

# Israel renews military threat against Iran

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In the wake of failed international talks in early April on Iran's nuclear program, Israeli government ministers have this week again menaced Tehran with military action, while pressing the US and its allies to do the same.

Speaking to the BBC on Thursday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that “without a direct military threat, Iran will not stop” enriching uranium. He dismissed sanctions and international negotiations, saying Tehran was using talks “to run out the clock and continue their enrichment program.” Netanyahu claimed that Iran posed a danger to the world and warned of a nuclear arms race that would turn the Middle East into a “tinder box.”

His comments stand reality on its head. Unlike Israel, which has a sizeable nuclear arsenal and delivery systems, Iran has denied any plans to build a nuclear weapon and its nuclear programs are subject to regular international inspection. Moreover, Israel, like the US, has a long history of inflaming the Middle East through its resort to military aggression and has repeatedly threatened to take military action against Iran.

Asked if the Obama administration had given a “green light” for Israeli strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, Netanyahu told the BBC: “Israel's right to defend its existence is not subject to a traffic light.” He added: “We have to make our own calculations, when we lose the capability to defend ourselves by ourselves.”

Speaking at the UN last September, Netanyahu falsely claimed that Iran's stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium meant that it would be at the point of being able to build a nuclear bomb by mid-2013. In fact, around 90 percent enrichment is required for a nuclear weapon. Asked by the BBC if Iran had crossed Israel's “red line” for military strikes, the Israeli prime minister answered: “They have sort of crept up, but not crossed it.”

Netanyahu's remarks echoed those of Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon who declared on Tuesday: “The world must lead the campaign against Iran, but Israel must prepare for the possibility that it will have to defend itself with its own powers.”

The Israeli military has been planning and training for air strikes against Iran for years. Israel Defence Force chief Benny Gantz tacitly confirmed that in an interview on Tuesday. He told Israel Radio that the armed forces had the capabilities to strike Iranian nuclear facilities and “intense, thorough discussions” with the Israeli government were ongoing. “We will do what is necessary when it is necessary,” he said.

The Israeli government's aim appears to be, in the first instance, to pressure the Obama administration into setting a deadline for a US-led attack on Iran. US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel is due to arrive in Israel on Sunday for talks. Speaking at a congressional subcommittee on Tuesday, Hagel confirmed the Pentagon's ability to support an Israeli military attack on Iran, if required by Obama.

On the same day, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee endorsed a resolution backing Israeli military attacks on Iran. It urged the US administration to “stand with Israel and provide diplomatic, military, and economic support” if the Israeli government were “compelled to take military action in self-defence.” The resolution is yet to be put to the US Congress.

For months, Obama officials have been warning Iran that “the window for negotiations” over its nuclear program will not remain open indefinitely. The international talks in Kazakhstan on April 5-6 broke down after the US and its allies refused to budge on what was effectively an ultimatum to Tehran to end enrichment to 20 percent and give up its existing stockpile in return for minor concessions on sanctions. US-led sanctions have had a crippling impact on the Iranian economy and working people—severely cutting oil exports, devaluing the currency and sending inflation soaring.

In comments to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday, US Secretary of State John Kerry hinted at the Obama administration's time line. He appealed to Congress to hold off on tougher economic sanctions until after Iranian presidential elections in June. Obama is clearly hoping to influence the outcome, as he

attempted in the 2009 election, to suit American interests.

“There’s an enormous amount of jockeying going on, with the obvious normal tension between hard-liners and people who want to make an agreement [on the nuclear issue],” Kerry said. “We don’t need to spin this up at this point in time... You need to leave us the window to try to work the diplomatic channel.”

The Obama administration is about to finalise a major \$10 billion arms deal with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to bolster their armed forces for any conflict with Iran. Under the deal, the UAE would buy F-16 fighters, along with precision missiles, and Saudi Arabia would purchase a similar class of advanced missiles.

The sale would ensure that Israel retained its military edge, not only over Iran, but any potential regional rival. The US will sell Israel a range of advanced weaponry, including new missiles designed to destroy air-defence radar systems, sophisticated radar for its own war planes, V-22 Osprey troop transport aircraft and the latest KC-135 refuelling tanker planes.

The refuelling aircraft, which are essential for long-range missions, would fill a gap in Israeli plans for air strikes against Iran. The capabilities of Israel’s current tanker planes are regarded as barely sufficient for the long flight by its warplanes to Iranian targets.

For weeks, the Obama administration has been deliberately stoking tensions on the Korean Peninsula as a means of pressuring China. Having apparently extracted some concessions during Kerry’s visit to Beijing last weekend, Washington is shifting focus. Along with its ally Israel, the US is once again inflaming the Middle East, with renewed threats against Iran and a military build-up in Jordan aimed against the Syrian regime.



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