

# Bush reaffirms “all options on the table” over Iran

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For all the denials on both sides, a top-level discussion is clearly underway in the US and Israel over the pros and cons of an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. In separate press conferences on Wednesday, US President George Bush and the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, both reaffirmed that the use of military force against Iran, either directly by the US or following air strikes by Israel, remained an option.

The comments come amid a continuing stream of barely concealed threats from Israeli politicians and officials that action will be taken to ensure that Iran does not achieve a nuclear weapons capability. The Israeli air force carried out a provocative exercise last month in which 100 war planes, backed by refuelling aircraft and rescue helicopters, flew 1,500 kilometres over the Mediterranean Sea in what can only be interpreted as a practice run for striking Iranian nuclear facilities.

In response, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, warned this week: “Any action against Iran will be interpreted as the start of a war.” In a newspaper comment last week, Jafari stated that if attacked, Iran would respond by hitting Israel with long-range missile and taking action to close the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world’s traded oil passes. The commander of the US naval forces in the Persian Gulf, Vice Admiral Kevin Cosgriff, declared this week: “We will not allow Iran to close it.”

When asked on Wednesday about the threat to the Strait of Hormuz, Bush emphatically declared: “I have always said that all options are on the table.” He added that “the first option for the United States is to solve this problem diplomatically... That is why we’ve been pursuing multilateral diplomacy.” Asked if he had discouraged Israel from attacking Iran, the president said that he had made it “very clear to all parties that the first option” should be a diplomatic resolution.

The president’s remarks have been interpreted as a “no” to Israel and a commitment to a diplomatic solution to the standoff with Iran—in the short-term at least. In the longer term, however, Bush has made clear that he is prepared to launch military strikes if Iran refuses to bow to US demands.

As for diplomacy, the White House has repeatedly refused to hold direct talks with Tehran. The aim of Bush’s “diplomatic solution” has been to pressure and bully the major European and Asian powers into imposing punitive sanctions on Iran through the United Nations and unilaterally. Before any negotiations take place, Washington insists that Tehran shut down its major nuclear facilities—including its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz—which Iran has refused to do.

Iran insists that its uranium enrichment program is to provide fuel for power reactors, as is its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Bush administration has failed to demonstrate that Iran has an active weapons program. In fact, last December, a National Intelligence Estimate produced by 16 American spy agencies concluded that Tehran had ended any weapons program in 2003. Despite the finding, Bush continues to claim that Iran is actively pursuing plans for nuclear weapons.

The nuclear issue is simply one of the pretexts that the Bush administration has been preparing as a possible *casus belli* for attacking Iran. Washington also accuses Iran of arming and training anti-US insurgents attacking American troops in Iraq and of supporting “terrorist groups” such as the Lebanese-based Shiite party Hezbollah. The real reason for the continuing confrontation is that the US regards Iran as an obstacle to American ambitions to establish its strategic and economic dominance throughout the oil-rich Middle East.

An optimistic note has been sounded in the international media over the latest European Union efforts to restart

negotiations with Iran, but nothing concrete has emerged from the manoeuvring. Yesterday Tehran issued its formal response to an international package of incentives aimed at encouraging Iran to give up its sensitive nuclear programs. Tehran reportedly offered to engage in comprehensive negotiations, but has not agreed to halt its uranium enrichment.

While publicly supporting the EU efforts, the Bush administration has been engaged in close consultations with Israel over Iran. Last week, three top US military officials, including Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Mullen, visited Israel for talks with their counterparts. In his press conference on Wednesday, Mullen repeatedly stonewalled questions on the nature of the discussions, the possibility of an Israeli strike on Iran and whether the US would become embroiled. Significantly he did not flatly deny discussions of an Israeli strike on Iran had taken place.

Obviously concerned at the potential for a war, Mullen said: "I've been pretty clear before that from the United States's perspective, the United States's military perspective in particular, that opening up a third front right now would be extremely stressful on us." Mullen nevertheless added: "That doesn't mean we don't have capacity or reserve, but that would really be very challenging."

Mullen's comments point to sharp divisions in the Pentagon and the White House opened up by the potentially catastrophic consequences of a war with Iran. In his lengthy article in the *New Yorker* this week, veteran journalist Seymour Hersh noted that, according to one of his sources, "the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose chairman is Admiral Mike Mullen, were 'pushing back very hard' against White House pressure to undertake a military strike against Iran."

The American ambassador to Israel, Richard Jones, this week played down suggestions of an attack on Iran by either Israel or the US in the near future, saying: "Use of military force is a last option and Israel and the United States are cooperating on this matter." In Israel, however, the pressure building for a strike against Iran is quite tangible.

Last Sunday, former Mossad chief Shabtai Shavit told the British-based *Telegraph* that time was running out to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb. Shavit, who is still an adviser to the Israeli parliament's powerful defence and foreign affairs committee, claimed, without offering any evidence, that the "worse-case scenario" was "somewhere around a year".

The article noted that "Israeli officials believe the

diplomatic process is useless and have been pressing President Bush to launch air strikes before he leaves office on January 20 next year." Shavit said that while it would be preferable to have American support in attacking Iran, Israel would not be afraid to go it alone. "It's not a precondition, [getting] an American agreement," he said.

A *Financial Times* article entitled "Fear over Israel's threat to strike Iran" on Wednesday cited one Israel official as saying: "If you want to do it [attack Iran] you don't talk about it." Then he added rather ominously that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had "adamantly requested that we all shut up".

On Thursday, senior military figures scotched widespread suggestions that Israel did not have the capacity to carry out a successful attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Isaac Ben-Israel, a retired Israeli air force major general and current member of parliament for the ruling Kadima party, told the *Financial Times* that an air strike "is not a technical problem". Retired Brigadier General Shlomo Brom, a former director of strategic planning, said: "I often read that Israel is not capable of doing it because the number of targets is very large. That is a mistake... You just have to find the critical notes of this [Iranian nuclear] system and hit them."

In a comment in the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Israeli analyst Alex Fishman speculated that the Bush administration was exploiting Israeli sabre-rattling to intimidate Iran into agreeing to US demands. "Israel's strategic military force is serving as a pawn in the hands of the [US] administration to bring this crisis to a situation of near explosion until someone blinks first."

Even if this were true, the dangers of an explosive new war in the Persian Gulf are by no means diminished. As Fishman himself commented: "The problem is that threats of this type have a dynamic of their own, and they may yet be self-fulfilling. What will happen if the Iranians don't blink?"



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