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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Safeguarding Israel's Security in a Volatile Region

Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
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My name is James Phillips. I am the Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Israel faces a wide spectrum of threats to its security. Many Arab and Muslim countries do not recognize Israel's very existence and continue to work for its destruction. These rejectionist forces support terrorist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which have mounted a protracted war of attrition against the Jewish state.

The uprisings against authoritarian regimes in the course of the so-called "Arab Spring" have empowered Islamist political parties and created power vacuums that Islamist extremists have exploited to advance their hostile agenda. For example, the ouster of the Mubarak regime has undermined the authority of Egypt's central government and allowed disgruntled Bedouin tribes, Islamist militants and smuggling networks to grow stronger and bolder in Egypt's Sinai peninsula. Egyptian and Palestinian Islamist extremists have exploited the anarchy to launch terrorist attacks against Israel from the Sinai, in an effort to provoke Egyptian-Israeli clashes.

Although the uprising in Syria has undermined the potential military threat posed by the Assad regime to Israel, it also could motivate the Assad regime to seek a confrontation with Israel to boost its declining popular legitimacy. Moreover, if the Assad regime implodes, its huge chemical weapons arsenal could fall into the hands of terrorist groups that could pose new challenges to Israel's long term security.

But the greatest threat to Israel's security currently comes from Iran, whose radical Islamist leaders have repeatedly called for Israel's destruction. Iran has made steady progress in its nuclear weapons effort and already has ballistic missiles capable of targeting Israel. Implacable hostility to Israel is a key pillar of the Tehran regime's harsh ideology and an important aspect of its foreign policy. Tehran has trumpeted its hostility to Israel to gain Arab allies, boost its claim to leadership in the Muslim world, outflank moderate Arab rivals and undermine the United States in the Middle East.

Clashing views on Iran's nuclear threat

For Iran's radical regime, hostility to Israel, sometimes referred to as the "little Satan", is second only to hostility to the United States, which the leader of Iran's 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, dubbed the "great Satan." But Iran poses a greater immediate threat to Israel than to the United States, since Israel is a smaller country with less military capabilities located much closer to Iran.

These geostrategic differences have given the United States and Israel differing perspectives on Iran's potential nuclear threat. Israel is more vulnerable to Iranian ballistic missiles and terrorist threats from Iranian-supported Lebanese and Palestinian groups on its northern and southern borders. It also has less military capabilities than the

United States that could be used in a long distance preventive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

This disparity in military capabilities means that Israel has a smaller window of opportunity in which to launch a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear weapons program before it is too late to effectively set it back for a significant period of time. For example, Iran's uranium enrichment activities are soon expected to shift increasingly to the Fordo facility, which is much more difficult to destroy than other facilities because it is buried under a mountain near the holy city of Qum. Israel lacks the huge bunker-busting bombs needed to penetrate the concrete and rock that shields the Fordo facility.

These differences in military capabilities give the two allies differing perceptions about the urgency of considering the use of force as a last resort. For Jerusalem, the clock is moving towards a decision point that is much closer than for Washington, which can afford to wait longer due to its greater military capabilities. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned in March that Iran is rapidly approaching the point at which the size, redundancy and hardening of its nuclear infrastructure would produce a "zone of immunity" in which an Israeli strike would lose its effectiveness.

Disagreements over Iran policy also have been magnified because President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have clashing world views and poor personal chemistry. The two leaders have starkly different perceptions of Iran's evolving nuclear threat and how best to confront it.

Prime Minister Netanyahu understandably perceives the Iranian nuclear program to be an existential threat to Israel and is determined to prevent another Holocaust, through military means if necessary. President Obama, who consistently has underestimated the ideologically-based hostility of Iran's Islamist dictatorship, puts much more faith in a strategy of diplomacy backed by sanctions. Therefore, the Obama Administration has exhibited a much weaker sense of urgency on the need to deal decisively with Iran's potential nuclear 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 its initial push for multilateral talks with Iran on the nuclear issue. The administration also opposed and sought to dilute several bipartisan 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 the use of force are likely to dissuade Tehran from continuing on its nuclear path. Iran in fact did freeze its nuclear program in 2003

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

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 programs when he thought that he might be the next target.

But the Obama Administration remains committed to its failed engagement strategy and may revive the comatose P5-plus-1 talks (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) with Iran on the nuclear issue, which Tehran has repeatedly sabotaged in the past. The administration continues to stress its commitment to open-ended diplomacy and reluctance to use the military option. Although administration officials dutifully have indicated that "all options are on the table," they frequently have gone out of their way to publicly devalue the prospects for success of a U.S. or Israeli military strike.

