

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3528 | MARCH 2, 2012

The Obama–Netanyahu Summit: Time to Present a Common Front Against Iran

James Phillips

When President Obama meets Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on March 5, the Iranian nuclear issue will dominate their agenda. The two leaders have starkly different perceptions of Iran’s evolving nuclear threat and how best to confront it. Both governments have publicly aired their differences in the run-up to the meeting, with the Obama Administration warning that an Israeli preventive strike would be premature and destabilizing while Netanyahu’s government has signaled that it cannot wait much longer.

The increasingly public spats reveal a glaring lack of trust. The two leaders need to forge a common understanding of how best to defuse Iran’s ticking nuclear time bomb and present Tehran with a credible military threat to dissuade it from continuing on its current nuclear path.

Clashing Views on Iran’s Nuclear Threat. The two leaders, who reportedly have a poor personal chemistry, also have clashing worldviews. Netanyahu understandably perceives the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat to Israel and is determined to prevent another Holocaust—through military means if necessary. President Obama, who has consistently underestimated the ideologically based hostility of Iran’s Islamist dictatorship, puts more faith in diplomacy backed by sanctions. But the Obama Administration has exhibited a much weaker sense of urgency on the need to deal decisively with the growing potential threat.

While the Obama Administration came into office pledging to impose “crippling sanctions” on Iran, it delayed efforts to ratchet up sanctions until after the failure of multilateral talks with Iran on the nuclear issue. The Administration also opposed and sought to dilute several congressional efforts to escalate sanctions, including sanctions on Iran’s central bank, which the President reluctantly signed into law in December.¹

Although sanctions have imposed an increasingly steep price on Tehran, sanctions alone are unlikely

to halt Iran’s nuclear push any more than they halted North Korea’s. Only sanctions backed by the credible threat of force are likely to dissuade Tehran from continuing on its nuclear path. Iran in fact did freeze its nuclear program in 2003 after the Bush Administration presented such a credible threat by invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein when he failed to live up to his obligations to destroy his prohibited missiles and weapons of mass destruction programs. Libya’s Muammar Qadhafi also gave up his nuclear and chemical weapons program when he thought that he might be the next target.

But the Obama Administration remains committed to its failed engagement strategy and may soon resume the P5-plus-1 talks (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) with Iran on the nuclear issue. Tehran has repeatedly sabotaged these talks. The Administration continues to stress its commitment to open-ended diplomacy and abhorrence of the military option. Although White House officials have dutifully indicated that “all options are on the table,” they have gone out of their way to publicly devalue the prospects for success of a U.S. military strike.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3528>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

To make matters worse, the Secretary of Defense and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have also publicly warned against an Israeli military strike. This counterproductive behavior only reduces the chances of resolving the problem satisfactorily through diplomacy, because it reduces international leverage on Tehran. By reducing the perceived likelihood of a preventive military attack, the Obama Administration lowers Iran's perceived costs for continuing its nuclear efforts. That ultimately increases the chances of war—either to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear capability or, worse yet, after it does so.

Finding Common Ground.

Instead of pressuring Israel, the Obama Administration should focus on bringing maximum pressure to bear on Iran. Therefore, at the summit meeting on Monday, President Obama should:

- **Make every effort to present a common front against Iran.** To a large degree, the rising tensions between Washington and Jerusalem stem from deep-seated Israeli doubts that the Obama Administration will take forceful action to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear capability, not just wait for concrete proof that Iran has decided to build a nuclear weapon, which may come too late. Recent leaks that indicate that the Pentagon is drawing up contingency plans, including the possible refueling of Israeli warplanes, could strengthen pressure on Iran by increasing the credibility of

a military threat. But President Obama should convince Netanyahu that he is absolutely determined to use such options to deny Iran a nuclear capability and will resort to military force if necessary. A joint declaration publicly declaring a resolute commitment to do so would increase pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear efforts.

- **Clarify the red lines that will trigger U.S. military action against Iran.** The Administration's mantra, "Every option is on the table," has become increasingly stale and unconvincing. Israel is concerned that Iran could soon reach what Defense Minister Ehud Barak has called a "zone of immunity" in which Israel would lack the conventional military capabilities to destroy nuclear facilities in hardened underground sites. Because of its greater military capabilities, the U.S.'s window for considering such a military option is slightly wider. But Israel is unlikely to agree to forego a preventive strike unless it has ironclad guarantees that the Obama Administration will take decisive military action before it is too late.
- **Set strict conditions on any last-ditch diplomatic talks.** Netanyahu is concerned that the Obama Administration will paint itself into a corner by entering into open-ended diplomatic talks that allow Tehran to "run out the clock" while it finishes building a nuclear weapons capability. A key

issue for Monday's meeting, therefore, will be setting an acceptable time frame for conducting the P5-plus-1 talks if they are to resume with Iran. Washington should assure Israel that it has fixed a hard deadline for attaining concrete results.

- **Recognize Israel's right to take military action in anticipatory self-defense.** Instead of sniping at the idea of an Israeli preventive strike, Washington should acknowledge Israel's right to take action against what it regards as an existential threat.² This would increase the pressure on Tehran and disabuse it of any notion that it can depend on Washington to restrain Israel.

Needed: A Commitment to Mutual Problem-Solving. Given the bellicose statements of Iran's leaders calling for Israel's destruction, Iran's long history of supporting terrorism, and its growing ballistic missile capabilities—which can already target Israel—Netanyahu is understandably determined to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear capability. President Obama should make it clear that he fully shares those concerns and pledge to take strong action to prevent that from happening.

—*James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*

1. See James Phillips, "Congress Should Reject the Obama Administration's Efforts to Weaken Iran Sanctions," Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 3432, December 13, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/12/reject-efforts-to-weaken-iran-sanctions>.

2. See James Phillips and James Jay Carafano, "If Israel Attacks," Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 3487, February 6, 2012, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/02/us-policy-on-israels-potential-attack-on-iran>.