

Israel steps up military threats against Iran

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bluntly told visiting US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta yesterday that sanctions had not halted Iran's nuclear programs and that time was running out. His comments are a clear sign that Israel is pressing the US for a timetable for war against Iran.

"You yourself said a few months ago that when all else fails, America will act. But these declarations have also not yet convinced the Iranians to stop their program. This must change, and it must change quickly because time to resolve this issue peacefully is running out," Netanyahu said.

Netanyahu's comments are the latest threat in recent days. Speaking on Sunday after meeting with Republican presidential contender Mitt Romney, the Israeli prime minister declared that "all the sanctions and diplomacy" had not "set back the Iranian program by one iota." What was required was "a strong and credible military threat, coupled with the sanctions, to have a chance to change that situation."

Interviewed on Israeli television on Tuesday, Netanyahu dismissed suggestions that an Israeli strike on Iran would be blocked by opposition from the country's security establishment. He said he would listen to the views of professionals, but "it's the government that decides, and the executive agencies execute." He added that the 1981 Israeli decision to attack Iraq's nuclear reactor had been taken "against the advice of security officials."

The prime minister also hinted that Israel might attack Iran unilaterally, declaring: "Things that affect our fate, our very existence, we don't entrust to others—not even to our best friends. Obama and Romney both said that Israel has the right to defend itself against any threat, and we are obligated to make the decisions."

"I haven't decided yet whether to attack," Netanyahu

said. "However, I see the commitment of this regime of ayatollahs to develop nuclear bombs that are meant to destroy us, and I won't let that happen."

These remarks underscore the hypocritical character of Israeli and American rhetoric: while threatening an unprovoked attack on Iran over unsubstantiated claims that it is building nuclear bombs, Israel has a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them to targets throughout the Middle East.

Within Israel, chief of staff Benny Gantz and Mossad head Tamir Pardo have reportedly expressed reservations privately about an attack on Iran. Any differences with the government are purely tactical, involving the potential ramifications for Israel in the Middle East if it, rather than the US, launches air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Gantz made clear to the media that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) would attack if ordered. "The IDF is ready and prepared for action and as we see it 'all options are on the table' is not a slogan, it is a working plan and we are doing it," he said. Both the Israeli and US militaries have made advanced preparations for attacking Iran.

US Defence Secretary Panetta, who has already visited Tunisia and Egypt, defended the US-led sanctions regime—a virtual blockade on Iranian oil exports. President Obama announced further restrictions on Tuesday against Iran's energy sector and financial firms. US and American sanctions have already led to a 40 to 50 percent drop in Iranian oil exports, equivalent to an annual revenue loss of \$36 billion.

However, Panetta assured Netanyahu that the US was prepared to activate the "military option." He stated: "We will not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon, period. We will not allow them to develop a nuclear weapon, and we will exert all options in the effort to ensure that that

does not happen.”

Visiting an anti-missile system yesterday with Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, Panetta repeated his threat against Iran and offered a tacit green light for an Israel attack. “[Israel’s] effort to decide what is in their national security interest is something that must be left up to the Israelis,” he said.

President Obama announced on Friday that the US would provide Israel another \$70 million to boost its anti-missile systems. The US and Israeli militaries plan to hold the largest ever joint anti-missile exercises later this year. The strengthening of Israel’s ability to withstand retaliatory missiles is an essential part of the preparation for attacking Iran.

Panetta is the latest top US official to visit Israel in the past three weeks, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon and counterterrorism chief John Brennan.

The US and international media interpret this parade as an effort by the Obama administration to head off Israeli plans for unilateral strikes on Iran. Such an explanation, which is encouraged by Washington, is designed to foster a false sense of security amid widespread opposition in the US, Israel and internationally to another US war of aggression in the Middle East.

It is far more likely that the Israeli and US governments and military establishments are closely coordinating their preparations for war. The Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* reported last week that National Security Adviser Donilon had briefed Netanyahu in detail about the Pentagon’s plans for a pre-emptive strike on Iran. Similarly, *Yedioth Ahronoth* stated on Tuesday that Panetta intended to do the same. Both US officials, of course, denied the reports.

Having steadily raised the stakes in its confrontation with Tehran over the past three years, the Obama administration has generated tensions that have a logic of their own. Negotiations between the P5+1 grouping—the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany—and Iran have ground to a halt. The US-led embargo on Iranian oil—itsself an act of economic warfare—has not forced the Iranian regime submit to Washington’s diktats. In the strategy elaborated by Obama, that leaves only “the military option.”

The Pentagon has been building up its forces in the Persian Gulf since the beginning of the year for just such an eventuality. It has stationed two aircraft carrier battle groups in the area and reinforced its air power with a squadron of sophisticated F-22 fighters. To counter possible Iranian retaliation in the Gulf, the US Navy has doubled the number of mine-sweepers and is preparing a major joint anti-mine exercise with its Gulf state allies. In the past two months, the US Defence Department has notified Congress of potential arms deals with Gulf states, including Qatar and Kuwait, totalling more than \$11 billion.

The volatile situation in the Gulf is now intersecting with American domestic politics following Romney’s visit to Israel, where he attempted to outflank Obama by appearing even more aggressive on Iran. The menacing US threats against Tehran are also enmeshed with the rapidly escalating intervention against Iran’s key ally—the Syrian regime of President Bashar al Assad.

The Obama administration has transformed the entire region into a powder keg. Under such conditions, virtually anything—a naval incident in the Persian Gulf, an Iranian nuclear scare or “intelligence” about Iranian military aid to Syria—could serve as the pretext for an attack on Iran, by Israel or the US, that would quickly draw in other powers.



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