

Intelligence brief | 29 October 2012

Will the United States or the United Kingdom play a role in supporting any Israeli military strike against Iran in the six months following the 2012 US presidential election?

1. The United States and the United Kingdom are **unlikely** to support any Israeli strike against Iran in the first six months following the November 2012 US presidential election (i.e. before May 2013).
2. Washington and London believe there is time for economic and diplomatic sanctions to work and are not inclined to pursue military strikes in the immediate future.
3. Should a unilateral Israeli strike occur, this would likely be because Tel Aviv will have become convinced its "red lines" have been crossed and that overtures to Washington, in particular, have fallen on deaf ears.
4. US and UK support for and involvement in Israeli military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities would require one or more of the following: solid evidence indicating a "smoking gun," the new US administration heeding Israeli overtures, and/or the UN Security Council endorsing the use of military force.
5. However, the likelihood of these scenarios occurring is difficult to assess and, in the case of UN Security Council endorsement, would require considerably greater intransigence on Tehran's part.

No change for now

Washington, under successive Democrat and Republican administrations, has relied on multi-pronged strategies to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. In concert with key allies, Washington has invested heavily in intelligence operations to degrade Tehran's nuclear capabilities and to deny it access to the resources and technical knowledge needed to produce a nuclear weapon. Washington has also pursued economic and diplomatic sanctions with the international community to force the halting or suspension of Tehran's enrichment programme. All 16 US intelligence agencies, along with the IAEA and other reputable monitoring institutions, believe Iran does not (at this time) possess the capability to produce a nuclear weapon and deliver it.

Open Briefing assesses it as unlikely that the pursuit of these strategies as preferred policy options will change during the first six months after the 2012 US presidential election, regardless of who wins.



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The **Obama administration** believes there is still time for economic and diplomatic sanctions to work and, if re-elected, has given no indication they will not be continued. President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton, along with several other senior members of the administration, have voiced their preference for sanctions. This administration has also indicated it does not want to define, agree to or apply time-specific ultimatums (red lines) that would initiate a military response by any country. Therefore, a second Obama administration is likely to be more inclined to heighten sanctions before considering military options in all realistic scenarios.

A **Romney administration**, despite his hawkish election statements, would take time to consolidate any new government and is unlikely to alter the current multi-pronged strategy approach in his first six months in office. While he is more likely to set red lines and articulate the threat of military force, the same risk factors that deter Obama from striking will also weigh heavily on any Romney decision to do so. Furthermore, any military action in the first six months after the election will not only reignite concerns surrounding the 2003 Iraq War intelligence debacle, but war fatigue on the back of Iraq and Afghanistan will also make it a tough political sell for a newly-elected President Romney.

Recent announcements by UK politicians and diplomatic envoys to Israel indicate London too believes preventative strikes will have enormous downsides and should therefore be avoided for as long as possible. London maintains that sanctions and diplomatic efforts must be exhausted first, pointing to ongoing indicators that economic sanctions are working, highlighting the devaluing rial, the heavy decline in oil exports and 50% inflation. While London obviously possesses independent Middle East policies, they will read from the same page as Washington on the issue of Iran and work to preserve the unified front, which includes upholding the current US administration's preference for not setting formal red lines. London will also be keen to stress to a President Romney the enormous downsides of not allowing the raft of non-military options to be exhausted first.

Washington wary of Tel Aviv

Washington under Obama worries that Tel Aviv will strike before sanctions have been given time to work. While Washington knows Israel is reluctant to use military force against Iran without its tacit approval, it also acknowledges there is a point at which Israel will act unilaterally. Washington under a re-elected Obama will be keen to push this point back, first with the government of Benjamin Netanyahu until the February 2013 elections and then with the new or re-elected government thereafter.

While Washington and key allies believe Iran has yet to make a definitive decision to acquire nuclear weapons, they suspect Iran seeks to give itself the future option of rapidly doing so. Moreover, they fear Iran is working to improve this virtual capability without detection and to reduce the ability for the United States and Israel to stop it once discovered. Washington worries that Tel Aviv's threat perceptions vis-à-vis Tehran's virtual capability ambitions will cause it to act militarily before heightened sanctions yield results.

Washington has additional concerns that any unilateral Israeli strike is more likely to set back the programme than eradicate it, and worries about the effect this will have on the regime in Tehran and the Iranian people for generations to come.

To overcome this, Washington has likely tried to convince Tel Aviv that it will not allow Tehran to develop a nuclear weapon, reassured Tel Aviv of its commitment to Israel's defence, encouraged Tel Aviv to give sanctions more time to work and emphasised coordinated action along with the costs of acting unilaterally.

Unilateral action means no US/UK support

For any unilateral Israeli strike to occur under a second Obama administration, it is likely Tel Aviv will have become convinced its own red lines have been crossed and that overtures to Washington have fallen on deaf ears. Tel Aviv will have decided it has little choice but to go it alone and will err on the side of surprise, meaning Washington may not be told (much) in advance. Under this scenario, Washington and London will not commit, or even be able to commit, military forces.

Importantly, however, there are no compelling reasons why a Romney administration – after setting red lines and articulating the threat to use military force – could not encourage Tel Aviv (under Netanyahu, at the very least) to give sanctions at least six more months to work. After all, it was Netanyahu who stated that he thought Tehran would back down if Washington provided a red line. It is also logical by extension that Romney could lessen the likelihood of unilateral Israeli action by setting US red lines (assuming they were not crossed).

It is clear that London's influence over Israeli policy is considerably weaker than Washington's. Nonetheless, to uphold a unified line with the United States, and also now with the rest of the EU, Downing Street will maintain its position that sanctions and diplomatic efforts must be exhausted before military action is considered.

Damning evidence ups the ante

The conditions that need to be met for the United States and United Kingdom to support or become involved in military strikes against Iran include:

- corroborated evidence indicating Iran has enriched U-235 above 20% and acquired the means to weaponise and deliver a nuclear bomb (the so-called smoking gun scenario),
- the new US administration heeding Israeli overtures, and/or
- considerable Iranian intransigence forcing the UN Security Council to endorse the use of military force.

While the likelihood of such events occurring in the six month period following the US presidential election is difficult to assess, they are possible given international fears that Iran is working on a virtual capability without detection, backed up by the high levels of intelligence and inspection activity along with the harsher economic and diplomatic sanctions now in place.

Should any or all these conditions be met, several courses of action may see Israel, the United States and the United Kingdom using military force against Iran. Such military scenarios would include (from most likely to least likely):

1. **Surprise attack by Israel alone**, with tacit approval from Washington but without UN Security Council endorsement.
2. **Surprise attack by the United States and Israel**, without UN Security Council endorsement.
3. **Surgical strikes conducted by a coalition of countries** led by the United States (with UK involvement) and endorsed by the UN Security Council.
4. **Ground war conducted by a coalition of countries** led by the United States (with UK involvement) and endorsed by the UN Security Council.

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