



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Position Paper

Risk Assessment Delays Israeli Strike on Iran

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

2 April 2012



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies-en@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/>

Tensions surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme have risen again, but the main determinants of the issue remain largely the same as they had previously been. As before, these determinants will most likely reduce the chances of a war being waged against Iran. New factors – particularly the upcoming elections in the United States – will act as additional restraints preventing the launch of military operations against Iran in 2012.

War: the Dilemma of Optimal Timing

Belligerent threats against Iran began to increase from the beginning of this year against a backdrop of conflicting reports on the Iranian nuclear programme. The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an agency of the United Nations (UN), issued a report in November 2011 which raised suspicions about the possibility that Iranian nuclear programme sites are being used for military purposes. Around the same time, US government sources said Iran was far from obtaining a nuclear weapon and that economic sanctions against Iran had been effective. Meanwhile, there was an escalation in Israeli threats against Iran, along with reports that the Zionist state had obtained weaponry capable of penetrating several metres of concrete, making capable of striking fortified underground sites.

The Israeli press was quick to publish different scenarios for an Israeli air strike on Iran. A debate raged between Israeli generals, retired officials and military experts about Israel's ability to carry out such an attack and its potential usefulness in undermining or disrupting the Iranian nuclear programme. The Iranians, for their part, were quick to signal their intention to close the Strait of Hormuz in the event of an Israeli or U.S. strike and stressed that Israeli threats would not discourage them from pursuing their nuclear ambitions.

A January 2012 visit to Tel Aviv by General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S. military, contributed to the exchange of belligerent threats. The visit made it clear that the Iranian nuclear programme had become the subject of discussion between the U.S. and Israel at the highest military levels. At a U.S. Congressional hearing on 28 February 2012, Dempsey confirmed that his talks with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Israeli Chief of Staff Benny Gantz had dealt with the Iranian nuclear programme. He said he had not asked the Israelis to refrain from attacking Iran and that the bilateral discussions had focused on the issue of timing.

In this round of escalation, expectations for war have centred on two key issues. The first is that the best timing for an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear facilities would be the spring. Winter would be unsuitable because the weather may affect the capabilities of long-range missiles, while summer was regarded as unsuitable because of U.S. presidential elections. More importantly, argued the advocates of war, Iran was approaching the point at which it may be immune to a military strike, whether for techno-military reasons or because it's nuclear programme would have reached a point at which it would be almost impossible to dismantle.

The second key issue was that the Israeli leadership had to find a solution to Washington's position towards the attack, meaning that they had to reach an agreement with the U.S. administration on whether Israel would be bound to give advance notice of such an attack to the U.S. Indeed, when information was leaked from the Israeli prime minister's office to the effect that Israel did not feel obliged to give such advance notice to the U.S., the Obama administration did not seem at all alarmed. This seeming American indifference may stem from a U.S. preference to be relieved complicity in a war fraught with the potential for rapid escalation.

The United States: A Necessary Ally

The fact of the matter, however, is that the Israelis cannot undertake an effective strike against the Iranian nuclear programme without U.S. support – at any time. Iran's

nuclear programme is distributed over several sites in the north and south of the country, mostly underground and some greatly fortified. The Israelis would therefore need a large number of aircraft to carry out the attack, and these planes will need to be refuelled in the air from a number of fuel carriers. It is certain that Israel does not have the required number of airborne fuel carriers, and there is reasonable doubt as to whether it has the quantity of appropriate weapons successfully to carry out the attack. In addition, there will be complications relating to the flight routes between Israel and Iran which, whether over Jordan and Iraq or over Turkey, cannot be assumed to be completely safe or secure.

This is what makes the U.S. position so crucial, and not only in relation to it being given advance notice.

The need for joint action between the Israeli and U.S. administrations was made clear in a meeting which took place earlier this month between the two sides. In a speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on Sunday, 4 March 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama pledged to use the full force of the U.S. to deter Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. 'I do not have a policy of containment,' he asserted, 'I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.' Obama said he would not hesitate to use force to defend the interests of the United States and that Tehran was 'isolated, its leadership divided and under pressure' and that 'an opportunity still remains for diplomacy backed by pressure to succeed'. In his speech, which seemed entirely devoted to reassuring Israel and its supporters in Washington, the American president said a nuclear Iran was 'completely counter to Israel's security interests. But it is also counter to the national security interests of the United States.' He added:

The United States and Israel both assess that Iran does not yet have a nuclear weapon, and we are exceedingly vigilant in monitoring their program... Both Israel and the United States have an interest in seeing this challenge resolved diplomatically... [but] when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say. That includes all elements of American power: a political effort aimed at isolating Iran, a diplomatic effort to sustain our coalition and ensure that the Iranian program is monitored, an economic effort that imposes crippling sanctions and, yes, a military effort to be prepared for any contingency.

Obama's AIPAC speech was a prelude to his meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu the next day, 5 March. Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth reported that the meeting between the two leaders was very cold as they were not able to bridge the divide between their positions.

