

Israel repeats military threat against Iran

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Just days after international talks in Istanbul on Iran's nuclear programs, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak dismissed the negotiations as a waste of time and made clear that an Israeli attack was possible, even as talks proceeded.

Speaking on Israel's Army Radio on Tuesday, Barak denied that his country had promised the US to hold off military action during negotiations. "We are not committed to anything," he said. "There is not, there had not been, there should not be and there cannot be [such a promise]."

Barak added: "I do not believe the efforts of the international community to stop Iran's nuclear program will bear fruit. The time spent in this process is very precious." He called for a quick conclusion to negotiations, declaring that any time-outs "do not serve our interests."

The Israeli defence minister has previously warned that time was short because Iran's nuclear facilities were entering a "zone of immunity"—a reference to the near completion of its heavily defended Fordo uranium enrichment plant near the city of Qom.

An Israeli TV station aired a report on Sunday detailing the Israeli military build-up for an air attack on Iran. Channel 10 reporter Alon Ben-David, who was granted weeks to interview Israeli pilots and officers, declared: "Years of preparations are likely to come to realisation... The moment of truth is near."

Ben-David claimed that strikes were unlikely during international negotiations, "but the coming summer will not only be hot but tense." His report said an Israeli attack would involve "dozens if not more planes," including attack and escort jets, tankers for

mid-air refuelling, electronic warfare planes and rescue helicopters.

Last Saturday's talks in Istanbul between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany—resulted in an agreement to meet again next month in Baghdad to discuss a deal on "confidence building" measures.

Iranian officials have hinted that Tehran might scale back or stop production of 20 percent enriched uranium—the level required to fuel a research reactor that produces medical isotopes. The US is reportedly demanding far more—that Iran ship all its 20 percent enriched uranium out of the country and freeze activity at the Fordo enrichment plant.

Like Israel, the Obama administration has declared that time is running out. It has billed the talks as Iran's last chance for a negotiated solution. The US and the European Union are due to impose crippling new economic sanctions on Iran from July, severely limiting its oil exports and access to the international financial and banking system.

President Barack Obama has repeatedly declared that "all options" would be used to prevent Iran building nuclear weapons, or having the capacity to build nuclear weapons. The Pentagon has been steadily building up its forces in the Persian Gulf, where it now has two aircraft carriers capable of launching a devastating aerial war on Iran.

Like Barak, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other ministers are pressing for more immediate action against Iran. Netanyahu declared on Monday that the Istanbul talks had given Iran a "freebie"—another five weeks to continue to enrich

uranium. Obama responded by insisting that “the clock is ticking” and there could be no “stalling process.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also took a hard line on Monday, declaring: “The burden of action falls on the Iranians to demonstrate their seriousness and we’re going to keep the sanctions in place and the pressure on Iran.”

The US Congress is preparing a new round of sanctions, targeting foreign banks that handle transactions for Iran’s national oil and tanker companies. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid called for quick action, saying: “Each day that goes by without Iran feeling more of our censorship, I think it’s too bad for the world and helpful to Iran.”

The sanctions already in place—many of which have been imposed unilaterally by the US and its allies—have impacted heavily on the Iranian economy. The currency has plunged sharply against the US dollar since December, sending prices soaring. According to the Iranian media, basic items such as vegetable oil, milk and dairy products and detergent have jumped by as much as 20 percent.

The punitive measures amount to an economic war against Iran and its people. Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, an economist at Virginia Tech, told the *New York Times* last week that the European oil embargo and other sanctions due by July could endanger up to 50 percent of Iran’s oil exports and cut annual earnings by more than \$30 billion. “It would be a huge shock to their fiscal and trade systems,” he said.

Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Danny Ayalon on Tuesday called on the US and Europe to immediately impose the sanctions due on July 1. Criticising the Istanbul talks, he said: “Nothing has changed. The danger is that the Iranians will continue to con the world.” On the same day, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Moshe Ya’alon attacked the Obama administration, declaring: “We no longer believe in the Americans, and on the Iran issue, we are not in the same boat.”

Despite the sharpness of the public rhetoric, the

differences between the US and Israel are purely tactical. While Israel is pressing for swift military action, the Obama administration appears, at this stage, reluctant to launch a war on Iran before the presidential elections in November. The latest round of talks is a convenient means for delaying an attack, even as the US military build-up continues and sanctions degrade the Iranian economy and its ability to retaliate.

At the same time, a relentless and cynical campaign is underway in the American and international press, vilifying Iran as a “rogue state” and “a threat to world peace,” while the US and Israel prepare to wage a criminal war of aggression. Iran has repeatedly denied that it intends to build nuclear weapons.

The Obama administration’s insistence that Iran take “confidence building” measures to prove it has no nuclear weapons program anywhere in its vast territory is a recipe for an endless series of demands to provide the pretext for war. Washington’s overriding aim is to fashion a regime in Tehran to strengthen US dominance in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.



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