such circumstances, the administration would have to decide whether to tolerate a nuclear Iran or initiate military action against it. The administration is well aware of the risks inherent in the nuclearization of Iran, but it is also well aware of the risks of an American military action.

Also on the table is the possibility of an Israeli military strike. The current stated position of the administration opposes this option. Statements made by administration officials are clear evidence of the administration's unwillingness to be viewed as the one giving Israel even a tacit green light to attack Iran. Nevertheless, even now, the administration's conduct in this context, especially the lack of threats against Israel should it ignore US entreaties to desist from attacking Iran, cannot but project the lack of a decisive stance. In the foreseeable future and the closer the administration approaches the moment of truth with regard to Iran, it may very well be – though there is no certainty here – that the administration will consider changing its current negative attitude regarding an Israeli military action against Iran.