The temperature of the meeting was unimportant, especially given that the personal relationship between Obama and Netanyahu is not particularly warm. What matters is that the U.S. president, as confirmed by American and Israeli reports, told Netanyahu that he did not favour an Israeli strike on Iran at the present time, and that too much discussion on the issue would not serve the Israeli position but would lead to a rise in oil prices, which would hurt the crisis-ridden world economy and would help increase Iranian oil revenues. For his part, Netanyahu asked Obama for access to a detailed timetable of U.S. actions aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capability and for detailed U.S. plans of action, including those in the diplomatic field and the schedule and impact of sanctions imposed on Iran. Netanyahu also asked that Obama provide him with plans on how the U.S. would respond if U.S. deterrence measures did not bear fruit and the form of U.S. support in the event of an Israeli military operation against Iran. In particular, he wanted to know whether the U.S. would provide support for Israel if the latter went to war with Iran.

In his speech to the AIPAC convention the day after the meeting, Netanyahu mobilised the memory of the Holocaust and the conditions that prevailed in Europe and the world in 1944 around the end of the Second World War to justify Israel's insistence on its right to military action aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear power. In reference to the difference between the American and Israeli positions, he said that despite the close

alliance between the U.S. and Israel, the latter should not be deprived of its right to defend itself against the Iranian threat. Moreover, the Israeli prime minister emphasised his belief that history had shown that those who claimed that a military strike on the Iranian nuclear programme would have more costs than benefits were wrong, and were putting the existence of the Jewish people at risk.

Israeli newspaper *Maariv* noted on 8 March 2012 that an agreement had been reached between Netanyahu and Obama in which Israel had committed not to strike at Iranian installations this year. In return, the United States, after its presidential election in November 2012, would provide Israel with the means to carry out such an attack, including advanced U.S. bombs capable of striking the underground Iranian bunkers as well as aircraft to supply fuel to airborne Israeli warplanes.

Necessary Postponement of a War Fraught with Risks

Netanyahu is the first head of an Israeli government not to have waged a major war or to have been the cause for igniting one. Despite his loud voice and radical language, he is a cautious leader. He knows that an Israeli strike against Iran cannot be carried out without U.S. support before, during and after the attack.

The current U.S. administration does not want a war in the Middle East at this moment. War as it is being waged in Afghanistan has proved to be a cemetery for its architects. The trajectory and end point of what can start as an Israeli air strike against Iran is an unknown factor. Currently, the U.S. administration's main concern is the re-election of the president. Because the U.S. economy has been slow to emerge from the financial-economic crisis that has loomed over both sides of the Atlantic since 2008, a military escalation in the Middle East could double the price of oil – which is already relatively high – and choke the engines of economic recovery, further risking Obama's goal of returning to the White House.

What is equally important is that the United States faces a series of challenges at the level of its global strategy – particularly its policy in the Arab-Islamic east. While the Obama administration announced that the Pacific Basin will top its global priorities list, it carried out a withdrawal from Iraq, began the process of altering the nature of its presence in Afghanistan, and has not taken firm positions on the revolutions across the Arab world and the frustrated uprising in Syria. A war on Iran may further complicate the situation in the region as a whole. Moreover, Washington views the Arab revolutions, and particularly the Syrian uprising, as a political disaster for Iran and thus regards an Israeli strike on Iran at this juncture as possibly restoring some sympathy towards the regime in Tehran.

For all these reasons, it is likely that the U.S. administration will prefer to make a deal with the Israelis that will meet some or most of their demands in exchange for a postponement of military action, especially if there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that Iran is still relatively far from strategic immunity. The elements of the deal may or may not resemble what was published by the Israeli press. What is certain, however, is that Netanyahu is not yet ready for war, and that he used the threat of military escalation to blackmail the Americans – who clearly do not want to see the eruption of a Middle East war at least until the end of the year.

Both Israel and the U.S. do, however, agree that economic and financial sanctions – along with efforts to force Russian diplomatic pressure on Iran – do not constitute a coherent strategy to deal with the Iranian nuclear programme. If Iran is planning to develop a nuclear weapon, or the technology to manufacture such a weapon, sanctions will not be sufficient to break Iranian determination. This is not only because there is no precedent that proves the effectiveness of sanctions in bringing about change in the strategic policies of states, but also because the resources of Iran and countries that are friendly with the Tehran regime or that oppose the sanctions for other reasons (whether or not they have borders with Iran) render the policy of sanctions effectively meaningless.

Potential Scenarios

Ultimately, Israeli fear of the Iranian nuclear programme's impact on the balance of power and the possibility of nuclear arms proliferation in the region will move in the direction of war. What is required to avoid war is a comprehensive U.S.-Iran agreement – for which the current conditions do not provide a favourable climate. There is low probability of an Israeli air strike against Iranian installations before the US presidential elections. This is so because an Israeli strike carried out without full U.S. support will be limited, and its impact on the Iranian nuclear programme will be less than the expected risk of a rapidly escalating conflict. The most likely scenario is that the Israelis will wait until Washington is more willing to cooperate and provide the necessary support before, during and after an Israeli strike on Iran.

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies

Copyright © 2012, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.