To make matters worse, various administration officials, including the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have 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.

Both governments have publicly aired their differences on Iran, with the Obama Administration warning that an Israeli preventive strike would be premature and destabilizing, while Netanyahu's government has signaled that it can't wait much longer. Netanyahu repeatedly has warned that diplomacy and sanctions have failed to stop Iran's accelerating uranium enrichment program and that stronger action is needed to sway Iran by clearly warning Tehran that continued nuclear defiance will trigger preventive military action.

The Obama Administration has rejected this advice. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointedly said on September 9th that "We're not setting deadlines." A disappointed Netanyahu subsequently retorted that "those in the international community who refuse to draw a red line on Iran have no moral right to draw a red line for Israel."

Finding Common Ground

The increasingly public spats reveal a glaring lack of trust. The Obama Administration's "lead from behind" approach has fueled Israeli anxiety about being left behind if Washington fails to follow through on its vague promises to take military action to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon. Many Israelis are skeptical about the Obama Administration's willingness to use force if diplomacy fails.

President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu 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. Absent such a common understanding, I think it is increasingly likely that Israel will go it alone and launch a preventive attack.

Instead of pressuring Israel to refrain from an attack, the Obama Administration should be focused on bringing maximum pressure to bear on Iran. Therefore the United States 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 about whether the Obama Administration will take timely action to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear capability. The White House's rejection of Netanyahu's request to meet with the president next week during his trip to the United States has only deepened these doubts. The president should readjust his schedule and meet with Netanyahu, hear out his concerns and address them forthrightly. He must convince Netanyahu that he is absolutely determined to deny Iran a nuclear capability and will resort to military force if necessary. Ruling out a meeting with Netanyahu sends a dangerous signal to Iran that Washington may not be serious about halting its nuclear weapons program.

Demonstrate resolve in halting Iran's nuclear weapons program. The administration's mantra, "every option is on the table," has become increasingly stale and unconvincing, not only to Israel but to Iran. The Netanyahu government is unlikely to agree to forego a strike in self defense unless it has ironclad guarantees that the Obama Administration will take decisive military action before it is too late. The president should clarify in a public statement that he will actually use the military option if necessary, not just leave it on the table. This would help ease Israeli concerns and put the onus on Tehran to halt enrichment efforts. The administration also must make the investments in the U.S. military that conspicuously demonstrate that the United States has a robust military capability to protect its vital interests in the region and act in defense of its allies.

Set strict conditions on any last-ditch diplomatic talks. Prime Minister 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 therefore will be setting an acceptable timeframe for conducting the P5-plus-1 talks, if they are to resume with Iran. Washington should assure Israel that if talks resume it will publicly fix a hard deadline for obtaining concrete results. Failing to set a deadline would allow Tehran to use the ongoing talks as diplomatic cover to stave off a preventive strike until it is too late to stop its nuclear ambitions.

Recognize Israel's right to take military action in anticipatory self defense. Instead of sniping at the idea of an Israeli preventive strike, the Obama Administration 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. The U.S. does not have the power to guarantee that Israel would not be attacked by a nuclear Iran in the future, so it should not betray the trust of an ally by tying its hands now. Although an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear program would entail increased risks for U.S. interests in the Middle East, these risks would be dwarfed by the threats posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. Moreover, a nuclear Iran would induce many other Middle Eastern states to seek their own nuclear weapons. This cascade of nuclear proliferation would enormously increase the risks of future nuclear threats to the United States, Israel and other allies.

The Bottom Line

To mitigate the threat posed by Iran's drive for nuclear weapons, the United States must proactively set a clear red line on Iran's nuclear program and enforce it. It should stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel in confronting Iran's growing nuclear menace. If Jerusalem decides to exercise its right of self-defense, then the U.S. should support that decision, not condemn it.

The Islamist dictatorship in Tehran has been given ample warning that its longstanding violations of its legal obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty will have a progressively heavy cost, yet it defiantly continues to enrich uranium, issue threats, and order terrorist attacks, including one plot to bomb a restaurant in Washington, D.C.

If Iran is willing to risk such an attack before it gains nuclear weapons, what threats is it likely to pose after it attains nuclear weapons? The United States, Israel and other allies cannot afford to find out

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

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