

**Israel and the US Perspectives on Iran at Odds**

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The [kerfuffle](#) over the [postponement](#) of the highly touted "Austere Challenge 12" joint US-Israel military exercise is over. Officials in both countries are now on the same page: it was a "joint decision" having nothing to do with finances, Iran or politics, just "technical issues." Regardless of the lid they've chosen to cover the pot, it is worth considering where and how the United States and Israel differ in their analysis of the problem posed by Iran's nuclear activity.

The US and Israel agree on the potential danger and they agree on the unacceptability of a nuclear-armed Iran. They differ, however, on how they assimilate intelligence information; how they assess the pace of Iran's movement toward weapons capability; and even over whether it is weapons that Iran seeks. The United States factors in more heavily what it believes about Iran's *intent*, which it insists remains unclear. Reflecting, perhaps, closer proximity and a smaller margin of error, the Israeli government places greater emphasis on its Iran's *capabilities*, which it believes are clear.

The discrepancy appeared as early as 2008. The Bush administration posited "weaponization" of uranium as its red line -- a position carried into to the Obama administration by Secretary of Defense Gates. But neither administration appeared to believe -- or appears *yet* to believe -- that Iran has taken the decision to make weapons.

In May 2009, The Washington Post reported that (then) Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dennis Blair and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Director Michael Maples told a Senate panel that "Iran is keeping open that option" and Iran's launch of a space vehicle "does advance their knowledge and their ability to develop an intercontinental ballistic missiles," but, according to The Post, "there may be no connection between the country's development of missiles and any ambition to have nuclear weapons." Blair said, "I believe those are separate decisions. The same missiles can launch vehicles into space."

Defense Secretary Panetta reiterated the "weaponization" standard in a recent television interview, as did current DNI James Clapper in Senate testimony. And in the meantime, however, a new construct has slipped into the American lexicon: "breakout capability," which may or may not trip the wire.

Recent IAEA revelations about the amount of enriched uranium Iran has (larger than previously thought), the regime's progress on "nuclear triggers" and discovery of a chamber to contain explosive tests may indicate that Iran is managing and organizing nuclear technology under the threshold of a weapon, but with the ability to construct one quickly when desired. That is, to "break out" of its non-weapon position, perhaps in a matter of months.

Here again, the Obama administration and the Israelis agree on what they're looking at, but not necessarily on what it means.

The Americans believe there is still time to dissuade Iran and while they're working on it, they don't want Israel goading the regime and perhaps provoking an unintended violent reaction.

That would account for Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman's remark that the exercise was postponed by the US to avoid antagonizing Iran. It would account for the State Department's vehement denunciation of the killing of an Iranian scientist while most of the world assumed Israel was responsible. It accounts too for the American determination to be seen as demanding that Israel not attack Iran. Short of a weapons breakout, the US is determined to have diplomacy backed by sanctions as its public posture.

Israel, while supporting diplomacy and sanctions, is inclined to have both backed by a credible military threat.

"Austere Challenge 12," although defensive in nature, would have served Israel's view better than America's view. The Iranians, like the Russians, believe defensive exercises can either hide preparations for an impending attack, or make a later attack more likely because a country that thinks it can protect its major assets is more likely to be aggressive than one that believes retaliation would be beyond its capacity to cope.

The fact is that neither the US nor Israel wants to engage in a large-scale strike on Iran. They agree that the military consequences could be grave and the effort might not terminate the program; they disagree on the political ramifications. The US believes Iranians want their nuclear program as a matter of national pride and would rally around their government if it was attacked. (Others believe the Iranians are horrified by what their government has wrought and would welcome its demise under Western attack.)

Israel points instead to its 1981 strike on Iraq's Osirak reactor -- not a military model for Iran but instructive. The Israelis predicted a one-year delay for Saddam, but the French government found it politically impossible to replace the facility and changed Iraq's calculations.

At the end of the day, the United States is a very large, rich country with an almost boundless capacity to absorb and correct for mistakes. We think in grand sweeps and, if they fail, we go on to the next sweep. Whether TARP spending, bailouts, health care, nuclear disarmament or the move from diplomacy to sanctions to escalation with Iran, the United States has an enormous margin for error in which we can, and often do, change course.

Israel has almost no capacity to absorb and correct for big mistakes. And its government is responsible for the desire -- no, the demand -- of history not to permit a repetition of the Holocaust within the national boundaries of the Jewish state.

One consequence is their differing approach to Iran, and another is Israel's much greater need for reassurance by its major security partner, the United States. The postponement of Austere Challenge 12 -- for whatever reason is posited as "official" -- is more likely to reassure Iran than to reassure Israel.